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# “Scotland’s different”: Narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness in the post-Brexit-vote era

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## Abstract

While Scotland has been portrayed as an outlier in the context of Brexit, we know relatively little about how ordinary people in Scotland, including a growing migrant population, make sense of this (political and media) narrative. In order to address this gap, in this article I look at everyday narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness in the post-Brexit-vote era among the long-settled population and Polish - and to a lesser degree other European Union - migrants in the East End of Glasgow. By drawing upon scholarship on everyday nationalism and imagined communities, I explore discursive claims which romanticise Scotland as different and “welcoming” of immigration, and position it in binary opposition to England. How is Scotland produced as different in the context of Brexit? How are these stories used to re-imagine increasingly diverse Scottish society? In what ways are they being employed by migrant communities?

## Keywords

Brexit, Scotland, migrants, Polish, everyday nationalism, imagined communities

## Introduction

Regional disparities in voting patterns in the United Kingdom’s (UK) 2016 European Union (EU) referendum are vivid (Knight, 2017, Dorling, 2016). Against this backdrop, Scotland has been portrayed as an outlier because of its overall vote to Remain and, arguably, more favourable public attitudes towards immigration (Hepburn and Rosie, 2014, McCollum et al., 2014). This portrayal needs to be understood against a wider and long-standing narrative of Scotland’s distinctiveness in the UK related to its migration history and ethnic diversity on the one hand (Smith and Simpson, 2015), and a strong devolved government and independence movement on the other (Liinpää, 2018). This *grand narrative* of distinctiveness has been actively maintained by Scottish political elites over decades and has been used for different purposes (e.g. to oppose Margaret Thatcher’s administration in the 1980s or to argue for and defend devolution in 1990s). More recently, it has been employed by the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) in its efforts to gain more independence for Scotland from the central UK government (e.g. in the run up to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum). While in the context of Brexit this narrative has been particularly prominent in political and media discourses, we know less whether and how it operates within wider Scottish society. How do

ordinary people make sense of this narrative? What kind of stories (or myths) of distinctiveness are developed and circulated within Scotland's increasingly diverse communities? And, importantly, are these stories picked up, recycled or challenged by Scotland's growing migrant population?

In this article, I address the above questions by drawing upon 40 interviews with the long-settled and Polish participants, and an *ad hoc* focus group with five (non-British) EU nationals in the East End of Glasgow. I use the term "long-settled population" as a proxy for UK-born participants (with two exceptions). As of early 2020, Poles constitute the largest non-British national group in Scotland and the UK accounting for 90,000 and up to one million residents respectively (ONS, 2018a, ONS, 2018b). The Polish language is the third most spoken language in Scotland (after English and Scots) and the second in England and Wales (after English) (ONS, 2013, Scotland's Census, 2011). In Glasgow and the East End within it, Polish nationals have been argued to contribute to population gain, local economies and transformation ever since they started settling in greater numbers following Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 (Kay and Trevena, 2019, Freeke, 2015). Given their status as EU citizens and the fact that they are one of the most prominent "new" national minorities in Scotland, it is important to look at how they respond to the narratives of Scotland's distinctiveness in the context of Brexit.

Likewise, the choice of the East End of Glasgow as a research site is deliberate. With a long-standing history of poverty and deprivation and recent regeneration efforts, the East End is undergoing a dramatic change (Clark and Kearns, 2016). While it is predominantly a White lower-income area with some sectarian tensions and youth gang activity in the past, historically, it was also a site of migrant (e.g. Irish, Italian) settlement. Importantly, in recent years it has been attracting increasingly diverse populations, including migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, and is currently home to one of the largest Polish communities in Glasgow (Kay and Trevena, 2019). The area also constitutes an interesting case study against the backdrop of Brexit. Similar to Scotland and Glasgow, it voted overall to remain in the EU (62% and 67% respectively). Yet, compared to other constituencies in the city it had most Leave voters (44% compared to 22% in Glasgow North, 28% in Glasgow South and 30% in Glasgow Central, Paterson, 2016). While reasons for these differences are yet to be rigorously investigated, this may be a reflection of the affluence-versus-poverty split between the North-West and East of Glasgow and a greater discontent with the EU among the residents of the latter (Gawlewicz, 2019).

