Too big to be local, too small to be strategic? Scotland's Councils and the question of local government boundary reform

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Abstract

Only a very brave politician would broach the subject of local government boundary reform. Like the Council Tax, it is one of those subjects that everyone agrees is important, but probably just too difficult to do anything about. For sure, we can tinker at the margins and tweak this and that, but it is not going to win many votes. But we are not politicians, and we believe there is value in looking at the question of whether the boundaries we use to govern Scotland are a good fit. Therefore, this paper looks at the question of whether Scotland's current Councils are the right political geography for governing Scotland and how they compare to those in other countries. We also set out two alternative administrative geographies. One of these is based on economic interactions, and the other is based on existing wards. However, these are not concrete proposals but are instead intended to prompt further reflection on the shape of local democracy in Scotland: a subject which spans economics, history, geography, identity, belonging and topography.

1. Introduction

On April 1, 2019 the City of Glasgow became just a little bit smaller. Why? Because the residents in one part of a new housing development in Cardowan argued that they had stronger ties with North Lanarkshire and felt they were "disadvantaged by being in a different council area from their neighbours" (LGBCS, 2018). As a consequence, after it was approved by Scottish Ministers in 2018, North Lanarkshire gained about 350 people, Glasgow lost 350 and the question of local government boundaries was resolved forever. Well, not quite. But this case does serve as a useful reminder that however prosaic it might seem, the question of boundaries, belonging and governance matters to people.

We can look back through the history of boundary reviews in Scotland, and across the rest of the UK, and find lots of similar stories. The reason the boundaries changed in Cardowan was because a newly built housing estate straddled the North Lanarkshire-Glasgow boundary and

from a geographic and governance point of view it didn't make sense for one small part of the new neighbourhood to be in Glasgow. Put simply, many residents felt Glasgow wasn't 'local' but North Lanarkshire was. It didn't make sense from the point of view of residents as it would cause problems for bin collections, education and street repairs, among other local services that really matter to people.

The point here is that the lines we draw on maps have very real implications for how people live their lives and how they are governed, but also that things can and do change. And when things change, it makes sense to reflect on whether the *status quo* is acceptable. That is exactly what the Scottish Government did in the case of Cardowan, following recommendations from the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. The history of local government boundary reform in Scotland shows that the *status quo* has been questioned fairly regularly over the years, and we think it is now time to ask once more whether boundaries used to govern in Scotland are the right ones. We are of the view that Scottish councils are perhaps 'too big to be local and too small to be strategic' (to paraphrase former Scottish Government Minister Marco Biagi). If some areas *are* too big to be local, then it is not unreasonable to ask whether governance itself *actually* is local.

In section two of the paper we look at the history of administrative geography of Scotland, from the large and small Burghs of the 1940s to the current set of Council areas that have been in place since 1996. We then say a little more about why revisiting the question of local government boundaries is important. This comes just over a decade after the announcement by Finance Secretary John Swinney of a 'concordat' whereby central government would 'stand back from micro-managing service delivery' (Scottish Government/COSLA, 2007) and usher in a new era of central-local relations in Scotland, with more local fiscal autonomy. When it was announced, however, Ministers could not have anticipated the decade of austerity that was to follow, so this must also be borne in mind when interpreting more recent local-central relations in Scotland. The conditions for governing, local or national, are frequently subject to events outwith our control. In section three we look at two different approaches developed by the authors. The first is a division of Scotland into 17 'regions' based on an in-depth analysis of travel-to-work data, and the second is a comprehensive two-tier approach which divides Scotland into 15 'regions' and 123 local authorities with an average population of just over 42,000. We offer these as

suggestions for a renewed administrative geography of Scotland that could at once be more local *and* more strategic.

