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PREDICTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUBNATIONAL STRUCTURES IN THE BRITISH MODEL OF REGIONAL POLICY

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This article analyzes the dynamics of decentralization (devolution) processes in the United Kingdom. The author's aim is to demonstrate that the conservative doctrine of centralized state governance (consistently implemented between 2010 and 2024), combined with the effects of Brexit (in the form of the cessation of the European Union's influence on the shape of British regional policy) has had a profound, comprehensive, and unequivocally destructive impact on devolution, reducing its overall development dynamics and, in some areas, halting or even partially reversing it, as well as causing confusion (both among the authorities and communities) in the regions affected by it regarding the prospects for their further political development. This state of affairs did not change after the last British Parliamentary elections, as the victorious Labour Party focused on nationwide economic and social problems, relegating issues affecting individual regions to the background. The interpenetration of bottom-up centrifugal tendencies, top-down recentralisation concepts and Brexit was shown using systemic and comparative methods, which made it possible not only to illustrate specific patterns but also to reflect their diversity in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The leading research method, however, was the scenario one, which allowed for determining the most likely directions of political development for all areas comprising the Celtic fringe.

Key words: devolution, Brexit, United Kingdom, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland.

Тошек Варфоломій Г. ПРОГНОЗИ РОЗВИТКУ СУБНАЦІОНАЛЬНИХ СТРУКТУР У БРИТАНСЬКІЙ МОДЕЛІ РЕГІОНАЛЬНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ

У цій статті аналізується динаміка процесів децентралізації (деволюції) у Сполученому Королівстві. Мета автора – продемонструвати, що консервативна доктрина централізованого державного управління (послідовно впроваджувалась між 2010 і 2024 роками) у поєднанні з наслідками Brexit (у формі припинення впливу Європейського Союзу на формування британської регіональної політики) мала глибокий, всебічний та однозначно деструктивний вплив на деволюцію, зменшуючи загальну динаміку її розвитку, а в деяких сферах зупиняючи або навіть частково повертаючи її назад, а також викликаючи плутанину (як серед влади, так і серед громад) у регіонах, що постраждали від неї, щодо перспектив їхнього подальшого політичного розвитку. Цей стан справ не змінився після останніх парламентських виборів у Великій Британії, оскільки переможна Лейбористська партія зосередилася на загальнонаціональних економічних та соціальних проблемах, відсуваючи на другий план питання, що стосуються окремих регіонів. Взаємопроникнення відцентрових тенденцій «знизу вгору», концепцій рецентралізації «зверху вниз» та Brexit було показано за допомогою системного та порівняльного методів, що дозволило не лише проілюструвати конкретні закономірності, а й відобразити їх різноманітність у Шотландії, Уельсі та Північній Ірландії. Однак провідним методом дослідження був сценарний, який дозволив визначити найімовірніші напрями політичного розвитку для всіх територій, що входять до складу кельтської окраїни.

Ключові слова: деволюція, Brexit, Велика Британія, Шотландія, Уельс, Північна Ірландія.

Introduction. The devolution reform initiated in 1997, in just a quarter of a century, caused a profound erosion of the cohesion of the British state. Underlying this process was the belief that reverse discrimination was necessary for the areas comprising the Celtic fringe, which, due to their peripheral location and limited demographic and economic potential, were at a significantly lower level of social and economic development, and consequently also politically, than the dominant

component of the UK, i.e., England. The specific nature of the devolution reform is therefore expressed in its territorial unevenness, as it was implemented only in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Moreover, in each of these areas devolution took (originally) different forms, from the most developed “Scottish model” (in which the central authorities were left with only matters relating to maintaining the constitutional order, foreign and defence policy, the activities of political parties, the

organisation and functioning of the civil service, and high treason), through the “Irish model” (in which decision-making powers were divided into those reserved for the Northern Ireland Assembly, conditionally transferred to that body, and those reserved for the exclusive competence of the UK Parliament and Government), to the “administrative model of devolution” in Wales (in which regional authorities were granted only the competence to enact executive law in relation to decisions made at the central level). The nature of devolution also determines its openness to further extensions of the scope of powers vested in regional parliamentary assemblies, which indicates the possibility of free development of the political aspirations of the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish populations. As a result, the model of regional decentralisation introduced in the UK turned out to be a unique construction, without any equivalent on the European continent, reflecting the British spirit of individualism and rationalism [1]. At the same time, however, devolution, instead of channeling centrifugal tendencies by imposing a constitutional framework on them (and thus subordinating them to central government control), proved to be a factor in stimulating these tendencies. The implementation of devolution reform led to the awakening of a regional sense of national identity, expressed primarily by emphasizing the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the Celtic population of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in relation to the Germanic roots of the inhabitants of England. Devolution also contributed to the emergence of serious political divisions between England and the regions covered by the devolution reform. The establishment of regional parliamentary assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland aroused a sense of national consciousness among the population of these regions, which resulted in demands from the national authorities for greater internal autonomy or even the right to self-determination. This was clearly demonstrated by the gradual increase in support for the Scottish National Party, which ultimately took power in Scotland and led to the Scottish independence referendum; the strengthening of the position of the Welsh Plaid Cymru and the organization of the third (Welsh) devolution referendum (culminating in the granting of the regional legislature the power to enact primary legislation independently), as well as the radicalization of the Northern Irish political scene (expressed by the rise of groups representing extreme loyalist and nationalist views).

