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Pandora's Box.

The unintended consequences of the devolution reform in the United Kingdom.

The current aspirations of the partial or full political emancipation of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland constitute an unintended result of the devolution reform started in 1997. The seizure of power by a conservative-liberal coalition in 2010 weakened the development of these processes. The government of D. Cameron faced a dilemma of whether to reject the existing effects of the devolution reform or to further decentralize the United Kingdom.

The last 15 years in the British history were a time of unusually dynamic political transformations, but special attention should be paid to the fundamental change in the relations between the state government and regional authorities. The implementation of the devolution reform in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the London Metropolis, which was preceded by a process of regionalization of England, aroused old and created new decentralist tendencies, determined by geographical, historical, ethnic, cultural, economic and even legal and administrative differences. While formally remaining a unitary country, the United Kingdom almost unnoticeably transformed into a quasi-federal structure, in which the constantly growing emancipation tendencies of regional communities endanger the cohesion of the country. Devolution, being more a result of a struggle between the British political parties taking place in the 1990s than a reflection of actual social expectations, turned out to be a Pandora's Box. The consequences of its opening went far beyond the predictions of those in favor of the strengthening of the political position of the regions.

There is no doubt that the first project of the devolution reform, created by the Labor government of James Callaghan, was mainly an attempt of winning over the Scottish and Welsh electorate in a situation, in which the inability of the state authorities to overcome the lasting economic recession was especially visible on the peripheral areas with poor economic infrastructure. The fact that the proposition of the government missed the expectations of the regional communities was confirmed by the failure of the devolution referendums conducted in 1979. When the Conservative Party, in favor of concentrating power in the hands of the state government, won the parliamentary elections, it might have seemed that the Labor concept of devolution was buried forever. However, the great social dissatisfaction with the radical economic policy of Margaret Thatcher and John Major caused the public to gradually turn away from their initial election preferences. The strong polarization of the British political scene made it possible for the Labor Party to put forward a number of demands (including the return to devolution projects), the popularity of which resulted mainly from the social opposition towards the governing party. Under the pressure of public opinion, the Conservatists decided in 1994 to perform the regionalization of England. However, at the same time, they categorically rejected the possibility of implementing the devolution reform, viewing it as a source of the potential weakening of the cohesive structure of the country. The policy of half measures turned out to be inefficient, which was confirmed by the crushing advantage of the Laborites in the parliamentary elections in 1997. The high level of public support for the demands of the Labor Party was also visible in the devolution referendums organized in 1997 in Scotland and Wales and in 1998 in Northern Ireland. Not many observers at that time were aware that the Pandora's Box had been opened.

The devolution reform, started by the government of Tony Blair, is mainly characterized by its open nature resulting from the intended adjustment of the final effect of regional decentralization to the expectations of the individual regional communities. On the other hand, the creators of devolution highly diversified the starting points of emancipation processes, basing them on discretionary development visions of Scotsmen, Welshmen and Irish-men. The special political situation of Scotland, expressed by the separate legal and public administration systems, the high level of ethnic and national individuality and also the strong Scottish lobby inside the Labor Party, constituted important premises for equipping the Scottish Parliament with wide decision-making capabilities. On the other hand, the Irish tradition of Home Rule, the still present strong tendencies to separatism among the regional community, calling into question the legitimacy of the British presence in Ulster, and finally the general awareness of individuality in geographic, historic, ethnic, national, cultural and religious aspects, justified the fact that the Northern Ireland assembly received only slightly



more limited powers than the Scottish Parliament. The Welsh, even though they widely manifested their ethnic and cultural identity, but did not express any serious aspirations of emancipation in a political sense, were “punished” for their passivity, as the National Assembly for Wales received executive competences only with respect to the acts established at the central level. The paradox of the devolution reform was the suspension of England, within the area of which (apart from the Great London region) there still functioned the quasi-parliamentary regional assemblies serving as advisory and consultative bodies for the state government. Furthermore, the criteria for the diversification of the devolution processes starting points turned out to be almost completely inappropriate, which was confirmed by the separatist tendency development dynamics in Scotland, Wales and England (which exceeded the expectations of the creators of the reform). It seems highly likely that the Scottish independence referendum in the fall of 2014 will at best cause a transformation of the United Kingdom into a confederation of two countries joined by a more or less loose formula of economic and political cooperation. Meanwhile, the ancient ties between Wales and England are wearing out, because as a result of the regional system reforms conducted in 2006 and 2011, the National Assembly for Wales received a range of decision-making powers comparable to the Scottish Parliament. The example of Scotland and Wales forced some political groups to introduce to their programs a demand to create an English Parliament and had some influence on the revival of the separatist movements in the north of England and in Cornwall. The quick emancipation of Northern Ireland, foreseen by the creators of devolution, slowed down as a result of the currently deepening difference between the stable economy of Ulster and the unpredictable economic situation in the Republic of Ireland. The mixture of the incorrect basis for the devolution reform with its open (and, therefore, unpredictable) nature was truly explosive and may result in an irreversible breakdown of the British statehood.

There is no doubt that the demand concerning the creation of regional parliamentary assemblies, providing peripheral communities with the ability to make independent decisions in the majority of matters related to their political, economic and social development, as well as increasing the influence of these communities on the decision-making processes at the central level, was consciously included in the Labor Party political program for non-substantive reasons - to gain the votes of the “Celtic” electorate. Despite the opinions of certain political scientists, pointing to the fact that the Laborites tried to dismantle the “internal empire” in the same way as the “external empire” was transformed into the Commonwealth of Nations, it is necessary to state that the governments of T. Blair and G. Brown did not intend to weaken the ties existing between the individual components of the United Kingdom. Still, they allowed the possibility of substituting the unitarian state structure



with an English-Scottish federation and providing Northern Ireland with significant internal autonomy. However, the creators of devolution did not foresee the appearance of more serious decentralist tendencies among the English and the Welsh. It also seemed that the huge advantage of the English demographic and economic potential over the remaining parts of the country was sufficient to maintain the belief in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that it is not profitable to function outside of the politically, militarily and economically strong United Kingdom. The pace of the devolution processes was, therefore, very surprising for the state authorities, who decided upon a series of actions aimed at stopping any further development of the reform. This was confirmed by the attempts to maintain an administrative devolution model in Wales, the suspension of the Ulster legislative in 2000, 2001 and 2002-2007 and the personal participation of Labor MPs in projects aimed at convincing the Scots to drop their pro-independence demands in favor of the extension of the fiscal autonomy of the Scottish Parliament.

In reality, it was only the seizure of power by the Conservative-Liberal coalition in 2010 which resulted in the weakening or even stopping of the devolution processes. The public expenditure cuts conducted by the new government limited the capabilities of the authorities in Wales and Ulster to perform financial activities from the state budget. The fact that this state of affairs is maintained suggests that the level of decision-making autonomy, gained by both of these regions during the rules of T. Blaire and G. Brown, constitutes a peak achievement on the path to full political emancipation, at least until the Labor Party assumes power once more. The level of advancement of the devolution reform in Scotland, which forced the state authorities to begin preparations to the independence referendum promised by the Laborites, points to the fact that despite the recentralization policy of the Conservatives and Liberals, the region may actually gain sovereignty. As a result, the government of David Cameron is currently facing a dramatic dilemma of whether to reject the legacy of the governments of T. Blair and G. Brown in defiance of the vital interest of local communities or to fulfill the obligations made by his predecessors leading to the actual decomposition of the "internal empire".

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