2. A brief history of local government boundaries in Scotland

Though we can trace the antecedents of Scotland's local government structure back to the arrival of the Normans in England and the northward expansion of their influence, local government as we know it today has its origins in the Burgh Police (Scotland) Act of 1833. This was followed in 1889 by the first of many Local Government (Scotland) Acts which successively attempted to modify and modernise local government in Scotland. At this stage the old Burghs and Counties were still treated differently but with the Local Government (Scotland) Act in 1929 governance arrangements were standardised and consolidated, with powers passed to County Councils. Another Act in 1947 explicitly enumerated Large and Small Burghs, many of which are still spoken of today, even if they no longer 'exist' in a formal sense. This is an important point. People often feel great attachment to places and when this is challenged it can be deeply unsettling and upsetting. This in large part explains why the process of local government boundary reform is often so difficult.

In 1973, a new Local Government (Scotland) Act heralded the arrival of a two-tier system of 9 Regions and 54 Districts, alongside 3 unitary Island regions. This reform was quite radical, and initial proposals even recommended dividing Fife; the residents of which successfully lobbied to retain their own region. This is a good example of how history and identity often win out when faced with seemingly mundane technocratic exercises like local government reform. Indeed, when faced with similar proposals for Fife in 2012, BBC Chief Political Correspondent Brian Taylor commented that:

> *"Needless to say, they were less than pleased. And, when Fifers are displeased, they are inclined to let the rest of us know about it. Which is a very long way round to saying that it is a courageous politician indeed who tampers with cooncil boundaries." (BBC, 2012)*

A two-tier approach to local government is based on the idea that some things are better managed locally (such as bin collection and local planning) while others require much wider geographic coordination (such as transport and education / social work / strategic planning).

So, although the 1973 Act abolished the historic Burghs and Counties it retained the concept of tiers. This was all swept away with the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1994, which laid the ground for the current set of 32 Council Areas, which were introduced on 1 April 1996. At the time, the Glasgow Herald reported "that JUST who runs our essential services will be a little clearer as from today". Though its simplicity was welcomed by many, the question of whether the 32 Council structure has ever been sufficiently local is questionable. The average population of Scottish Councils in 2019 is about 170,000, far higher than elsewhere across Europe and – critically - also much higher than the 96,000 average population of the previous 54 District structure.

3. Why might we need to look at this again?

Anyone who remembers the implementation of the 1974 or 1994 Local Government (Scotland) Acts may at this stage feel inclined to remind younger readers that these are not activities one enters into lightly. In fact, the process of local government reform can be so fractious that it leaves protagonists scarred for life, so potent is the mix of politics, belonging, attachment, culture and whatever else gets thrown into the pot during the process.

Two authors of the current paper were exposed to this a very small way in 2018 when they published an academic paper and short summary piece online on the topic of 'regions from the ground up' (Hamilton and Rae, 2018). The responses and reporting on the work were a mix of the uncharitable, unpleasant and untruthful. This is to be expected, yet it also serves as a useful reminder that any politicians thinking of initiating such a review need to be resilient, and very well briefed on the rationale for tackling such a thorny problem in the first place. Here we articulate two main reasons why we think local government needs to be looked at again with fresh eyes. These reasons must, of course, be viewed in the wider historical and political context of the existence of a devolved Scotland. Previous reforms took place pre-devolution, and were implemented before the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

