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Europe of Regions

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EUROPE OF REGIONS: DO STRONGER REGIONS LEAD TO SEPARATISM SENTIMENTS?

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The primary purpose of the article is to correlate a predominant position of some regions with the intensity of separatist movements there. Two tendencies of peripheral separatism have been discovered in Europe. The role of the European continent is confirmed in representing different independent regional and interregional organisations, i.e. through the Assembly of European Regions comprising roughly 300 regional entities. A brief analysis has been made of several regions facing the most evident separatist tendencies and ethnic turbulence. Coincidence factor and prosperity syndrome as accelerant of separatist tendencies have been noted in the Western and Eastern parts of Europe, pointing out different surroundings and the same triggering motivation. And finally, some of most effective instruments to withstand separatist pressure, backed by external powers in proxy-war environments, have been suggested.

Raising of the Problem

Recent developments relating to ethnic conflicts and separatist movements around the world are similar to the effect of a seething cauldron that has not reached its boiling point yet. In this sense, Europe is no exception. New foci of instability emerged as a result of separatism sentiments and proxy-war conflicts. Europe, after two dramatic world wars, started a new regional strategy through a unified diversity concept. Thus, geopolitical changes, proxy-war conflicts, immigration crisis, etc., seem a clear attempt to open Pandora's Box. The most evident examples of the separatist developments on the European stage recall the regions of Catalonia (Spain), Scotland (the United Kingdom), Corsica (France) in Western Europe and Crimea, Donbas (Ukraine), and Transnistria (Moldova) in Eastern Europe.

Separatist tendencies usually originate in prosperous, historically self-dominant regions, which feel underestimated and somehow prejudiced against by central powers, but that need not necessarily be the case. The situation may differ from region to region. Sometimes it proves that the most vulnerable regions to separatism are the areas with ethnic minorities in a cross-border or peripheral location. The presence of ambitious political elite who haven't realised their potential and a local community that gravitates to a mighty state across the border may lead to a logical follow-up of separatist trends. However, there are some instruments to withstand separatist movements inside the nation and imperial ambitions of "good-willing" neighbours, keeping the territorial integrity of the country.

The article aims to mark out a correlative motivation for some European regions that gravitate to separatism or enhanced autonomy.

Today a great number of countries may face the problem of separatism due to the activation of self-awareness and identity by ethnic minorities, nationalism, and ambitions of local political elites, audacious interference of “good-willing” neighbour countries, etc.

K. Boyle and P. Englebert in their work “The Primacy of Politics in Separatist Dynamics”¹ described economic, cultural, political, and some other facilitating factors fostering separatism in the regions. The political elite and large segments of the local population in separatist regions feel somehow left out and underestimated by the rest of the country in terms of prosperity, physical or human capital, or natural resources endowment. Secession tendency is often argued to be promoted by ethnic, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity in the country. Ethnic diasporas may also contribute to secessionist sentiment as they tend to nurse grievances, promote elements of irredentism, exacerbate disaffection with the central authorities, intensify the feelings of ethnic purity, and provide some funding to local organisations.

In many cases, the politics of neighbouring states have a keen interest in continuing insurgencies across the border in next-door countries and gaining benefits of separatist activities there. Sometimes



Separatist tendencies usually originate in prosperous, historically self-dominant regions, which feel underestimated and somehow prejudiced against by central powers, but that need not necessarily be the case

political developments and transitions make states vulnerable and can create a situation that triggers the separatist process. In their study, K. Boyle and P. Englebert, defining separatism as “the expression of aspiration for statehood” and “a deeply political statement”, made a very interesting conclusion, describing the range of dependence between the state and separatism. They described the latter as “an act of state formation, which is more likely to occur the more communities are discriminated against, the more the states in which they live fail to provide any form of social compact and restrain violence, and the more they can rely on the remembrance of a once autonomous life.”² Therefore, “separatism in the political sphere could have adverse consequences, e.g. reduction of state sovereignty, destabilization of the situation in the country, etc.”³

Separatism may differ according to its objectives as “...secession (i.e. to secede from the existing state and to establish a new independent one), irredentism (to separate from the existing state and to join another state), and separatist movement (to strive

1 K. Boyle, P. Englebert, *The Primacy of Politics in Separatist Dynamics*, San Diego, CA: International Studies Association, 22 March 2006, p. 45, [http://cega.berkeley.edu/assets/miscellaneous_files/wgape/10_Englebert.pdf access: 16 July 2019].

