**EU COHESION POLICY AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION:
THE UNITED KINGDOM AND CONTEXTS AND ISSUES FOR RESEARCH**
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I. INTRODUCTION

While European cohesion policy expenditures are a major item in the EU budget there remains relatively little research of their effects on perceptions in the member states of the European Union. This paper addresses the United Kingdom, identifying the contexts to research in this case and the key issues for investigation. The paper has four principal aims. First, section one will establish how significant European cohesion policies have been to the United Kingdom. Section two will consider how the territorial dimension to UK government has heightened the political significance of EU cohesion policies in the UK. Section three then considers evidence of public perceptions of the European Union in the UK as a whole as well as in each nation and region of the UK. Section four then considers what key political variables should be included in analysing the relationship between the experience of EU cohesion policies and perceptions of the European Union.

II. EU COHESION POLICIES AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Soon after the UK joined the European Communities in 1973, and as a direct implication of its membership, the European regional development fund was created in 1974. Thereafter, EC regional policy was seen as a key policy through which money paid into the budget may be balanced by funding coming back to the UK. British local authorities were very active in the 1970s and 1980s in lobbying for funding, led by the larger Scottish and Welsh local authorities and in England the big cities of Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham. British local authorities were prominent in the Regions of Traditional Industry network (RETI) and the European-wide coalfield campaign that led to early objective one and objective two funding as well as the RECHAR programme for coalfield regeneration. The significance of regional policy was further enhanced by the introduction of the economic and social cohesion priority in 1988 which led to the doubling of structural funds and their subsequent growth as part of the programme to complete the single European market. This was strongly welcomed by sub-national government in the UK. Merseyside and Northern Ireland were classified as objective one regions, as they had less than 2/3 of the EU average GDP per capita. Other areas defined as declining industrial regions and therefore eligible for objective 2 funding were in England, Greater Manchester, West and South Yorkshire, parts of the North-East and Birmingham; and in Scotland, Strathclyde. Devon and Cornwall were funded as a rural area containing high economic and social deprivation under objective 5b (Goldsmith, 1997).

During the 1990s the principal focus of the EU was the consolidation of the single market and progress towards economic and monetary union. In this context, the UK was able to maintain a position as a strong beneficiary of cohesion policy and it played a major role in regional policy in the UK (Bache, 2008). In this period one might also have expected greater EU cohesion funding for Wales due to the decline of the coal and steel industries and the loss of thousands of heavy industry jobs. This left both skills base (unemployability) and unemployment problems. However, Wales

got relatively little funding until the redrawing of the regional boundaries in Wales in 1998. Under this exercise much of West Wales and Valleys qualified for objective one funding for the first time for the 2000-2006 period, while the rest of Wales was eligible for objective 3 support (Wyn Jones and Rumboul, 2012). This was to prove to be a significant addition to UK eligibility for cohesion funding as following the expansion of European Union membership in the 2000s and the consequent radical redrawing of the regional funding map cohesion funding for the UK was cut in half. Even so in the 2007-13 period two regions in the UK (West Wales and the Valleys, and Cornwall and the Scilly Isles), unusually among regions in Western member states, still qualified as convergence regions, as they had again failed to achieve more that 75% of average EU GDP. The Scottish Highlands and Islands received funding as phasing out regions and Merseyside and South Yorkshire as phasing in regions; and with 6.2 billion Euros regional competitiveness and employment funding for projects in other parts of the state, the UK received overall 9.5 billion Euros.

In preparations for the 2014-2020 financial framework there were two major challenges potentially constraining cohesion policy: first, new member state regions with greater need; and second fiscal austerity in response to the financial and currency crises that beset the EU during the 2010s. It is to be expected that these may have significantly eroded the importance of cohesion policy for the UK. Despite this, for the 2014-2020 financial framework the UK was allocated around 11.8 billion Euros. West Wales and the Valleys and Cornwall and the Scilly Isles continue to qualify as less developed regions. A wide range of areas have qualified as transition regions: the Scottish Highlands and Islands; Northern Ireland; Devon; Shropshire and Staffordshire; East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire; South Yorkshire; Lancashire; Tees Valley and Durham; and Cumbria. The rest of the UK, including the major focus of economic development in London and the South East, is classified as more developed. Even so there is a strong governance infrastructure geared towards seeking European Regional Development Funding related to innovation, ICT, developing small and medium sized enterprises and a low carbon economy, or European Social Fund support for specific projects (europa:eu, 2014).