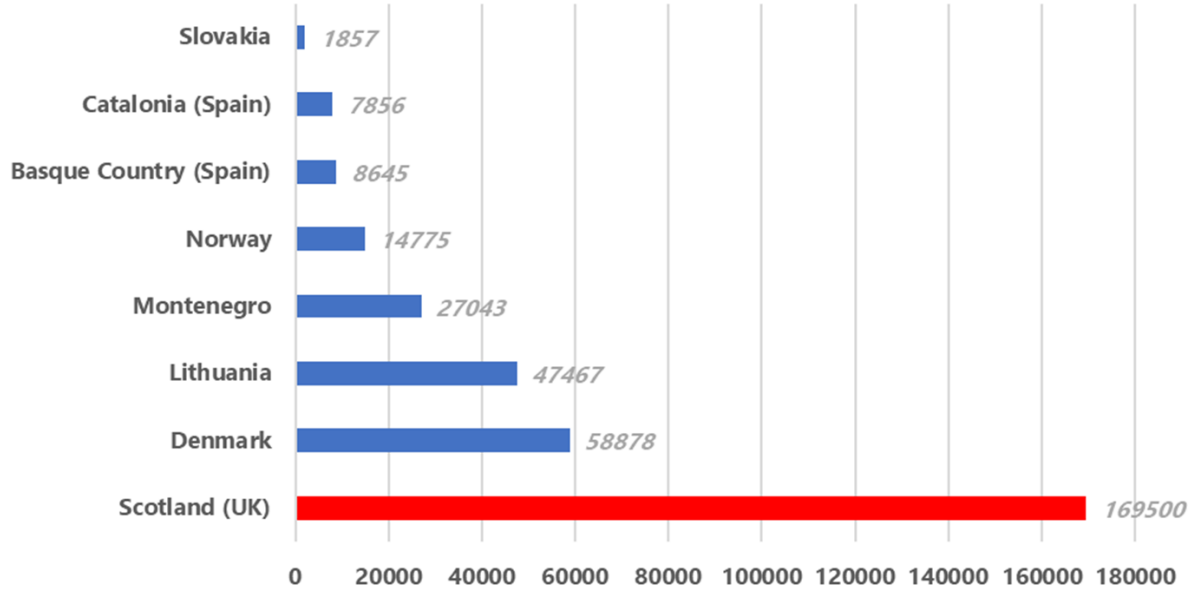
The Cardowan example above provides a good example of why 'local' government needs to be local and how, when it is not seen to be sufficiently local, it causes problems in people's day-to-day lives. This can mean things like a 5 mile journey to school instead of a one mile journey, or it can mean Council bin lorries going a long way out of their normal route to collect rubbish, or

residents having their bins collected on a different day to their immediate neighbours. These things matter to people and they also have costs, both human and financial. When we look at some of the current Council areas in Scotland the word 'local' does not seem to fit well at all. The case of the Highland council area is the most obvious example since it is larger than Wales (which has 22 local authorities) and almost exactly the same size as North Macedonia (known as Macedonia until February 2019), which has 80 municipalities. In total, seven Scottish Councils areas also are larger than Luxembourg, which itself has 12 local government Cantons.

The *first reason for looking at reform*, then, is geographic size. Some 'local government' areas really do seem too big to be local. Highland is the most obvious example, but the same could be said of many more, including Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, and Dumfries and Galloway. Even in comparatively smaller areas like West Lothian, it is easy to see how places like Fauldhouse or Broxburn could feel overshadowed in their local areas by larger settlements like Bathgate and Livingston. One important implication of having such large 'local' areas is that councillors can find themselves, through no fault of their own, taking planning decisions on areas they barely know. It can also have an impact upon the composition of Councils since the role of councillor may be less appealing to young people and those with caring responsibilities (more likely to be women) when you add in the need to travel long distances just to attend a committee meeting. These are not new issues, but they are important for local democracy.

The *second reason*, somewhat paradoxically, is also geographic size. Yet in this respect some Council areas can justifiably be criticised for being too small. That is, they appear too small to be strategic. In this respect, transport provides the most obvious example of where a joined-up approach makes sense and of course Strathclyde Partnership for Transport is an excellent example of this. In the health domain the 14 NHS regions are, from a strategic and delivery point of view, quite logical. After all, it is neither practical nor necessary to fund cutting edge cardiology centres in every part of Scotland. Consolidation of functions - for *some* functions - makes sense. There are ways of dealing with such complications on a more ad-hoc basis, through different agreements and working arrangements, but the evidence from around the world and Europe in particular suggests that Scotland is an outlier when it comes to the size of its local government areas, both in relation to population and geographic area. A comparison with other small European countries is shown below, for comparison (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Average population per municipality for selected European countries and regions



Source: CEMR, 2016

In papers such as this it is commonplace to invoke the European experience, whatever it may be. However, we do so not in a 'grass is greener' way but to point out important differences in size and 'localness'. It is not necessarily the case that local government in Europe is 'better' in that it leads to better outcomes, but it is almost without exception more local and this is the key point. The fact that it is also accompanied by greater fiscal autonomy is perhaps an additional reason why such arrangements could be attractive to local people. Local democracy in Scotland, both as a consequence of geographic size and lack of fiscal autonomy, is said to be 'weak' (COSLA, 2013). This raises the question of what an alternative structure for local government in Scotland might actually look like. We look at this below in two separate parts. The first is based on earlier work two of the authors on spatial economic interactions (Hamilton and Rae, 2018) and the second on work by the other (Faulds, 2019).