2 Ibid

3 N.I. Romaniuk, *Separatism as Social and Political Phenomenon of Modern Times*, Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University: The 3rd International Conference, 20 October 2014, [https://internationalconference2014.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/сепаратизм-як-суспільно-політичне-яв access: 16 July 2019].

for more autonomy power while remaining within the existing state).⁴ *Separatism* as defined by Cambridge Dictionary means “the belief held by people of a particular race, religion, or other groups within a country that they should be independent and have their government or in some way live apart from other people: e.g. Basque separatism.”⁵

The European continent, as referring to the UN official data, is represented by 44 (excluding dependencies, mini-states, etc.) independent countries. Almost all of them have in their territories ethnic minorities, which have been or may potentially be involved in separatist movements.



Despite the declared willingness to promote interregional coexistence and cooperation, the very regions often find themselves in a sensitive position due to the separatist tendencies and movements

It turns out that the minorities residing within the established political contours of certain nations display an apparent tendency towards secession or autonomy. Secessionist movements seek complete independence from an existing country. Autonomist movements aim at achieving, strengthening, or maintaining political autonomy within an

existing country. Separatist movements and parties are widespread through the whole of Europe: Their ambitions range “from militant secession leading into outright warfare, through repression by national/central governments, non-violent democratic independence movements, movements aimed at achieving some measure of autonomy (however defined), increasing or strengthening existing autonomy, to relative contentment with status-quo autonomy.”⁶

It is worthy to note that Europe has unified (as of today) 28 nations into the European Union, established in the aftermath of the World War II. Furthermore, the EU has a quite effective network of regional organisations and unions. One of the most universal and representative regional organisations is the Assembly of European Regions (AER). It unifies regions from 35 countries and 15 interregional entities. Its stated objectives proclaim “promoting regional interest in Europe and beyond” and “fostering interregional cooperation to promote the exchange of experience and the development of regional policy.”⁷

This organisation regards region as one of the key elements in the political system and establishment. Article 3.2 of the AER Statute, adopted by the AER General Assembly on 05 June 2019 in Larnaca (Cyprus), constitutes that “[t]he term ‘Region’ covers in principle territorial authorities between the central government and local authorities, with a

4 N.M. Maslova, P.P. Muntyan, *Separatism in the Modern World: Source, Causes and Regional Varieties*, Volodymyr Vynnychenko Central Ukrainian State Pedagogical University: The 8th International Conference, 21 March 2018, [<https://www.cuspu.edu.ua/ua/stratshii-innovatsiinoho-rozvytku-pryrodoznychykh-dystyplin-dosvid-problemy-ta-perspektyvy/sektsiia-4/7675-separatyzm-u-suchasnomu-sviti-sut-prychyny-ta-rehionalni-riznovydy> access: 16 July 2019].

5 *Separatism*, “Cambridge Dictionary”, Cambridge University Press, 2019, [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/english/separatism> access: 16 July 2019].

6 A. B. Anderson, *Overview: The Diversity and Complexity of Separatist Movements in Europe*, “Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe”, vol. 17, no. 3, 2018, p. 32, [https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2018/Issue_3_2018/Anderson_intro.pdf access: 16 July 2019].