With this in mind, it may be particularly revealing to juxtapose how the long-settled East End residents and Polish (and wider EU) migrants in the area make sense of the narratives of Scotland's distinctiveness. Such stories of national "difference" are by no means unusual and are reflective of national myth-making or everyday/banal nationalism (Palmer, 1998, Billig, 1995). In what ways are they affected by a seismic socio-political event such as Brexit?

In what follows, I first look at the role of myth-making and debates on the *everyday* and the *imagined* in nationalism among the established and migrant populations. Second, I reflect on

the methodology underpinning the research that this article is based upon. Finally, I explore the narratives of Scotland's distinctiveness by focusing on how the long-settled, Polish and a small (mixed) group of EU nationals make claims about Scotland.

### **Everyday nationalism among the long-settled and migrant populations**

Narratives of national "difference" or "distinctiveness" are one of (many) manifestations of so-called *everyday nationalism*. Everyday nationalism has been on the academic radar for a few decades now and draws upon, but also departs from, the notion of *banal nationalism* "embedded in the routines of social life" (Billig, 1995: 175). While banal nationalism is primarily concerned with how nations are reproduced in discursive or material ways in our daily lives (e.g. via songs, flags, sporting events), everyday nationalism is rather preoccupied with how they are called into existence in specific spatiotemporal circumstances (Antonsich and Skey, 2017). In other words, everyday nationalism explores the when, where, how and why the nation is made or its relational, representational and changing character (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008, Brubaker et al., 2006, Skey, 2011a). Both these conceptual frames are also related to the earlier notion of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991), which revolutionised our understanding of the nation by bringing attention to the importance of how it is discursively narrated or, indeed, imagined (Antonsich, 2016).

As part of this discursive turn, some attention has been paid to how grand narratives of national "difference" emerge and circulate in society, i.e. how the nation is constructed through stories, stereotypes or myth-making (Condor, 2000, Valkonen and Ruuska, 2012). Scotland has had its fair share in this body of work and the everyday talk of distinctiveness is well documented (e.g. Cohen, 1996, McIntosh et al., 2004, Meer, 2015). Unsurprisingly, England occupies a special place in these stories and is routinely produced in essentialist terms as Scotland's "national Other" (Liinpää, 2018). Of course, these everyday stories are partly reflective of the fact that Scotland, and its geography, history and culture among others, are – as noted earlier - in many ways distinct within the UK (Davidson et al., 2018, Hepburn and Rosie, 2014, Hunter and Meer, 2018, Smith and Simpson, 2015). Smith and Simpson (2015), for example, explore this distinctiveness in relation to migration and ethnic diversity. Historically, Scotland was largely a country of emigration with significant numbers of Scots leaving for North America, Australia or New Zealand among others (Harper, 2003) and a diaspora of over 30 million as of early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sim, 2011). This does not mean that there was no immigration to Scotland (note e.g. significant Irish or Italian settlements throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century; for a useful overview see Edwards, 2016). But scope and magnitude of these population movements were different compared to England and Wales leading to differences in ethnic composition (e.g. the 20<sup>th</sup>-century migrations from the Commonwealth countries were experienced on a much smaller scale in Scotland). Likewise, Scotland's long-standing independence movement, strong devolved government and more recent EU sympathies among political elites are further examples of the country's difference within the UK. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that there is an intricate connection between Scotland's actual distinctiveness and what is made of it in everyday (and banal)

myth-making. Importantly, while how these stories operate and what function they play has been well researched, we know relatively little whether major political events such as Brexit impact on them and in what ways (although note an emerging scholarship on the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, e.g. Liinpää, 2018). Essentially, how is the nation re-imagined through such events?