4. Big enough to be strategic? 17 'regions' of Scotland

When the term 'strategic' is used, it is sometimes difficult to discern exactly what is meant. Yet it is important to think about how and where 'local' government can actually be more strategic

in relation to the dictionary definition of 'relating to the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them' (OED, 2019). To put it more simply, we think there is a need to look at whether the current configuration of local government in Scotland is the best way of delivering services at the local level. Our view here is that it is, at the very least, worth re-thinking current arrangements. Two areas in which we think local government is often too local, in the sense that they function over wider geographic areas, are health and transport. That is, we think some governance needs to be regional. There are already alternative regional geographies for Scotland for health (i.e. NHS Health Board regions), so here we consider how Scotland can be administered when we take a connectivity-oriented approach to regionalisation. So, the question here is, if we were to subdivide Scotland based on the underlying patterns of how people live and travel to work etc., what would it look like? This is an inherently economic geography question and follows on from earlier work in the United States by Nelson and Rae (2016).

This question was tackled by Hamilton and Rae (2018) in our work on 'functional regionalisation', using an algorithmic approach. This approach was based on the analysis of 2011 commuting data for the whole of Scotland at the local level (i.e. Scotland's 'Intermediate Zone' geography of 1,235 areas). We then processed the data using an algorithm called 'Combo', developed by researchers at MIT in the United States. This algorithm groups together areas based on how strongly they are connected, measured in this case by the total number of people commuting between home and work. It does so without the knowledge of where any areas are; it only knows how strongly connected they are based on the number of people travelling between two places. Once the process is complete, Combo generates a final set of 'regions' based on the underlying network pattern of travel-to-work interactions.

The Combo approach itself comes from a family of methods known as 'network partitioning' and it can be used for any kind of data where you have origin and destination pairs. There are a number of different algorithms available for this approach, but Combo provides the best partitioning of places in the sense that it maximises what is known as 'modularity'. If a network is perfectly partitioned, the modularity tends towards its maximum value of 1.0. Generally, a modularity value of 0.6 or above could be considered high, and in the case of our analysis of Scotland, it produced a modularity of 0.74. What this means is that the regions Combo identifies have a high degree of internal connectivity, and a low level of connectivity with each other. As

such, there would be only limited commuting *between* these regions, but a lot of commuting *within* them. It is similar to the travel-to-work area approach used throughout the UK, but it builds regions 'from the ground up' rather than starting with any notion of how big they should be or what shape they should take.

The results of this process are shown in Figure 2 below, where 17 new 'regions' of Scotland are identified.

Readers familiar with the current set of 32 Council areas or the 14 NHS Boards may see some similarities with the areas in Figure 2, such as Highland or Forth Valley, but on the whole this represents a new regional geography for Scotland. In our academic paper we discussed our redrawing of Scotland in the context of previous iterations of Scotland's administrative geography, including the current set of 32 Councils, and in our public-facing article we were keen to stress that our new boundaries were *not* proposals.