7 *AER Statute*, AER General Assembly, 05 June 2019, [<https://aer.eu/aer-statute/> access: 18 July 2019].

political representation power as entrusted by an elected assembly.”⁸

Despite the declared willingness to promote interregional coexistence and cooperation, the very regions often find themselves in a sensitive position due to the separatist tendencies and movements. The regions leaning towards separatist sentiments are often prosperous and they consider themselves not estimated properly in the economic or political sphere. It seems that the prosperity factor is not a dogma, but it makes sense. Maria Fiedler of Germany highlighted several European regions demonstrating their attitude towards independence.⁹

Separatism: The Most Important Movements in Europe

Catalonia is one of the most obvious European regions in its tremendous tendency for secession. The region has gained unique historical experience in its confronting Madrid Central Authorities either during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco or during 1.5 million demonstrations in 2012 while demanding independence from the Spanish monarchy. The Catalonians consider themselves a self-sustaining minority with tenuous dependence on the central establishment in Madrid. Hence, a historical parallel naturally arises to the Duchy of Burgundy, whose court in Dijon

outshone the French court economically and culturally during the Hundred Years’ War in the 14th and 15th centuries. Current statistic data and reviews of numerous international observers indicate that “[a]s the most prosperous of Spain’s 17 regions, Catalonia houses roughly 19% of Spain’s economy, benefiting from tourism, exports, manufacturing, and industry.”¹⁰ This wealthy region has not only the 1000-year distinct history but also a 7.5-million-strong population with their language, parliament, flag, and anthem, and even their police force and some public controls.¹¹

Nonetheless, Catalan nationalists and radical groups have long considered that Madrid allocates too much money to poorer parts of Spain at the expense of their region through tax control. From their point of view, a 2010 constitutional court decision to lessen Catalonia’s sovereignty undermined the Catalan identity. In a referendum held finally on 01 October 2017, “about 90% of Catalan voters backed independence.”¹² But the turnout of the voters was only 43% and Spain’s Constitutional Court declared it illegal.

Unfortunately, some serious factors are affecting Catalonia’s aspiration to secession. One of the obstacles on its way to separation is the national public debt of Spain, which constituted in 2016 approximately \$1.18 trillion, according to the Bank of Spain and before the Catalan independence referendum

8 Ibid.

9 M. Fiedler, *Nicht nur Katalonien: Wer alles nach Unabhängigkeit strebt (Not Only Catalonia: Those Who Strive for Independence)*, “Der Tagesspiegel, Politik, Separatisten in Europa”, 17 October 2017, [https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/separatisten-in-europa-nicht-nur-katalonien-wer-alles-nach-unabhaengigkeit-strebt/20366008.html access: 18 July 2019].

10 S. Bosch, *Here’s How Bad Economically a Spain-Catalonia Split Could Really Be*, “CNBC European News”, 29 September 2017, [https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/21/heres-how-bad-economically-a-spain-catalonia-split-could-really-be.html access: 22 July 2019].

11 Catalonia Statistics 2018, *Barcelona Chamber of Commerce*, 2019, [https://www.cambrabcn.org/en/web/cambra-english/are-you-looking-for/economic-studies/catalonia-statistics access: 22 July 2019].

12 *Catalonia Crisis in 300 Words*, “BBC News – Europe”, 11 June 2019, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41584864 access: 22 July 2019].

of 2017. Catalonia accumulated in 2016 one of the largest debts among Spanish regions, i.e. \$86.9 billion. Consequently, further success of Catalonia depends heavily on “whether or not they would assume a percentage of the Spanish debt and if they would be required to pay off their debt.”¹³ In such a case, the situation with the region’s debt burden could prove to be detrimental to a new Catalan nation and would cause real damage to the development of their economic potential.

Catalonia’s intention to obtain complete independence from Spain may cause negative feedback from the European Union due to institutional reasons. Such a situation had arisen following the referendum on Scottish independence from the United Kingdom held on 18 September 2014. The voters were supposed to give a “Yes” or “No” answer to the single question: “Should Scotland become an independent country?” A majority of 55.3% (2,001,926 votes), against 44.7% (1,617,989 votes), decided that Scotland would remain part of the United Kingdom.¹⁴ It should be noted that the voter turnout rate of 84.6% was the highest in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage. The problem is that neither Scotland nor Catalonia possesses an automatic right to the EU membership. It means that Catalonia must receive a unanimous “Yes” from the EU members, including Spain and its allies, which are difficult to predict. If the European Union declines the new nation’s membership or makes things difficult, the Catalan economy will bear a heavy transition burden and may

not only lose its current trading partners but also encounter a trade boycott by the rest of the Kingdom of Spain.

