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## Scotland eyes Brussels elections

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**Results of the upcoming European Parliament elections could influence whether Scotland becomes an independent country, according to speakers at an event organised by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.**

By Laura Greenhalgh

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Speaking in Brussels on 11 February, Fabian Zuleeg, chief executive of the European Policy Centre, highlighted the connection between the Scottish referendum and a possible future vote on the UK's EU membership. On 19 September, Scottish citizens will decide whether they believe that Scotland should be an independent country.

But the UK government, if re-elected, wants to hold a vote on the country's membership of the EU in 2017, meaning Scotland may also be voting to determine its future in Europe. "If the sentiment in England during the EU elections is very anti-EU, this will raise in the minds of Scotland's voters the possibility that the UK will leave the EU," said Zuleeg.

Michael Keating, director of the ESRC's Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change at the University of Edinburgh, said that Scottish independence supporters would use the UK referendum idea to garner support. "The nationalists will spin it as 'the Conservatives will drag you out of Europe against your will'," he said. "There is not a great love of Europe in Scotland, but we want to make up our own minds about this."

The Scottish referendum could also have an impact on the UK's EU referendum, said Zuleeg. "If you get to a situation where Scotland is more likely to exit the UK, it would also make a UK exit more likely," he said, on the basis that Scots are generally more pro-European than the rest of the UK. "So we're getting an interesting feedback loop where we could see a self-fulfilling prophecy."

If Scotland secedes, it is likely to become an EU member, as it already fulfils most of the obligations, participants were told. However, an autonomous Scotland might clash with EU rules on higher education. The Scottish government has said that if it becomes independent it will continue to charge fees to students from the rest of the UK but not from elsewhere. "This is doubtful under EU law because it discriminates against one member state," said Sheila Riddell, an education researcher at the University of Edinburgh.