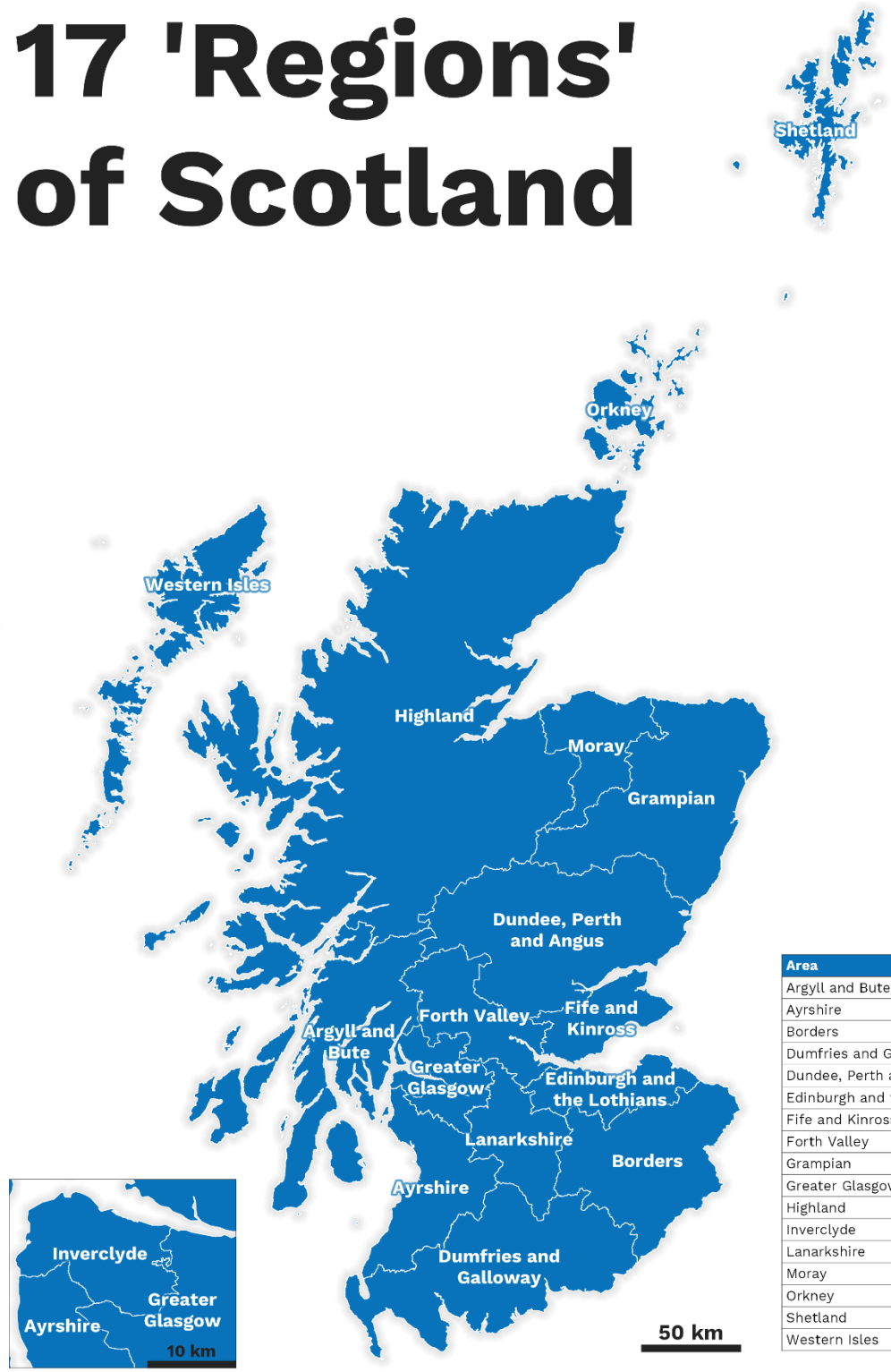
However as we noted at the start, writing about council boundaries can be a difficult enterprise as shown by the following newspaper headlines which appeared on the publication of our work.

"Scrapping half of councils 'will save cash and boost efficiency'" [subhead: Greater Glasgow would become the largest local authority in Britain if a study's proposal is adopted] *The Times*, 17 October 2018

"Call for creation of 'super council': Perth and Kinross, Dundee and Angus councils would combine" *Daily Record*, 19 October 2018

There were several more such headlines, plus considerable debate on Twitter. We present this simply to illustrate three points that are worth reflecting upon when discussing changes to existing local boundaries.

