

MODERN EUROPEAN SEPARATISM: THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND WEALTH

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Abstract. The article is aimed at the change of the separatist discourse from ethnic self-determination to secession based on public spending and wealth redistribution. Further, it aims to explain the role of the European Union, its legislation and politics, in these processes amongst its Member States. Besides establishing that such role is both increasing and diminishing separatist tendencies due to the Single Market, legislation on regions or siding with Member States against secession, the article argues that the paradigm may change yet again to the notions of human rights, citizenship and immigration, due to the stall of economic secessionist aspirations.

Keywords: separatism; European Union; secession

Introduction

The European continent, being the cradle of the nation-states and the notion of nationhood especially after the French Revolution, continues to be exposed to the occurrence of separatism and separatist movements. Strong examples of those still are spanned from Scotland to the North and Catalonia to the South whilst the Eastern border of the European Union is contaminated with such even in the form of latent armed conflicts. Given the persistence of such phenomena, some major patterns and tendencies could be analysed and sorted. At first, taking into account some major historical considerations, there could be a brief estimation of basic periods in regard to separatism and its characteristics.

Such marking moments could be the geopolitical and to some extent Willsonian self-determination factors after the First World War and the devolution of the Eastern European empires, the decolonization process after the Second World War that took most of the remaining overseas territories of some European powers, the violent movements during the Cold War such as the Basque and the Northern Irish ones. The period of separatism powered by the end of the Soviet Union saw different examples and approaches to secession and self-determination ranging from the Velvet Revolution and the division of Czechoslovakia to the violent wars started by the ultra-nationalist Serbian Communist functionaries and military on the Balkans.

In such case, what could be the driving force of the modern separatist ideas and movements across Europe? Is modern separatism based on wealth and economy, rather than on self-determination, as most of the discussions and political programs are being dominated by themes such as public spending allocations and taxation (Connolly, 2013)? Additionally, how the newly established EU institutions and legal texts further affect these issues. The European level of the separatist discourse is mainly targeted on the possibility of the newly formed states remaining inside the European Union. Appreciating such approach a conclusion on the recent developments of separatism could be made.

Regions in the EU framework

Separatism in the context of the European integration is mostly concentrated in legally based in the nation-states administrative regions. Given the high protection of human rights in the European Union and its Member States, linguistic borders, ethnic boundaries, etcetera affect less the most influential separatist movements recently. Thus, the outcomes driven by the European Union are going to be situated within regions with some degree of political and/or economic autonomy, which coincide with minority population basis and boundaries.

The most obvious effect of the EU framework on modern separatism is the sole existence of the Single Market. Intra-national economic dependence of the separatist regions would be less important when more and more institutional factors applicable for the business are being decided and set upon in Brussels rather than the capital of the arch-state. The risk of the need for establishing new rules would be non-existent, the empowered regional administration could regulate effectively through developed capacity and the lack of trading barriers with the former arch-state would make the process uniquely painless in comparison with other regions in the world where such level of supranational regional cooperation does not exist. When comparing with just twenty years back in time of European integration the same reasoning applies. Thus, the affected territories would no longer have to share resources through the national capitals. „Tax exits” would just bring the process of redistribution down to the local minority (Borgen, 2010), enriching the local elites and voters.

Further institutional changes, for example the empowerment of the Committee of Regions with the Lisbon Treaty, make separatist tendencies stronger. The Committee gains, alongside its power of being consulted on legislative drafts inside the EU legal framework with its establishment with the Treaty of Maastricht, the ability to address the European Court of Justice on issues that affect regions, mainly in regard to the principle of subsidiarity, with the Lisbon Treaty. That regions then stronger in regard to nation-states decisions and block the opportunities to EU law developments diminishing regional and local authorities (Borgen, 2010).

Additionally, regions play greater role in the territorial policy of the EU. One basic example is the direct negotiations between the Union institutions and bodies

and the local authorities over funding and development strategies. That process eliminates the nation-state as an agent between (Borgen, 2010). Setting offices of regional representation in Brussels or around major centres of policy-making illustrates that vacuum posed of the lack of a mediator. The mere existence of channels of influence of the separatist movements and regions makes them develop their claims and credibility (Jenne, Saideman, & Lowe, 2007). Thus the existence of regions-EU communication could be described as stimulation of separatism.

Creation of an independent state within Europe means not only gaining economic powers and political prestige amongst voters. It further creates powerful influence in European decision-making. This is especially valid as there is a high level of *de jure* over-representation for the smaller states in the shared institutions, for example the seats in the European Parliament or the appointment of the Commissioners (Bieri, 2014). Still the nation-state sovereignty factor is greater than the mere mirroring of population.

There are also well-established parties like the Greens in the European Parliament that put the principle of subsidiarity and self-government ahead in the European agenda. Flemish autonomist and secessionist parties argue that coping better with globalization and Europe require at least more regional autonomy (Beyers & Bursens, 2012).

The regional policy and constitutional setting of the European Union also works in the opposite direction, or, namely, diminishing local rights of self-governing and thus effecting negatively secession developments on the forementioned basis. The unification of EU law in that field disempowered separatist regions to considerable extent as they used to have strong self-government. That led to the creation of REGLEG, an organization that unites regional authorities with greater legislative powers (Borgen, 2010). That institution lobby to increase the subsidiarity principle of EU governance.