Overall, therefore, while there is something of a rise and fall narrative to the scale of cohesion policy funding in respect of the UK, its significance to poorer areas but also to other areas has remained fairly constant even into the 2014-20 period. Across the UK Scottish Enterprise, Welsh Government and in England the local enterprise partnerships (LEPS) in conjunction with local authorities, a range of quangos and third sector bodies, are geared up to the seeking and usage of European cohesion funds. In exploring the relationship between EU cohesion policy and perceptions of the EU the UK is a good case to study.

III. UK TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENT AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EU COHESION POLICIES

The political significance of EU cohesion policy has been further heightened in the UK by the existence of historic nations (Scotland and Wales) and regions (Northern Ireland), each with strong national identities distinct from that of the state as a whole. They have long been recognised in the territorial governmental structures of the state, with implications for the focus placed at the sub-state level on how EU cohesion policy might be applied. Even in the period between the 1970s and 1990s, when EU regional funding began, there were territorially defined central government departments for each of the historic nations of Scotland and Wales and the contested region of Northern Ireland, each with a secretary of state in the UK cabinet. Consequently, the secretaries of state for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all became

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a focus for lobbying and accountability within their respective territories with regard to how well they were accessing and using EU regional funds. This became particularly controversial during the period of the Thatcher/Major Governments (1979-97) as there were strong criticisms that because the Conservative party was Eurosceptic, Conservative secretaries of state in Scotland and Wales in particular were failing to maximise EU funding, and failed to ensure that EU funding was genuinely additional to state regional aid.

In England, the vast majority of the state, there also emerged some English regional consciousness in this era that was focused on making the most of European cohesion policy. This was not so much at the popular level as at the governance level. Local government during the 1980s and 1990s increasingly sought to establish regional consortia of local authorities to give themselves greater collaborative capacity in relating to Europe. In 1994 the administrative regional dimension to English government was recognised by the Major Government when it reorganised all of its regional offices of central government departments into one coherent structure of Government Office for the English regions. Thereafter, the issue of managing good regional partnerships between central and local government bodies and other governance stakeholders within each region in relation to EU cohesion policies became one of the Government Offices' key responsibilities. In a similar way to the territorial departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, they also became a key focus for lobbying and accountability over the formation and implementation on the ground of EU cohesion policies (see Bradbury and Mawson, 1997).

Critiques of UK central government eventually led to the Labour Government, led by Tony Blair and elected in 1997, to introduce a new elected tier of regional government for the historic nations and regions: the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales. Since 1999 the UK Parliament has devolved extensive powers to these bodies, including responsibility for EU cohesion policies and the parliament/assemblies have provided the new focus for accountability. The establishment of democratic devolution has had potentially far reaching consequences as it has created the opportunity to place the development and scrutiny of EU cohesion policy under distinctive designs of representative democracy, the influence of regionally defined approaches to political economy and distinctive decentralised approaches to governance. Such institutional reform was of course in large part driven by the politics of national identity but the institutionalisation of identity politics has created the further potential for consideration of EU cohesion policy in terms of a heightened sense of regional interests. A major part of why the devolved bodies were created in Scotland and Wales was also because of the belief that decentralised government could help to improve their economies and give them a greater voice in Europe; twin ambitions that were brought together in the opportunity to manage EU cohesion policies. Parties vying for office in each of these territories, therefore, approach EU cohesion policy as one of the key policy issues over which to compete, heightening the territorial dimension to the political significance of EU cohesion policy quite significantly (see Bradbury, 2008).