Figure 2: A new ‘regional’ map of Scotland based on 2011 commuting patterns



Area	Population
Argyll and Bute	63,302
Ayrshire	373,578
Borders	113,870
Dumfries and Galloway	151,324
Dundee, Perth and Angus	406,128
Edinburgh and the Lothians	834,648
Fife and Kinross	365,967
Forth Valley	291,339
Grampian	475,766
Greater Glasgow	1,167,939
Highland	232,062
Inverclyde	78,932
Lanarkshire	574,724
Moray	93,295
Orkney	21,349
Shetland	23,091
Western Isles	27,684

First, even with a data-driven, dispassionate approach to drawing lines on maps, controversy is unavoidable. Second, when it comes to discussing matters such as local government reform, we believe the tone and tenor of today's public discourse is likely to make the exercise much more contentious than in the past. And, third, looking at the map, not all these regions make 'sense' from a 'facts on the ground' point of view. A prime example of this is how Inverclyde remained separate from the 'Greater Glasgow' region generated by Combo. The underlying data shows that it is functionally separate from its neighbours yet from a proximity and strategic point of view it seems odd that it is separate. We can use computational approaches to regional delineation and they can generate useful results in many respects, but we believe the exercise requires a significant degree of local knowledge, forensic attention to detail and a knowledge of local identity and history. Algorithms may be very good at answering the 'is' question, but they are often quite poor at answering the 'ought' question. What 'ought' to be is inevitably a normative question. In answering it, it needs to blend thorough data analysis (as presented here) with a localised appreciation that takes full account of Scotland's unique mix of settlement pattern, topography and history.

The next section takes a more human-centric approach to the question of what a new municipal geography of Scotland could look like.

5. Small enough to be local? 138 local government areas

In 2014 a report by Andy Wightman for the Scottish Green Party looked at the question of 'renewing local democracy in Scotland' (Wightman, 2014, p. 3). He also drew upon repeated claims from COSLA that 'Scotland is one of the most centralised countries in Europe'; a claim which is perhaps in part a reflection of what some have seen as a return 'to the pattern of their predecessors in centralising power' (Democratic Audit, 2017). Wightman therefore proposed a new approach to local democracy, using a set of principles including the establishment of local institutions based on a minimum population threshold of 20,000 and a set of around 10 'Strategic Regions', four of which would be based on the largest cities in a single tier format. The same single tier approach would be applied to the three island authorities of Shetland, Orkney and Na h-Eileanan Siar.

Based partly on these principles, and on the wider goal of enhancing local democracy, Faulds (2019) recently published a report on the issue, entitled 'New Municipalism: A Refreshed Map for Local Government in Scotland'. It is based on a two tier model of local government and within it is contained a basic outline of a new geography for local government in Scotland, as described below.

The final map (Figure 3) contains a total of 138 local government areas, comprised of a system of 123 Municipalities in 10 Regions, plus 5 Unitary Authorities. The composition of the Regions is shown below, with the number of Municipalities and their 2017 population, alongside the proposed Unitary Authorities.

10 new Scottish 'Regions', with 123 Municipalities [2017 population]

- Ayrshire (12) [368,235]
- Clyde (17) [591,433]
- Dumfries and Galloway (5) [149,200]
- Fife (10) [371,410]
- Forth (14) [488,093]
- Grampian (14) [587,138]
- Highland (14) [295,826]
- Lanarkshire (15) [658,687]
- Lothian and Borders (11) [309,950]
- Tayside (11) [417,608]

5 Unitary Authorities [2017 population]

- Edinburgh [513,210]
- Glasgow [620,020]
- Na h-Eileanan Siar [26,950]
- Orkney [22,000]
- Shetland [23,080]

Figure 3: A new municipal map of Scotland

(Zoomable, interactive version available online)

Based on the 128 areas at the lowest level of local government (i.e. 123 municipalities, plus 5 unitary authorities), would produce a mean population per council of just over 42,000, and a median population of 27,400. In Figure 4 below we show how this revised scale of local government in Scotland compares to other European nations. We see that at present Scotland, and indeed the rest of the UK and Ireland, are outliers while this revised scale of local government would place Scotland in the European mainstream, though still toward the upper end.