Materials and methods. In this article, the author aims to positively verify the thesis that the centralist concept of state governance (implemented by the Conservative-Liberal coalition in 2010 and successively developed by subsequent Conservative governments), combined with the gradual phasing out of EU cohesion

policy’s influence on British regional policy (between 2016 and 2020) as a result of Brexit, has had a profound, comprehensive, and unequivocally negative impact on devolution processes in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This has led to a slowdown, halt, and even reversal of these processes, leading to long-term confusion among the authorities and regional communities (even after the Labour Party, declaring a break with the centralist approach of its predecessors, returned to power) regarding the future direction and dynamics of devolution. The interpenetration of the bottom-up centrifugal tendencies that shape the current state of affairs, top-down recentralist concepts, and Brexit is illustrated using research methods from the social sciences. A systems approach to national and regional models of public affairs management, as well as the process of the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, has, to some extent, dictated the use of macro- and microsystemic methods. Demonstrating similarities and differences between the variable factors determining the development of the political situation (in the context of the discussed issue) in individual regions would not have been possible without the use of a comparative method. The most important research tool, however, turned out to be the scenario method, which, based on the author’s findings, allowed for the formulation of conclusions regarding the potential directions and dynamics of devolution in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Results. Changing the approach to devolution. The concept of the gradual strengthening of the political position of the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish authorities in relation to the parliament and national government was part of a broader trend of relativizing the state as the traditional arena of political life. This situation applies primarily to Western European countries, where tasks previously reserved for the exclusive competence of central government bodies are increasingly being transferred to regional-level local government units. As a result, regions are gradually becoming more independent in their relations with states at the economic and political levels, as evidenced by, for example, supranational regional cooperation or the establishment and maintenance of direct relations between regions and states and international organizations. This phenomenon is stimulated, among others, by the European Union, which, by supporting the economic development of regions, increases their political significance, ultimately leading to a strengthening of devolutionary tendencies in individual member states [2]. EU regional policy thus fostered the development of devolutionary processes, shaping a platform for direct cooperation between European Union bodies and the regional authorities of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, bypassing the British government and its subordinate central administration.

This state of affairs, accepted (or at least tolerated) during the Labour Party's rule (i.e. in the years 1997–2010), began to change after the Conservatives took power (initially as part of a government coalition with the Liberals, and then governing alone), who did not hide their reluctance towards devolution (considering it as the root of the integrity of the state) and closer integration with the EU structures (advocating a return to the traditional Eurosceptic British policy).

Reducing the dynamics of devolutionary processes by limiting state budget funding for regional government activities did not, however, produce the expected result of 'withering devolution away', but rather led to increased public discontent, prompting Welsh residents to vote for expanding the powers of the regional parliamentary assembly, and in the Scottish independence referendum, over 44% of voters voted for Scotland's separation from the UK. The real blow to devolutionary reform came only with the decision to withdraw from the European Union, made primarily by the English population in the 2016 Brexit referendum, which ultimately came into effect three and a half years later. After being cut off from EU support instruments, the areas affected by devolutionary processes found themselves in a situation where decisions about the prospects for their economic and political development are made solely by the national parliament and government, with no possibility of challenging them or creating an alternative at the supranational level. This state of affairs provides the Welsh and Northern Irish authorities with a rationale to consolidate the devolution gains to date before making demands for further decision-making powers. In Scotland, however, which (it seems) has already achieved its maximum capacity to decide on its own affairs within the British state, further development (especially political) would require the regional community to decide on the issue of maintaining, modifying, or terminating the Anglo-Scottish Union.