Separatism is inherent not only in the economically developed and self-sufficient regions but also in the subsidized areas depending on federal subvention, e.g. Corsica, which is one of 18 administrative divisions in France (13 metropolitan regions and 5 overseas regions). Starting from 1991, the Territorial Collectivity of Corsica has obtained a special status with greater authority, possessing two bodies: the Executive Council and the Assembly of Corsica. The 2017 regional elections brought the national alliance Pè a Corsica, combining the autonomist party Femu a Corsica and separatist party Corsica Libera, to the majority of seats in the Corsican Assembly, a unicameral legislative body, by 56.5% of votes.

Unlike Catalonia in Spain or Scotland in the United Kingdom, Corsica does not think of any complete secession. It rather looks for enhanced autonomy and power, especially financial liabilities and official recognition of Corsican language. A perspective of international isolation in the case of total secession is beneficial neither for the Corsicans nor for their region because “Corsica is a region subsidized by the French Government. Most of the island’s population receive their salaries financed by public funds”¹⁵ and they greatly depend on tourism.

As for Eastern Europe, it is worthy to note Transnistria, which is a small breakaway

13 S. Bosch, *Here’s How Bad Economically a Spain-Catalonia Split Could Really Be*, “CNBC European News”, 29 September 2017, [<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/21/heres-how-bad-economically-a-spain-catalonia-split-could-really-be.html> access: 22 July 2019].

14 J.-C. Piris, *Political and Legal Aspects of Recent Regional Secessionist Trends in Some EU Member States*, [in:] *Secession from Member State and Withdrawal from the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 72.

15 H. Kuchalejschwili, *Will Corsica Be a New Catalonia?*, “112.ua: Elections”, 12 December 2017, [<https://ua.112.ua/statji/chy-stane-korsyka-novoiu-kataloniieiu-424559.html> access: 26 July 2019].

entity (unrecognised state) located between the Dniester River and Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine. "Since 1992, the Transnistria region, an economically important part of the Republic of Moldova ... has suffered self-imposed isolation from the rest of the country and, for the most part, from the world at large."¹⁶ The cause of the unsettled conflict lies in ethnic and linguistic aspects as well as the different approaches to conduct the required economic reform. In November 1990, limited fighting took place between Moldovan police, supported by military units, and Russian-backed Transnistrian forces. Russian-speaking population in Transnistria regards the Russian military presence as protection for their identity, which may be overwhelmed by the ethnic Moldovan majority. In its turn, Moldova believes that Transnistria is a "dark hole" for smuggling and illegal trafficking and insists that the location of Russian troops there violates its territorial integrity. Besides, the Moldovan authorities accuse Moscow of blocking iteratively any attempts to find a settlement.

"The Transnistrian conflict has been under the regulation for more than 25 years, but the prospects for restoring the territorial integrity of Moldova and the Transnistria reintegration are very small."¹⁷ Maybe that is why this long-simmering "frozen conflict" in Transnistria recalls a certain parallel between the current situation along the eastern border of Moldova and the ongoing

conflict related to the annexed Crimea, as well as continuous fighting in eastern Ukraine. Notwithstanding the existence of the same behind-the-scenes actor from the past Soviet Union's reality, the scope of these conflicts is different in terms of both the human losses and the violation of International Law. The Transnistrian conflict's death toll accounted for over 1,000 irreparable losses and "in Donbas hostilities, some 12,800 to 13,000 people were killed from April 2014 to the end of 2018, according to UN Monitoring Mission on Human Rights."¹⁸

If in the case of Crimea's annexation the Russian Federation used the threat of force to seize the peninsula, in Donbas, it appealed to its regular armed forces (both planning and the use of personnel and small units) on a par with its security groups and separatist formations to incite war there. Initially, Russia denied its troops in Crimea as belonging to the regular army, as it denies its involvement in Eastern Ukraine and huge military and material supplies to the unrecognised "Donetsk and Luhansk republics".