This state of affairs was intensified by the success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in becoming the largest party in the Scottish Parliament in 2007 and forming a minority government, and then actually winning an overall majority in 2011. In 2014 the SNP was able to hold a referendum on independence in which they campaigned on a policy of an independent Scotland combined with membership of the European Union. As an independent state and with more autonomy in decision-making, the SNP argued that Scotland could thrive economically and develop a stronger role in the EU, accessing more support and making more of that support. In practice, the referendum resulted in a No vote by 55-45%, but the campaign established greater

credibility to arguments for an independent Scotland and made the issue of how well Scotland could access the benefits of EU membership within the UK even more salient. This has served only to intensify party competition over issues like EU cohesion policy. In the same period, the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, also made it in to government in Wales, going into coalition with Labour between 2007 and 2011. Plaid Cymru, like the SNP, promote a policy of independence in Europe and have strongly criticised Labour's stewardship in the Welsh Government of EU funding since 1999. Whilst, the electoral fortunes of Plaid Cymru fell back in 2011, the political pressure on Labour to perform on EU cohesion policy was keenly felt.

The increasing assertion of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish claims since the late 1990s generally has not been matched in the English regions, though the significance of the regional dimension to government has remained strong. Between 1997 and 2010 the Blair-Brown Labour Governments offered the opportunity for English regions to embrace elected government but with little success. A referendum on the creation of an elected greater London Authority was successful in 1999 but a referendum for an elected regional assembly for the North East in 2004 resulted in a very emphatic 'no' vote. No further regional devolution was attempted. Thereafter, with the exception of Greater London, Labour developed the English regions through the introduction of regional development agencies. In 2010 the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government, with the exception of the retained Greater London Authority, dismantled the regional machinery of government in England returning the focus for English government firmly to local government. This remained the state of play ahead of the 2015 General Election and was set to continue if the Conservatives were re-elected. However, the regional collaborative operations of local government remained strong and as part of the debate about balancing the devolution of power across the UK after the Scottish independence referendum the Labour Party argued for greater power across England's regions. This received an enthusiastic response from England's big cities in the Midlands and North, intent on gaining fiscal devolution and more freedom from central control. Overall, while the political saliency of EU cohesion policy funding has not grown in prominence in English regional government in the same manner as in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, it has certainly not diminished and may rise again in the context of further debate about elected regional government in England.

IV. THE UK AND PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE

Despite the UK's membership of the EU and strong engagement with policies like cohesion policy, public perceptions of Europe in the UK are among the most disengaged and critical in the European Union. Between the early 1990s and early 2010s support for EU membership generally declined across Europe from over 70% to an average of just over 50%. But even within this broader context the UK was one of the states exhibiting least support, typically averaging between 30-40% support for membership (Hix and Hoyland, 2011). In recent years British consciousness and resentment against the implication of European Union membership has developed significant new momentum. This has in turn led to growing support for the UK Independence party (UKIP), which wishes the UK to leave the EU and demands an immediate referendum. UKIP topped the poll in the 2014 European elections in the UK, including victories in six of the nine English regions (see table 1). In Autumn 2014 UKIP also won two UK parliament by-elections to place pressure on all of the other parties to reconsider their approach to EU membership.

Table 1: Vote Share in the 2014 European Parliament Elections (%)

	UK	London	South East	South West	East England	West Midlands
Cons	23.9	22.5	31.0	28.9	28.4	24.3
Green	7.8	8.9	9.1	11.1	8.5	5.3
Lab	25.4	36.7	14.7	13.8	17.3	26.7
LibDem	6.9	6.7	8.0	10.7	6.9	5.6
SNP/PC	3.2					
UKIP	27.5	16.8	32.1	32.3	34.5	31.5

	East Midlands	Yorkshire & Humber	North East	North West	Wales	Scotland
Cons	26.0	19.2	17.7	20.1	17.4	17.2
Green	6.0	7.9	5.2	7.0	4.5	8.1
Lab	24.9	29.3	36.5	33.9	28.1	25.9
LibDem	5.4	6.3	5.9	6.0	4.0	7.1
SNP/PC					15.3	29.0
UKIP	32.9	31.1	29.2	27.5	27.6	10.5