Scottish case. Brexit, understood as a factor accelerating the recentralization processes (underway since 2010), through its destructive impact on devolution reform, has made regional authorities in the areas comprising the Celtic fringe aware of the need to consolidate their political position (which was successfully achieved in Scotland and Wales in 2016 and 2017, respectively) and expand their decision-making powers, and in the longer term, determine the political future of the regions they govern. The latter issue is particularly important in the case of Scotland, which gained broad internal autonomy (constituting a model in terms of political development for Wales and Northern Ireland) already in 1997, and after the independence referendum in 2014 (which, although it was a defeat for those in favour of breaking up the Anglo-Scottish Union, at the same time showed a

significant (i.e. 44.7%) level of support for this concept among the region's inhabitants) and the Brexit referendum in 2016 (which updated the question of the justification for holding another independence referendum due to the change in the economic and political situation of the entire country), it faced a seemingly simple alternative, i.e. staying or leaving the structures of the British state organism. In fact, the argument repeatedly raised by successive regional governments about the need to hold a second independence referendum (initially used to force the national authorities to refrain from interfering in the decision-making competences of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, and then with full conviction about the possibility of opening up a 'different and better vision of the future' to Scotland [3]) was not only defeated on the political-administrative level (through the refusal of the British government to organise the referendum) and on the legal level (after the Supreme Court ruling indicating the invalidity of the potential announcement of a referendum by the Scottish Parliament), but above all it turned out to be completely unrealistic for economic reasons. "A declaration of independence would bring losses to the Scottish economy that would be twice or even three times greater than the costs of Brexit. Furthermore, rejoining the European Union <...> would only slightly mitigate these losses, and in the short term would probably lead to even more serious consequences due to disconnection from the British market. <...> Taking into account the effects on trade alone, it must be recognized that independence would mean a significant disadvantage for Scotland compared to remaining within the United Kingdom" [4]. Another concept for the political development of the region (and the entire country) was presented by Labour politician and former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who proposed changing the formula for ties between individual parts of the United Kingdom (which would remain in place after the Labour Party's victory in the British Parliament elections). In his opinion, 'federalism is the most realistic option after Brexit' [5]. Transforming the unitary state into a federal one would include, among other things, transforming the House of Lords into a Senate of Nations and Regions, establishing a Council of the Federal Union (with the participation of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), making regional authorities in areas covered by devolution reform independent of national authorities (which would entail the abolition of the principle of primacy of the British Parliament), and giving the Scottish Parliament additional decision-making powers (concerning matters such as social security, migration policy, excise duty, and combating drug trafficking). Brown also envisaged transferring to the Scottish authorities (retained at the

national level) competences to regulate matters within the scope of sectoral framework policies (which before Brexit remained the responsibility of EU institutions) and sanctioning the results of paradiplomacy conducted by these authorities in relations with European Union countries. Moreover, Scotland would receive full compensation for the lost financial benefits resulting from British membership in the European Union, access to European research goals and the Erasmus program, as well as a seat on the European Court of Human Rights. Brown's federalist concept, which favors Scotland, was positively assessed by the current British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, but due to a lukewarm reception by the rest of the party leadership, it did not become part of the official Labour program. At the national level, the only political party currently advocating for the transformation of the United Kingdom into a federal state is the Liberal Democrats, while in Scotland, regional Labour and Liberal structures support such a solution. Beyond the independence and federalist streams, 'concepts have emerged that assume shaping Scotland's future based on administrative arrangements or through a gradual expansion of powers [available to regional legislatures] <...>. The first of these options has been repeatedly considered at meetings of the Scottish Affairs Committee of the House of Commons. It was also the subject of a thorough analysis by Theresa May's government <...>, which ultimately (in the Dunlop report published in 2021) resulted in the conclusion on the desirability of transforming the Joint Ministerial Committee into a forum for regular discussions between regional governments [and the British government] <...>, making binding decisions by consensus <...>, and if this were not possible – resolving disputes based on transparent criteria' [6]. However, these proposals were deemed far from sufficient by the Scottish Government, which, in the face of the negative stance of the national authorities on the issue of organizing a second independence referendum, decided to focus its efforts on striving to extend devolution reform, i.e. 'to transfer to Holyrood nothing less than all decision-making powers, except those relating to defense, national security and monetary policy. Devolution would therefore be extended to industrial relations, counteracting discrimination, health care, social care, consumer protection, import and export control, immigration policy, market competition rules, rules for the operation of commercial companies, management of energy resources, control of financial services, telecommunications and postal services. <...> These demands were certainly not intended to strengthen the domestic market <...>, but rather to undermine its integrity' [7], and were therefore ignored by the British Government. Consequently, neither of these two most moderate (and thus most likely to be implemented) con-

cepts for Scotland's political development can currently be implemented due to the lack of agreement between the national and regional authorities. However, it seems that reaching a compromise between the top-down and bottom-up proposals for expanding the decision-making powers of the Parliament and the Scottish Government represents the most realistic scenario for the region's political future.