Declining post-Soviet economy, growing poverty, and the increasing number of pensioners boosted separatism sentiments in both the Transnistria and Donbas cases. "Almost 700,000 pensioners are not receiving their pensions because of the restrictive policies linking payment of pensions to conflict-affected people with

16 *Republic of Moldova: Economic Review of the Transnistria Region*, "Report No. 17886-MD Europe and Central Asia Region"; World Bank, June 1998, p. 7, [<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/492631468773991051/pdf/multi0page.pdf> access: 26 July 2019].

17 W. Jawir, *The Disintegration-Integration Challenges in Moldova*, "Studia Politologica Ucraino-Polona" (V.M.Koretsky Institute of State and Law, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine), no. 8, 2018, [<http://journals.urau.ua/spup/article/view/163866> access: 27 July 2019].

18 *Donbas War Death Toll Rises up to Nearly 13,000 - UN*, "UNIAN Information Agency", 22 January 2019, [<https://www.unian.info/war/10416549-donbas-war-death-toll-rises-up-to-nearly-13-000-un.html> access: 27 July 2019].

the requirement to register as an internally displaced person.”¹⁹

The Crimea annexation and unleashed war in the eastern part of the country resulted in a significant loss for Ukraine’s sovereignty and economy since 2013, namely:

- Loss of control over 46,200 km² (of the whole 603,700 km²);
- Nearly 6 million deduction from its total population of 43,835,000;
- 20% loss of GDP (Crimea 3.6% of GDP in 2013, and Donbas 15% of GDP in 2013).²⁰



declining post-Soviet or uncompetitive economy, growing poverty, and the increasing number of pensioners create some extra motivation for separatism, especially in Eastern Europe

Objectively speaking, the declared prosperity of Donbas related mostly to the “good old times of the Soviet Union” with the total sell-off of mineral resources and rolled steel by the oligarchies. Oleksandr Shlapak, Ukrainian minister of finance, confirmed during a press briefing organised in May 2014 that “...the self-sustainment of Donetsk and Luhansk regions for their revenues in 2013 was 39.8% and 44.1% accordingly.” He added that “the revenues of the Donetsk region in 2013 constituted UAH 16.3 billion,

while its expenses raised to UAH 41 billion, indicating that the region’s self-sustainment remains at 39.8% level.”²¹

Conclusion

Separatist movements continue unabated throughout the world, especially in the trans-border and peripheral regions, where ethnic minorities have a certain ethnic, linguistic, or historical attraction to their vis-à-vis across the border.

Most cases of separatist tendencies are caused by ethnic and linguistic reasons, as well as the underestimation of economic prosperity and self-sustainment of some regions. Nevertheless, declining post-Soviet or uncompetitive economy, growing poverty, and the increasing number of pensioners create some extra motivation for separatism, especially in Eastern Europe.

External factors may have the effect of scaling up and scaling down the intensity of separatism. History knows a lot of examples when separatist disturbances were initiated and further used for annexing the territories of a smaller neighbour, e.g. the Anschluss of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 or annexing of the Ukrainian Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. It often happens as a result of proxy conflicts, or hybrid wars, or even tense interstate relations, especially if the neighbour possesses unilateral superiority related to the military, economic, and human resources.

19 K. Nechayeva, T. Jenssen, *Ukraine: 5 Facts after 5 Years of Conflict*, Norwegian Refugee Council, Ukrainian War Conflict, 03 April 2019, [<https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2019/five-things-to-know-after-five-years-of-conflict-in-eastern-ukraine> access: 27 July 2019].

20 *Mere Facts: Today's Ukraine without the Crimea and Donbas*, “ICTV Facts”, 13 April 2017, [<https://fakty.com.ua/ru/ukraine/20170413-tilky-fakty-shho-ukrayina-vtratyta-vnaslidok-okupatsiyi-krymu-i-donbasu> access: 28 July 2019].

21 *The Revenues of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions Cover Only 40% of Their Expenses*, “Economic Pravda”, 12 May 2014, [<https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2014/05/12/450790/> access: 28 July 2019].

This situation requires that we look for the most effective instruments to withstand the separatist movements, which may include the involvement of international organisations and mediating countries, peace talks, economic and political sanctions, recourse to the International Court of Justice, appeal to international isolation, use of coercive force by police or even by units of armed forces or peacekeeping troops assigned by international community.

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