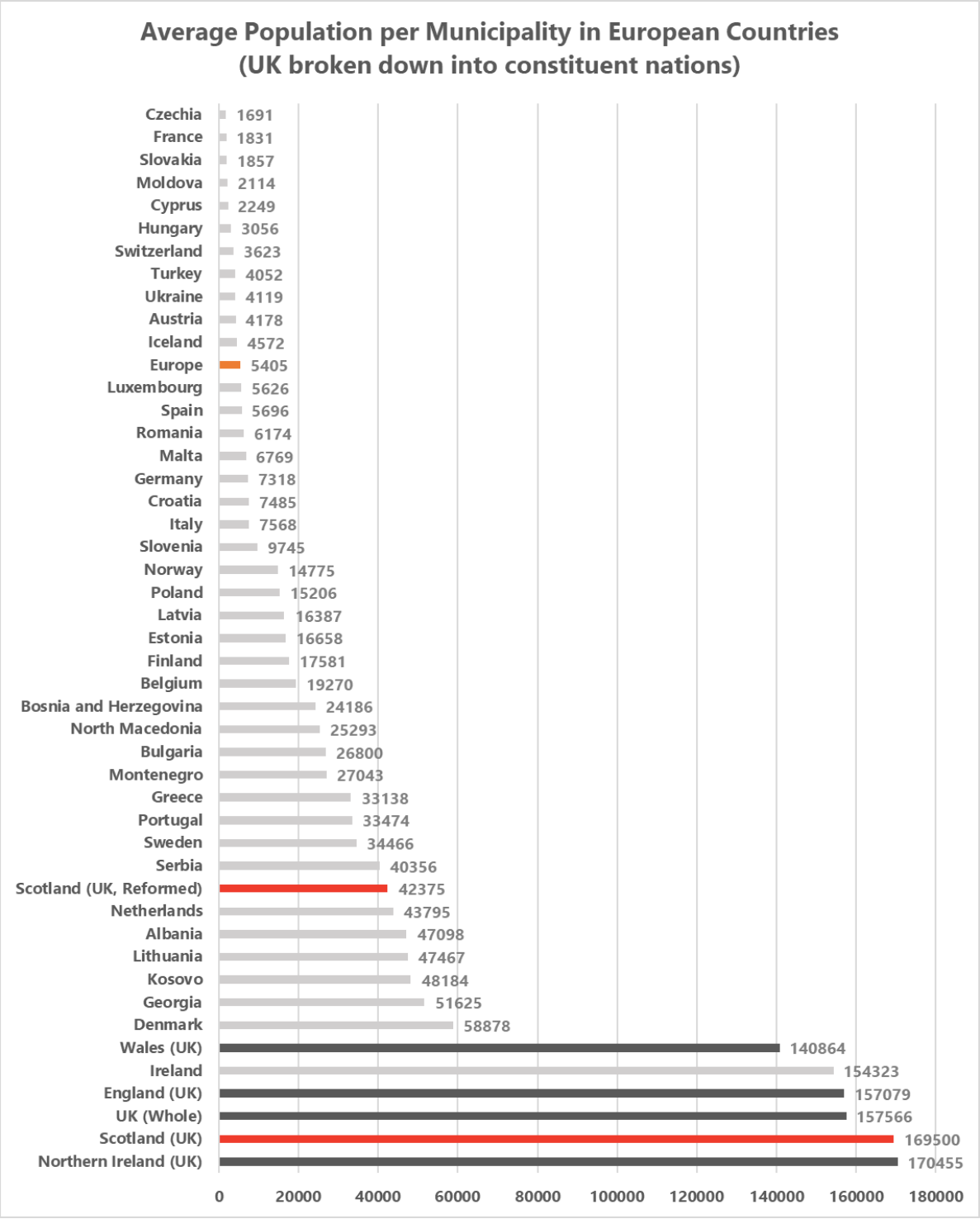
The method behind this approach is presented in the Faulds (2019) report, but in essence it is based on the existing set of 354 council wards, grouped together on the basis of the underlying settlement pattern across Scotland. Where wards do not align with historic towns or natural features they have been split in order to create a set of boundaries that reflect the underlying topography and settlement pattern.