Crucially, everyday nationalism, and national myth-making as its manifestation, are not only discussed with regard to established populations. There are two significant bodies of work focussing on what is reminiscent of everyday nationalism among international migrants and diasporas more broadly. Firstly, there is an established scholarship on the so-called *long-distance nationalism* (Anderson, 1992), i.e. identity claims that migrants make to a specific place viewed as their ancestral home (Bielewska, 2012, Mavroudi, 2010, Burrell, 2006). Secondly, there is somewhat separate literature on the constructions of home vis-à-vis “host” society (Christou, 2011, Christou and King, 2010, Gawlewicz, 2015, Horolets and Kozłowska, 2012, Skey, 2011b). The former has broadly looked at the production of national identities and how they are fostered, celebrated and challenged among migrant populations, for instance the Polish in England (Bielewska, 2012). The latter is situated within wider work on migration and orientalist imaginaries and posits complex ways in which the country of origin and destination are (re-)made through the process of migration. For example, reflecting on my earlier research (Gawlewicz, 2015), I have found that Polish migrants in the UK may discursively construct Polishness and Britishness in binary oppositions underpinned by orientalist understandings of Poland as the iconic East and the UK as West. This suggests that migrant populations are actively involved in producing and circulating stories about not only their country of origin but the one(s) of destination. Yet, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Liinpää, 2018), there is little discussion about how they engage with the grand narratives of “difference” produced in the “host” society. And so the question remains: how do migrants respond these stories?

## **Methodology**

In the paper, I draw upon a subset of data collected for the project *Living together in the context of Brexit: Migrant-‘host’ encounters in the East End of Glasgow* funded by the Urban Studies Foundation and looking at the interplay of community relations, migration, political hostile environment and the city (March 2017 - December 2019). This includes 40 in-depth interviews and a focus group with the residents of Glasgow’s East End. The interviews were split equally between the long-settled population and Polish nationals (20 with each). The focus group involved five EU nationals from Czech Republic, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Romania. In total, 45 residents were involved.

As mentioned, I use the term “long-settled population” to refer to UK-born participants (with two exceptions). While these participants were predominantly White Scottish, this group was, indeed, diverse and included Asian Scottish, English and Irish people as well as one dual-national (Italian-British). As noted, I purposefully selected Polish migrants as members of the

most numerous non-UK population in Scotland attracting significant public and media attention since mid-2000s. My initial plan was to focus on these two groups exclusively. However, as a number of non-Polish/non-British EU nationals in the East End expressed a strong desire to get involved in the study (in particular in relation to Brexit), I organised an *ad hoc* focus group to further include their perspectives. Both interviews and the focus group were conducted between July 2017 and April 2018 and explored, among other things, how Brexit shapes migrant/‘host’ relations in Scotland, everyday interactions in Glasgow’s East End as well as solidarities and concerns, and a sense of belonging to the area.

The participants were recruited via gatekeepers (e.g. community organisations), leafleting in Polish and wider community venues, social media (e.g. facebook) and chain referral, and included 27 women and 18 men between the mid-20s and late 70s. They were diverse in terms of religion/belief, class, sexuality as well as attitudes towards Brexit. They also had different education levels and employment statuses although the overall sample was skewed towards the better-educated (roughly two thirds either held a university degree or were university students) and employed (around 80% were in some form of employment; the rest were either students or retired; only one person was unemployed). It is worth noting that a number of Polish participants worked below their actual qualifications, which is reflective of deskilling among Polish migrants in Scotland (Moskal, 2013). However, this group included also highly-skilled professionals, business owners and students. Throughout the overall sample, participants had lived in the East End between 3 months and 68 years. Unsurprisingly, many of the long-settled participants had a long-standing connection with the area and had lived there 16.5 years on average. Polish participants and the EU nationals in the focus group had all migrated to Scotland as adults and lived in the East End for 4.5 years on average.

As a bilingual researcher, I conducted the interviews either in English (with long-settled and focus group participants) or Polish (with Polish participants with one exception). Subsequently, I employed narrative analysis (across both languages) to explore the overall material. Hence, excerpts from the interviews and the focus group in English are verbatim and the ones in Polish have been translated into English. I use pseudonyms throughout the article to maintain participant anonymity.