Index; Cons = Conservative; Lab=Labour; LibDem=Liberal Democrats; SNP=Scottish National Party; PC=Plaid Cymru; UKIP=UK Independence Party
Source: Compiled from www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/vote2014/eu-uk-results (accessed 3 February 2015)

Pressure from UKIP resulted in a promise by the Conservative Party if re-elected in 2015 of a referendum on whether to stay in the European Union or not after a renegotiation of the terms of UK membership. Labour and the Liberal Democrats also moved to positions where they promised to hold an in-out referendum if during the 2015-2020 UK Parliament term there is a proposed major transfer of powers from states to the EU under a new EU treaty. This is obviously a more conditional position on holding a referendum but nevertheless it reflects the fact that between 2010 and 2015 all the major British-wide parties had to engage with the debate about the conditions that would make an in/out referendum necessary. Regular polling by YouGov suggests that there is considerable scope for fluctuation in voting intentions in a possible EU membership referendum. In January 2014 a YouGov poll indicated a 46-36 split between those saying they would vote to leave against those wishing to stay. In January 2015 this had turned round to leave a 43-38 split in favour of those wishing to stay (I, 27/1/2015, p5). The data suggests that concerns about the implications of EU membership may still not lead to a vote to leave, but even so, it suggests the result of such a referendum would be very close.

Table 1 is also revealing for showing differences between the nations and regions of the UK in their support of UKIP. Support for UKIP is most marked in the majority of the regions of England, slightly less marked in Wales and the Northern English regions, and is least marked in London and Scotland. Table 2 also reveals differences between England, Wales and Scotland on EU referendum voting intentions. This may add to a view that UK scepticism about the EU should be more properly understood as an English view. However, one should not get too carried away by the differences exhibited in either table. Though England is more Eurosceptic than Wales, Wales has still clearly exhibited high levels of support for UKIP and for a No vote in a possible

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referendum. Equally, while Scotland exhibits less interest in UKIP and more positive support for EU membership, one should not make too much of Scotland's relative pro-Europeanness. Seen in a broader European rather than simply British comparative context, Scotland emerges as simply more in the mainstream of the generally Eurosceptical turn of opinion across Europe rather than actually being comparable to the most pro-EU countries. Equally, across the UK there are common concerns with respect to the EU over the free movement of people and immigration, followed by crime and security. Concerns about immigration from recent EU entrant member states is one of the key campaigning tools of UKIP, and this appears to have had a broad appeal as evidenced by the fact that UKIP was able to win at least one MEP seat in each territory in the 2014 European elections, including Scotland.

Table 2: Intended vote in an In/Out Referendum

	England (%)	Wales (%)	Scotland (%)
Vote to stay in the European Union	37	39	48
Vote to leave the European Union	40	35	32
Non-voter / Don't know	22	26	20

Source: Report by Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change, University of Edinburgh, Survey April 2014, N=4,421. See www.cardiff.ac.uk/wgc/2014/04/29/national-identity-plays-a-key-role-in-voters-views-on-Europe/ accessed 3rd February 2015

V. EU COHESION POLICIES AND UK PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE: KEY ISSUES FOR RESEARCH

The central concern is of course to consider the relationship between the experience of EU cohesion policies in the UK and these relatively negative perceptions of the European Union. In doing so, the UK's potential gains from EU cohesion policy can easily be over-estimated. Its financial significance in the context of the size of government budgets is still relatively small. Nevertheless, economists have still been keen to evaluate the effects of EU cohesion policy on regional economies. In addition, three other key variables in determining the broader political and social significance of EU cohesion policy have emerged. First, the European Commission made the process of cohesion policy making as important as the policy itself, with great importance being attached to participation by economic and social groups in project development. Second, the perceptions of the cohesion policies produced has been important, focusing on whether policy analysts believe there has been a clear strategy, whether it has produced synergies with other regional government strategies and/or improvements of policy implementation. Finally, communication strategies have been significant, focusing on how well funding opportunities have been disseminated to potential local partners; how aims of EU cohesion policy have been promoted, and how well its benefits have been translated to the public.