The building blocks of wards were used mainly because they are sufficiently small enough but also because they are an established political geography with a high degree of local acceptance. In some cases (such as Perth or Dalkeith) municipalities have been constructed purely from wards, but in other cases it was not possible. For example, Wigtownshire's historic eastern boundary is the River Cree, but present council wards in the area span both banks. Similarly, the single ward of Renfrew South and Gallowhill covers parts of both Renfrew and Paisley.

In these cases, wards were split as necessary to give more natural boundaries. Wherever possible these splits follow other boundaries such as rivers and roads. Whilst the resulting municipalities therefore follow more natural boundaries than the wards they were initially based on, that does impact on the ability to estimate population figures.

All population figures are drawn from the official Scottish Government statistics website, and are for 2017. Where wards have been split as described above, the best possible fit "2011 Datazone(s)" for the split areas were allocated to the appropriate municipality. This inevitably leads to small differences in estimated populations compared to what is actually the case.

Figure 4: Average population per municipality, by selected European countries



As with any new map, our eyes are inevitably drawn towards the areas we are most familiar with, in addition to anything that looks odd or anomalous. In this respect the Forth region and the Lothian & Borders region will perhaps raise a few eyebrows. In particular, the inclusion of West

Lothian in the Forth region may indeed generate some political comment. On the other hand, some regions are very much aligned with the status quo, with the island regions plus at least Dumfries & Galloway being familiar sights. Yet, it is the boundaries of the smaller areas that really matter here. Indeed, it is not so much *where* the lines of local authorities are drawn here, but that they are *drawn at all*.

This map represents *one* potential reality for a new municipal geography of Scotland but one that we think has merit. The fact that it appeared to pass the 'eyeball' test online with former MSP Marco Biagi (2018) is perhaps a sign that it is not too far away from a viable map of local government for Scotland. Well, perhaps. Our goal here is to provoke and spur further discussions about local democracy in Scotland, rather than propose a definitive mapping.

However, before we conclude, one further point deserves mention. When people see how other countries 'do' local government, or when they see a municipal map of Scotland with over a hundred local government areas on it, the immediate reaction is typically 'that looks expensive'. If the current functions of local authorities in Scotland were all duplicated in a new set of 123 local authorities, then it would surely be expensive and not viable in an age of stretched budgets. But the whole point with such an administrative geography is precisely that this is *not* the case. A larger set of municipalities would deal with a smaller set of truly local issues and a smaller set of organisations (Regions) would deal with many more. That is why a two-tier system is desirable.

6. Conclusion: it's time for a fresh look at Scottish local government boundaries and structure

We used the example of the redrawing of the Glasgow-North Lanarkshire border in Cardowan to help highlight the importance of local boundaries and how, when they are in the wrong place, or the wrong size, they can have a real impact on people's everyday lives. At present, we have a set of 'local' authorities in Scotland that range from the very large to the very small. In Aberdeenshire, for example, it is a two and a quarter hour drive from Braemar to Fraserburgh. The journey time between Cairnryan to Canonbie in Dumfries and Galloway is similar. In reality these are not "local" journeys and it is hard to see how the current administrative geography truly provides for local government across Scotland as a whole.

Take another example, the Highland local authority area is 428 times bigger than the smallest, Dundee. East Lothian, ranked 18 out of 32 in terms of area, is more than ten times larger than Dundee. In a country like Scotland, with a very uneven settlement pattern and highly variable terrain, it is inevitable that there will be differences, possibly even large differences, between what 'local' actually means to people across the country. Yet the current map of local government in Scotland is, to our eyes at least, considerably less local than it could be in nearly all cases.

Experience from other nations tells us that a refreshed municipal geography need not be overly burdensome to implement, nor financially prohibitive. In fact, over the long term, evidence from other nations suggests there may be efficiencies to be gained from getting it right when it comes to the geographical shape of local democracy (Blom-Hansen et al., 2014; Marques et al, 2015). This is why we think it is a good time to revisit the topic and why we present our ideas here.

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