The recent constitutional arrangements in the European Union could be viewed as being against the separatist movements as well. The *de jure* institutionalisation of the European Council of the Heads of States or Governments of the Member States through the Lisbon Treaty could be accepted as an increase of the power of nation states in the Union. In that case the common policies or actions would not be sympathetic to the secession or autonomist movements.

Summarizing the discussion above it could be argued that the EU has an ambiguous or even contradicting effect on regions and their empowerment vis-à-vis their respective states (Beyers & Bursens, 2012). The EU is more and more involved in centralized decision-making in various fields such as forming important economic, political, etcetera policies and thus its constitutional and institutional setting is challenging the sovereignty of nation-states. On the other hand, it is more inclined to act in support of the official members rather than the peoples and regions.

Role of wealth

The role of wealth in the modern European secessionist movement is dictated by basic reasons. First, the development of democracy means that the power-sharing problem of local elites is shifted towards popular claims. Then, these mass concerns are further affected by the agents of change like the problems of the global political economy and in the European perspective – the financial, sovereignty debt and economic crises. The widespread demonstrations, political party creation, far-right and far-left movements find some logic in separatism.

The secessionist movements in Scotland and Catalonia are dominated by the left and base much of its rhetoric against the ideas that the national governments enact and to some extent present the notion that central governments are not adequate to address social issues. The opposite example is being presented by Flemish parties defending austerity and less state involvement in the economy (Beyers & Bursens, 2012). However, the ideological positions of wealth redistribution find its place in such discussions and policies.

The scholarly paradigms on the place of economy and wealth in the secessionist movements could be divided into two basic evaluations (Jenne, Saideman, & Lowe, 2007). The first one states that more developed regions tend to leave a union or a state to avoid sharing wealth with poorer regions in which case the most prominent separatist tendencies like those of Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders fit. The other one presents the idea that a more backward territory and its population may try to secede in order to compete better with the dominant regions and majorities over the allocation of resources. However, such contrasting theoretical approaches to the role of wealth distributions are united in the appreciation that economic disparity between regions is likely to provoke separatist movements (Horowitz 1985: Ch.6 as cited by (Jenne, Saideman, & Lowe, 2007)).

Additionally, being a powerhouse region undisputedly makes the claim for independence realistic, as the EU recognition would be more needed by its members and thus more possible. This is especially valid in the case for Catalonia, one of the “motors of Europe”, or Flanders being located in the economic core of the Union. The wealth of the regions additionally means that there is concentrated much de facto influence through informal contacts, lobbying, etc. It further supposes a viable economic future for the minority affected outside the current arch-state.

Recognition in the EU perspective

Political aspects of recognition are first and foremost based on the structure and meaning of the European Union. Especially after the Lisbon Treaty it has become more based on intergovernmentalism and, thus, it represents the interests of the nation states it consists of. In that sense involvement by the European institutions on the side of separatist movements is highly unlikely to happen.

Scholars such as (Vaubel, 2014) draw a picture of international bodies, such as

the EU, as incredibly biased against the separatist movements. His main reasoning is that the power of the bureaucrats is based on the majorities and thus, the EU represents a close form of the 19th century Holy Alliance. This claim he backs with a several-year timeline of EU Commissioner, Members of the European Parliament, etc. making statements against separatism and overthrowing the idea of automatic accession to the EU of newly formed countries. Such actions, however, could be regarded as failing to oblige with the constitutional duty of the European Commission to safeguard the Single Market (Douglas-Scott, 2014). The legal framework of European Union recognition is also unclear. There are no specific mentions of internal enlargement or whether it could be automatic or following the specific procedure and Member States vote (Thorp & Thomson, 2011).

Additionally, the legal problems of intra-state secession in the EU include the problem of citizenship. After the introduction of the European citizenship with the Maastricht Treaty, an issue arises with the rights of the separatist populations after leaving a Member State. Could such rights be simply erased with the breaking up of a country? Gounin (2014, 21) as cited by (Vaubel, 2014) suggests that the European Court decision rules that EU citizenship is not an integral part of the national citizenship and thus it could not be simply taken away. The Court decision of 1963 even proclaims that personal rights acquired are part of the individual „legal heritage” (Douglas-Scott, 2014).

Tendencies

The actual occurrence of a successful secession would be hard to predict. The tendencies reviews range from secessions being „unlikely, but would not disappear” as movements (Bieri, 2014) to a whole shift towards different forms of separatism. The emergence of the gated communities in the USA with wealthy citizens not interested in redistribution and so on is being described as „separatism of the rich” (Hollinger, 1997).

Other possible tendencies in regard to separatism are closely connected to the „separatism of the rich”. Such could be the white supremacist movements which are opposing the immigrant flow in Europe and that cover to some extent such a demarcation line. Another could be the Roma separatism, both from inside and outside their communities. Sharia enclaves across the European Union could also be a possible outcome in the near and predictable future (Astrid Bötticher, 2013).

Conclusion

Given the estimation of how wealth, social differentiation and the EU affect separatism inside a nation-state, several conclusions could be made. Wealth and economic reasoning could very well play a more significant role in the discussion of unity. Cultural aspects beyond the traditional European divisions, mainly drawn by immigrants, but also based on sexual orientation, etc., as well as social inclusion

and mobility are likely to be more involved than classic territorial boundaries. In such case, beside the greater role of the EU on regional policy, its powers on decision-making in the fields of immigration and human rights could make it the sole instrument of dealing with separatist movements.

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