Welsh perspective. In Wales, the only significant political force openly advocating for independence is Plaid Cymru, while Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberals oppose such a solution. Supporters of granting sovereignty to the region point out that the national authorities are not interested in Welsh problems (although they retain the right to interfere in decision-making areas covered by devolution processes), therefore granting full decision-making autonomy would enable the regional authorities to create a constitutional order from scratch (responsive to the needs and preferences of the inhabitants of Wales), take control of foreign affairs and national security, introduce an immigration policy (adapted to actual market requirements), take over crown properties, create an open and flexible model of the national economy, implement large transport and energy projects (which have been postulated for a long time), and ensure better protection of the Welsh culture and language. These phantasmagorical visions are opposed by strong arguments put forward by groups wishing to maintain the political status quo, including: the inability to cover the high regional budget deficit [8] (which is compensated in the national budget by the surplus generated by some English regions); the risk of replacing the strong pound sterling with a weaker national currency, or maintaining the pound without a currency union (which would mean the inability to control its own monetary policy), in a situation where the British government does not consent to the functioning of such a union (analogously to the situation preceding the Scottish independence referendum in 2014); the loss of 'a much stronger voice on the international stage <...> and money flowing to Wales from the richer parts of Great Britain' [9]. Recognizing the low probability of independence being realized in the foreseeable future, the most progressive political parties, the Welsh Labour Party and the Welsh Liberal Democrats, have advocated for a federal solution. In 2021, the Labour Welsh Government presented a plan to transform the United Kingdom into 'a voluntary union of four nations, in which the pace of devolution processes will be equalized, and these processes cannot be reversed without the consent of the national community concerned. Each parliament or parliamentary assembly will independently determine the number and method of electing its members <...>, and the decision-making areas reserved for them

will remain free from interference by the British Parliament <...>. The governments of individual nations will be treated on an equal footing, and their members will <...> be held accountable for their actions only within their own federal state. National governments will exercise real influence over international relations and foreign trade agreements <...>. Grants from the national budget will be allocated in amounts corresponding to actual national needs <...>, and the governments of the individual parts of the federation will be responsible for determining the correct structure of national revenues and expenditure' [10]. These proposals were included in the Labour Party's election manifesto before the Welsh Parliament elections. They were also taken up by two regional research centres, the Institute of Welsh Affairs and the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, which considered federalism to be the best solution among all the options for political development in Wales. The independence and federalist concepts formulated by Welsh political groups, social organizations, and research centers have met with little response from the British Government, especially since none of them have been framed as demands addressed directly to the national authorities. Consequently, they remain (more or less far-reaching) visions of Wales's political future, rather than goals achievable in the relatively near future. Therefore, the most likely direction for the region's political development seems to be further, consistent expansion of the scope of devolution reform within the unitary state. The decision-making areas most frequently identified as those that should be transferred to regional authorities include: tax policy for all public levies collected in Wales (the so-called devo-max project) [11]; media policy (including controlling and financing the activities of radio and television broadcasters); energy policy (including regulating the rules of operation and collecting fees from energy companies); management of the national Shared Prosperity Fund allocated to Wales; management of Crown land and natural resources; oversight of the justice system; management of rail and road infrastructure; and anti-discrimination policy. Almost every one of these proposals was rejected by the British government. The only exception is the proposal to grant the region full fiscal autonomy, which was assessed by David Cameron (then leader of the opposite Conservative Party) as feasible in 2005 (albeit only in relation to Scotland and in the unspecified future) [12]. Since none of the subsequent governments at the national level has criticised this concept, the devo-max project currently represents the most serious (if not the only viable) option for the political development of Wales.

Situation in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, Brexit 'undermined the institutional and political frame-