Some evaluations in the regions of the UK in these terms indicate that in practice the experience of EU cohesion policy may have contributed to sceptical perceptions of the EU. For example in Wales the Welsh Government was generally criticised in the 2000-06 period for lacking a coherent strategy (Entwhistle et al, 2007) and lacking an openness in encouraging participation by civic groups which contributed to lack of capacity and reach in the implementation of the strategy (Royles, 2006). The

implementation of EU objective one regional aid in Wales in the 2007-13 period was similarly open to many criticisms about the coherence of strategy and lack of imagination in developing projects (Guildford, 2013). Consideration of the experience of EU cohesion policy obviously needs to be taken further; to assess economic effects, policy process, strategic policy development and communication strategy in the UK's regions that have strongly engaged with EU policy. Further analysis may well provide a more complex picture but as part of this we may learn much more about how the implementation of EU cohesion policy has contributed to the UK's troubled engagement with European integration.

It is important though not to consider the importance of cohesion policy to UK perceptions of the EU in isolation from other key factors. Explaining public attitudes in member states to the European Union has stimulated a broad-ranging research debate, which has identified a wide range of other key political variables that could do much to clarify the reasons for the UK's relatively poor perceptions of the European Union (see Hix and Hoyland, 2011; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010). By taking these into account we may be able to explore more clearly the relative significance of the experience of EU cohesion policy in explaining perceptions of the EU in the UK, both as a whole and across its nations and regions. Four sets of variables are itemised here to illustrate the breadth of the research agenda:-

(1) *Underlying political differences*. There is an in-built aspiration in European integration to seek to encourage member states to converge on political norms and accordingly political differences are often couched in terms of length and form of commitment to broad principles of democratic government. Despite this, three political differences between the UK and much of the rest of the EU can be highlighted which may explain UK perceptions of Europe and differences within UK regional attitudes. First, there is variation over types of democratic principles applied, notably varying between proportional consensual styles of government and majoritarian adversarial parliamentary systems. Secondly, there is variation over the model of political economy applied and how that frames approaches to economic development and welfare state provision. Thirdly, there is variation over the system of governance that reflects levels of state-society engagement, and roles for interest and civil society groups, in policy making and implementation. The UK is identified with majoritarian adversarial parliamentary government, neo-liberal political economy and market governance models of service delivery, complemented by closed network governance, all of which may be seen as distinctive from the EU mainstream. Political analysis of the UK's stateless nations and regions nevertheless offers variation from British central government practice towards engagement with semi-PR electoral systems, more consensual styles of government and more inclusive non-marketised modes of governance, and continued adherence to social democratic models of the welfare state. In relating this variation in underlying political differences within the state to variations in perceptions of the EU we also of course need to keep in mind analysis of where public attitudes lie on left-right and authoritarian-libertarian survey scales and whether these also vary across nations and regions.

(2) *Contingent political factors*. There are two key issues that have been identified as important to perceptions of the EU and have particular bearing in analysis of the UK. First, social scientists have tracked declining public trust in their domestic politicians in most EU states and considered whether growing distrust of domestic politicians feeds through into similar distrust of the EU. Equally though they are conscious that it is possible for the EU to be considered more positively by electorates in contrast with their own government. In the UK declining trust in domestic politicians has been a major issue and whether representatives in the

devolved parliaments and assemblies have any greater levels of trust is something we need to know more about. It appears that declining trust in domestic politicians in the UK is accompanied by low trust in EU institutions but we know little about the relationship and how this might vary across nations and regions in the UK.