### **Narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness**

Narratives of Scotland’s “difference” or “distinctiveness” in the context of Brexit were often produced by the long-settled and migrant participants. In particular, questions about changes in the East End since the Brexit referendum and feelings about Brexit (explored in both interviews and the focus group) prompted participants to reflect on Scotland. These narratives were relatively similar across the long-settled and migrant participants, although the trope of Scotland’s distinctiveness was more implicit in the stories of the former. Migrant participants, on the other hand, tended to use the term “difference” or “distinctiveness” explicitly followed by examples of how Scotland was different in their eyes.

Interestingly, in these narratives Scotland was frequently discussed in relation to England as a “national Other” (Liinpää, 2018). This is reflected in the extract from the focus group below.

**Interviewer: Have you noticed any changes in your neighbourhood?**

*Erik: No, you would have to go to England for that [laughter], because in Manchester I have Dutch friends (...) and [we] would be speaking Dutch and there would be comments, which is really, you know, I've not had - never in Scotland.*

**Interviewer: [responding to another participant nodding] You agree Jadzia?**

*Jadzia: Yeah, yeah. I heard a story from my friend. He's half Italian and half (...) from Thailand. (...) He'd been living in England for a long time (...) and had this situation where he was speaking with his parents on the phone and someone shouted like: 'Why are you speaking Italian? You have to speak English'. (focus group with EU nationals: Erik, Dutch man in his late 50s; Jadzia, Polish woman in her late 20s)*

Throughout interviews, where participants typically had more time to reflect on their feelings, Scotland was widely perceived as “more welcoming”, “open and tolerant” and “friendlier” as opposed to England, which was demonised as “unfriendly”, “anti-immigrant” or even “racist”. England was clearly *othered*, i.e. made to be intrinsically different, in these stories and served as an imaginary opposite or a binary outside.

*I'm so happy that I live in Scotland not England, because from what I hear and read (...) there are some real racist sentiments in England because of Brexit, you know? Whereas in Scotland, you just sense this everywhere: Scots say that they like Poles, Poles are OK, hard-working, right? 'We don't want you to leave.' (Wojtek, Polish man in his late 20s)*

*Scotland is an open country. Even after Brexit [referendum] people were still... Because Scotland didn't want to leave [the EU] first of all. It's different here. There've never been larger racist incidents here – of course, they happen everywhere but it doesn't really happen here that people protest and attack others because of their religion or culture or skin colour. Scotland's always been a mixed country, everything has been mixed here, even historically (...) there are Scandinavian influences, everyone's friendlier, there's no hatred. Scotland's just more open, Brits [sic] are self-righteous, they think so highly of themselves - that they're the best. (Marcin, Polish man in his late 30s)*

It is also worthwhile to mention that Brexit was largely seen as an “English vote” and Brexit negotiations as the “Westminster's imposition”. There were some highly controversial claims that Scottish people “did not” or “would not” vote to Leave. Such claims are very problematic not least because a significant 38% of voters in Scotland opted for Leave in the Brexit referendum. They also draw on essentialist understandings of (national) identity and – as noted earlier – binary *othering* of England. Importantly, these were sometimes entangled

with narratives of Scotland's independence, in particular in interviews with the long-settled participants.

*It's different in England. I think in Scotland we're still a little bit kind of, maybe a bit relaxed or laid back about it, or kind of - it's caught up with the independence question as well in Scotland and I voted yes in the independence referendum. I strongly believe that the country should be independent of the Commonwealth and Britain. (Oonagh, long-settled Scottish woman in her late 30s)*

*In Glasgow it was remain. (...) Scottish people, you know, they will become more open (...) because of Brexit, because I mean they voted to remain. And bloody England voted to leave. They [Scottish people] want to distinguish themselves and so they're not hostile at all to the different ones [foreigners], you know? (Enzo, long-settled Italian-British man in his early 40s)*

Somewhat unexpectedly, historical and cultural parallels were sometimes drawn in particular in interviews with Polish participants. In these narratives, examples were given of the allegedly shared history of oppression between Poland and Scotland, cultural proximity or what some participants would vaguely call a "similar mentality". This is evident in the three quotes below.