work of the Good Friday Agreement and weakened power-sharing and devolution' [13]. British membership of the European Union was a factor in easing internal tensions. 'While the Common Travel Area ensured free movement between the two countries for British and Irish citizens (regardless of their EU membership), the Common Market eliminated customs checks and made the border (and with it the question of whether Northern Ireland should be part of Great Britain or Ireland) much less relevant to everyday life. Fears of a return to a 'hard border' brought the issue of the region's political status back into the political debate' [14]. Another problem was the fraying of the region's governance system in the areas undergoing devolution processes, which is based on a top-down arrangement of political forces. Between 2015 and 2019, voters shifted their support towards radical parties – the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin – at the expense of their moderate counterparts. This complicated the situation regarding Northern Irish devolution even before the Brexit vote in 2016, but it was the referendum campaign that proved to be the decisive factor in differentiating the attitudes of Sinn Féin and the DUP [13]. Irish nationalists expressed the belief that the only real way to avoid the reinstatement of a 'hard border' would be to unite both parts of the island, which would automatically stabilize the political situation and, thanks to continued unrestricted access to the Irish market and other European Union countries, would give the region a chance for dynamic economic development [15]. Unionists, on the other hand, saw no alternative to maintaining the closest possible political and economic ties with the rest of the United Kingdom. These radical differences of opinion led to Sinn Féin's withdrawal from co-creating the regional executive, which resulted in the suspension of the devolution processes in Northern Ireland in the years 2017–2020. This situation was consolidated as a result of the DUP establishing cooperation with the Conservative Party in the British Parliament in 2017–2019. Only the elimination of this last factor (after the formation of Boris Johnson's government) 'opened up the prospect of a broader spectrum of nationalist and unionist groups engaging in the process of creating a new [Northern Ireland] executive in January 2020. However, February's <...> victory of Sinn Féin in the elections to the Dáil Éireann, i.e., the lower house of the Irish Parliament] threatened a repeat of the situation that occurred in 2017' [13]. Although Sinn Féin ultimately remained the opposition party in the Irish House of Representatives, the provisions of the Northern Ireland Protocol (establishing a customs border in the Irish Sea) so outraged the Democratic Unionist Party that in January 2021 it threatened to dissolve the Northern Ireland Assembly and force early elections. A year later (in February 2022), Paul Givan

(a member of the DUP) resigned as head of the regional executive, automatically leading to a government crisis. Following the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Assembly elections in May 2022, the Democratic Union Party continued its obstructionist policies, refusing to join the newly formed regional government. The permanent political stalemate that has persisted since 2017 was the main reason why federalist concepts (similar to those in Scotland and Wales) did not emerge in Northern Ireland under the influence of Brexit. For the same reason, the idea of political development through strengthening the political position of regional authorities and expanding their scope of competences has not taken hold. However, strong centrifugal tendencies (aimed at uniting the region with Ireland) are countered by equally strong unionist tendencies, making it impossible to identify a clear majority among the region's inhabitants supporting one of these two solutions. Consequently, Northern Ireland has lagged far behind Scotland and Wales, whose authorities were able to define a vision for the political future of their regions. Therefore, unless new factors significantly impact the political or economic situation in Northern Ireland emerge in the near future, the reasons for the (gradual) changes should be sought solely in demographic factors. 'In the 2011 census, the percentage of the population identifying as Protestant fell below 50% for the first time, and according to long-term forecasts, the Catholic population will steadily increase. However, this is not a factor that would clearly translate into increased support for the idea of unification with Ireland, because not all Catholics are Irish nationalists' [14]. Devolution in Northern Ireland will therefore most likely stagnate, especially since the British Labour government has not proven to be a factor stimulating the devolution processes.

Conclusion. The reluctant (until 2024) or indifferent (after 2024) attitude of the national authorities

towards all independence and federalist demands and most demands for increasing the scope and dynamics of devolution processes put forward by the Scottish and Welsh authorities, combined with the passivity of the Northern Irish authorities in this area (resulting from objective impotence), constitutes a premise leading to the belief that devolution reform is gradually slowing down. Over the past 20 years, it has brought tangible benefits to all areas comprising the Celtic fringe, in the form of the creation and systematic expansion of decision-making autonomy for regional authorities, as well as a constitutional guarantee of the irremovability of these authorities in Scotland and Wales (while the permanence of regional authorities in Northern Ireland is determined by the Good Friday Agreement). However, while initially devolution processes developed very quickly (opening up prospects for individual regions to reduce their dependence on the central centre of power, or even become completely independent from it), this development slowed down after 2010, and even more so in the context of Brexit. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that further projects will be implemented as part of the devolution reform (e.g., devo-max, which envisages granting regions broad fiscal autonomy), but there is no doubt that this undertaking is approaching its limits, beyond which lie only powers jealously guarded by the state (e.g., foreign policy, defense, and national security). Entering these areas of competence would require a change in the formula of ties connecting Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland with the central center of power, resulting in a transformation of the state structure (from unitary to federal) or its ultimate dissolution. Neither the Conservative Party, in power until 2024, nor the Labour Party, currently in power, envisioned the possibility of realizing such scenarios, so it seems that no grassroots federalist or independence project currently stands a chance of realization.

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