Secondly, a factor that is particularly pertinent is the relationship between public attitudes to national identity and their approaches to the EU. For example, it is possible for national identities to be (i) constructed as exclusive identities both at state and sub-state levels and for this to harbour negative attitudes to the EU; (ii) as identities that may be felt as nested among other identities, in which Europeanness has been or can be accommodated; or (iii) as identities submerged by that of the state and which can view the EU as a supportive identity context to subvert any continued association with the state in which they are currently located. In the case of the UK actually all three possibilities have been observed, although their relevance is strongly politically contested. In the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014 the third option was the one most actively promoted by the Yes Campaign. Meanwhile the No campaign's approach was rooted in option (ii) but given the lack of really positive support for the EU it was couched more in terms of multi-level identities purely in a British context related to the practical necessity of European membership best secured by being in the UK.

(3) *Realities and perceptions of economic benefit*. Research needs to examine economic growth rates and their association with EU membership or policies. This is of course as much a case of perception as well as reality. In this context the UK's relatively low level of association of economic performance with EU membership can be contrasted with its near neighbour, Ireland, where economic fortunes have been perceived as strongly intertwined. In the period since 2007 there has been a particular need to consider how regions have fared following the financial crisis and the onset of policies that have both cut public spending and raised taxes. What has been the perceived role of the EU and its broader economic effects? Recent comparative research has actually suggested that the global financial crisis did not bring economic factors substantially back in as a cause of Euroscepticism and even less so in those countries relatively less affected by the crisis (Serricchio et al, 2013). The UK undoubtedly was affected by the crisis but not as radically as some states.

(4) *Group interests*. Analysis also needs to drill down in to the study of how groups respond to the EU. Previous comparative research has identified a scale of positiveness towards EU membership starting with the most pro EU groups and ending with least pro EU groups as follows: students, followed by professionals, senior private sector managers, middle managers, manual workers, farmers, white collar employees, small business owners, service sector employees, the unemployed and skilled workers. On this basis it is logical to expect the most developed national and regional economies with a big university sector, professional classes, large head quartered companies and a prosperous farming sector to be the most pro-EU, and the regions characterised by small scale business, larger public sectors and high unemployment to be the least. Analysis of these factors could explain why Scotland exhibits slightly more pro-European perceptions than Wales given that Scotland conforms more to the more developed economy model and Wales to the small-scale business, large public sector model. Something we know little about, however, is how cohesion policy impacts on the relationship between group interests and views of Europe. Further research needs to focus on the related significance of class, age, gender, religion, and education, and how all these factors relate to attitudes to migration.

There are of course other issues that may affect attitudes towards the EU, notably social composition and how it changes over time, and the effects of education. Equally, the political context and role of the media in communicating news events and informing public attitudes can produce dramatic shifts in perceptions of the EU. Examination of these issues is as relevant to an examination of the UK as for any other case. It underlines the complexity of isolating policy effects on public attitudes, and indeed whether it is even realistic to expect European cohesion policy to be ever more than one factor among many shaping perceptions of the EU in the member states and regions in receipt of funding.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper has addressed key contexts to and issues for research in the case of the UK regarding the relationship between European cohesion policies and perceptions of the European Union. Section one identified the extensive role that European cohesion policies have played and continue to play in UK national and regional governance. Section two clarified why the importance of EU cohesion policy has been heightened by the fact that from the late 1990s EU cohesion policy has become part of the complex set of political battles both between central and devolved government and within devolved territories between parties vying for office. Section three demonstrated that despite this importance of EU cohesion policy the UK is one of the least positive states about the benefits of EU membership. There are differences of perceptions of the European Union across the nations and regions of the UK but these are differences of degree of Euroscepticism rather than between sceptical and strongly positive sentiment. The final section explored how the experience of EU cohesion policy can be conceptualised as a set of variables that may have impacted on UK perceptions of the EU; and then itemised a number of key political variables that may more broadly explain perceptions of the EU. It remains open to question as to whether variables relating to EU cohesion policy have ever had any independent effect on perceptions of EU membership. This raises a long standing analytical debate between positions which isolate on the one hand the importance of the dynamics of European integration to domestic attitudes to the EU, and on the other the continued dominance of domestic politics in understanding attitudes to the EU.

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