*I think Scottish people are like Poles. I feel attachment to and... a sense of familiarity with Scots, but not with the English. (...) It's the same sense of freedom and respect of the freedom of others. (Sławek, Polish man in his mid-50s)*

*It only occurred to me after a while... that Scotland is kind of under British occupation. The UK is imposing everything on them, right? That's why they don't like the English. But, luckily, they like us [Polish people]. (Wojtek, Polish man in his late 20s)*

*I think the East European people, they're more like us: they like their football, they like their drink. (Des, long-settled Scottish man in his late 70s)*

In the first quote, Sławek discusses freedom as a value of particular significance to both Polish and Scottish people. Sławek implies that understandings of freedom in Poland and Scotland are similar because they are strongly embedded in history, in particular the history of oppression and dependence on external powers. These historical parallels are also evident in Wojtek's narrative. Scotland is being described here as being under "British" occupation. While this is not captured in the quote, Wojtek implicitly likens Scotland's history to Poland's experience of the partitions (1772-1918) and the Nazi Germany and Soviet Union occupation during World War II (1939-1945). The final quote, on the other hand, focuses on the alleged cultural parallels between Scots and – in Des' words - "East Europeans" (the term sometimes used by the long-settled participants as a proxy for Polish migrants). These seem to include everyday habits, lifestyles and activities (here exemplified by football and drinking culture).



In contrast to what the empirical material may suggest so far, when the interviews focused on actual experience rather than purely discursive claims, participants did recall some instances of Brexit-related racism and xenophobia broadly discussed in wider Brexit literature (Rzepnikowska, 2018, Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2018). However, somewhat surprisingly, these were often downplayed or even excused, in particular by Polish participants. This is reflected in the two quotes below in which racism is clearly excused because the perpetrators allegedly had had what is referred to as “limited knowledge” (Urszula) and the public display of fascist symbols had not translated to actual violence (Sławek).

*Straight after the referendum, I had this situation: I was speaking to someone on the street [in Polish] and there was a group of Scottish lads in their 20s, they were passing by... and there were comments because they recognised our language, right? But I think that they simply didn't know what was going on, they didn't know the circumstances. They simply had limited knowledge. (Urszula, Polish woman in her mid-40s)*

*I think it's different here. I haven't heard of any instances of hate crime here, but you hear a lot about other places in the UK. I don't know if there were any concerning news from Scotland.*

***Interviewer: There were - from Glasgow... Someone put up stickers with Nazi symbols in some neighbourhoods.***

*Well, they might have put some stickers on - so what?! Has anything happened to anybody? But, it did elsewhere in the UK. (Sławek, Polish man in his mid-50s)*

The second quote by Sławek is particularly interesting here. When Sławek said that he had not heard of any instances of racism post-Brexit-referendum, I challenged him by providing a local example from Glasgow. He responded in somewhat confrontational way as if to imply that I was exaggerating because – to use his reasoning – *nothing happened to anybody*.

Both the above and earlier narratives are quite revealing. What comes across strongly is that Scotland is being re-imagined against the backdrop of Brexit, i.e. Brexit is impacting on how Scotland is called into existence as a discursive figure or, in other words, a discursive nation. Firstly, it is constructed as fundamentally different through reviving but also repositioning the long-standing narratives of historical, cultural and political distinctiveness (e.g. a narrative of favourable attitudes towards immigration, see Hepburn and Rosie, 2014, McCollum et al., 2014). It appears that what has been largely a political elite projection until recently (Liinpää, 2018, Davidson and Virdee, 2018) is being increasingly internalised by ordinary people and manifests itself in everyday talk (cf. Hussain and Miller, 2006 in relation to Scotland's devolution).

Secondly, Scotland is not re-made in isolation. Rather, it is produced in relation to England. Hence, this re-making is relational and based on the well-known principle of binary *othering*: Us versus Them. Of course, it should be emphasised that the storied Scotland and England

are first and foremost imagined or ideational (cf. Anderson, 1991). While they may be acted upon and have most “real” consequences for people, they are not necessarily “lived” as the recalled instances of post-Brexit racism and xenophobia illustrate. Instead, they are part of the myth-making which casts Scotland as the heroine and England as the villain.

Finally, it is crucial to note that this binary production and wider myth-making are, indeed, picked up by Scotland’s migrant population. In fact, throughout the interviews migrant participants were more likely to produce the narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness than their long-settled counterparts. How exactly this is related to their migration experience is yet to be explored, although it could be linked to the desire to integrate into Scottish society or being viewed as such by the established population.

Arguably, the extent to which Scotland and England are being reproduced is reflective of the divisive power of Brexit. Clearly, the material quoted in this article illustrates that Brexit has the capacity to re-shape the national grand narrative and re-invent Scotland versus England (as well as more broadly in relation to the UK or other societies for that matter). This is worrying not least because such myth-making draws upon essentialist rhetoric and problematic binary relationships. It also (re-)creates negative stereotypes and a sense of suspicion, difference and tension (if discursive).

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored narratives of Scotland’s distinctiveness in the context of Brexit. In particular, I have looked at how Scotland is re-imagined in everyday talk of the long-settled and Polish residents (and a small group of other non-British EU citizens) in the East End of Glasgow.

I have found that Brexit is re-shaping how Scotland is narrated and impacting on its positioning versus England as its “national Other”. In participants’ stories, Scotland is not only an outlier in how it voted in the EU referendum: it emerges as profoundly different or, in participants’ words, “welcoming”, “inclusive” and “tolerant”. Otherwise speaking, it is broadly (and uncritically) romanticised. I have also established that Polish/EU migrants pick up and re-circulate this narrative. This is worth further research as it may have far-reaching implications for the increasingly diverse Scottish society.

The reported tendency to romanticise Scotland is, indeed, fascinating. Could it be reflective of an attempt to escape or “wash hands” from Brexit? Or an attempt to defend the nation, or the “host” society? Could it be related to a *Brexit fatigue* that I noted among research participants during my fieldwork in 2017-2018 (cf. Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira, 2020)? The everyday nationalism scholarship suggests that myth-making plays an important role in constructing and maintaining national identity (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008, Palmer, 1998, Skey and Antonsich, 2017). Essentially, it is something people can *hold on to* as a group. This may be even more evident in the context of political turbulence such as Brexit. Perhaps, sticking to a romantic vision of “different” Scotland is part of the everyday processing of a

complex, emotional and deeply consequential act of exiting the EU (which is, indeed, taking place against the will of a significant proportion of Scottish society and many EU nationals in Scotland)?

Against this backdrop, it is also important to emphasise the discrepancy between discursive claims made by research participants and their actual lived experience. It is clear that how they (in particular migrants) spoke of Scotland was sometimes contrasting with their experiences of racism and xenophobia. Yet, they did not recognise these experiences as such or diminished them in the light of the narrative of “different” and “welcoming” Scotland. This exposes how powerful such grand narratives can be and that they may have real-life consequences for people and societies (cf. Anderson, 1991).

While illustrative of some of the rhetorical undercurrents in the increasingly diverse Scottish society, the article has an important limitation. Even though Scotland voted overall to Remain in the Brexit referendum, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that a substantial 38% of voters did opt for Leave. Meanwhile, the vast majority of both the long-settled and migrant participants in this study were strongly opposing Brexit. This could have manifested itself in more vivid narratives of distinctiveness. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to repeat this study with a well-balanced research sample to ascertain that a range of political views is appropriately considered.

By looking at everyday myth-making about Scotland in the post-Brexit-vote era, in this article I have contributed to the body of work on nationalism in Scotland and its regional distinctiveness in the UK (Davidson et al., 2018, Hepburn and Rosie, 2014, Meer, 2015, Smith and Simpson, 2015). Through focusing on Brexit, and by exploring perspectives of both the long-settled and migrant population, I have added a new layer to the growing scholarship on migration, Brexit and diverse UK communities (e.g. Botterill, 2018, Brahic and Lallement, 2018, Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2018, Lulle et al., 2018). In a wider context, the article provides an original perspective on how nations are re-imagined in turbulent times. Given the global rise of populism and neo-nationalism in recent years (exemplified in Trump’s administration in the United States or Orbán’s in Hungary, amongst others), understanding of how nations come to existence in everyday talk is becoming a key concern for contemporary societies and social science research.

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