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State of the nations

Without intending to do so, the European Union has fuelled separatism and made independence a more attractive prospect

Independence movements in Europe have been attracting attention again lately. But the separatists are not turning their back on the EU. Quite the opposite, in fact: the EU plays a central role in the vision of today's separatists, and the way the EU has developed in recent years goes some way towards explaining why separatist parties are enjoying such an upturn.

First and foremost, the new popularity of separatist ideas is rooted in the underlying movements, which have become more acceptable to the wider population. Unlike in the 1990s, for example, separatism is no longer automatically equated with extremism. Terrorist groups like ETA in the Basque Country and the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland have since announced an end to their armed struggle, while extreme forces are no longer the key players at a political level.

In Flanders, for example, the far-right Vlaams Belang (formerly Vlaams Blok) was central to the region's separatist movement until the mid-2000s but has steadily lost ground since then. The N-VA, now the Belgian party with the largest voter base, is now the most visible proponent of Flemish independence. This development has also been observed in Catalonia. Since the end of the 2000s, the call for independence has come not only from the separatist left wing, but also from liberal centrists. In other words, separatism has found its way into the political middle ground.

This also explains why separatist ideas are finding a broader audience, and this widening of the target group is no coincidence. After all, modern separatist movements are designed extremely strategically. Their central objectives are to address large slices of the population and generate international sympathy and understanding. Achieving these goals is necessary if they are to ultimately establish a viable, legitimate state. Depending on the initial circumstances, however, the first step in the strategy often involves identifying intermediate targets. For example,

leading separatists in the Basque Country announced their desire to establish the corresponding political conditions before openly issuing a renewed demand for independence.

The EU: a natural ally

In regions with separatist potential, the EU is generally seen in a very positive light, primarily because the regions benefit greatly from its existence. The EU has opened up new opportunities for their development, while the protection of minorities, European regional policy and options for integration in Brussels have helped to safeguard their regional capacity.

Strengthening the regional level has been one of the EU's ambitions for decades. This is reflected in the Treaty of Lisbon, which reinforced the principle of subsidiarity: higher political levels should take on only those tasks that cannot be performed at lower levels. But this brings us to one of the key conflicts. The principle affects the relationship between the EU and the nation states on the one hand, but also the relationship between the nation states and their subsidiary bodies on the other. While the former distribution of power has been successfully enforced, many European countries are still struggling with the latter.

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As such, strong regions see the EU as a natural ally against the nation state's claim to power. However, developments in recent years at a European level are also central to the growing popularity of separatist ideas. Nation states have been reconfirmed as the bodies responsible for upholding the European order, meaning they will continue to play a central role within the EU for the foreseeable future. Decisions in Brussels will still be taken by national representatives. Meanwhile, the vision of moving beyond the nation state concept has faded into the background. Ideas like the 'Europe of regions' feel like they to belong to an entirely different era.

At the same time, though, the EU's policy has served to strengthen the regionalist movements. Stronger regionalism would not ordinarily be a problem; instead, it would be seen as an enrichment to the concept of a lively and diverse Europe. But with the reinforcement of the nation states, however, this has allowed separatist elements to gain in importance in some regions.

Fuelled by crisis

But why are certain regions home to separatist movements in the first place, and why are some more successful than others? It all comes down to the conditions. Separatism rears its head only where there is a sufficient breeding ground. This includes a tangible narrative basis behind the desire for independence. This typically takes the form of historical tales of past injustice or the uniqueness of an ethnic group. For example, this explains why the Lega Nord finds it difficult to establish a credible claim for independence in northern Italy.

It also helps when a region is relatively homogeneous and clearly distinct from the rest of the country. These differences, which can also be rooted in a different concept of statehood or a distinct mentality, can be actively developed and nurtured.

In today's world, political constellations also play a key role. When a central state is governed for many years by parties with little support in a given region, this provides an easy win for separatist rhetoric. This dynamic has been observed in Scotland and Catalonia, for example. Such situations ultimately also result in a loss of legitimacy for the central government institutions in the region, making it harder to return to the norm. However, there are proven recipes against separatism, too. For instance, tailored autonomous rights have ensured relative calm in South Tyrol for many decades now.

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Crises also offer natural momentum for separatist ideas. The financial and economic crisis proved to be an ideal breeding ground in this respect, as it was often accompanied by powerlessness and incapacity on the part of the political elites and a desire for change. As separatists tend to promise a better future and a fairer, more efficient state, it is easy to see why they have been successful. While it's clear that the promise of economic viability is essential to the successful existence of separatist ideas, we should be careful not to overestimate the importance of economic concerns, as they alone are not enough to explain why separatists have managed to attract a wider audience.

A message of continuity

The EU is a key player in ensuring that this economic promise can become a reality. It offers continuity in various areas and has – albeit inadvertently – made independence a more attractive prospect in many respects.

For separatists, the seamless integration of their desired state into the EU is the be-all and end-all, as EU membership significantly reduces the theoretical costs of independence. Access to the common market would mean things remaining largely unchanged in terms of business and the economy, for example, while any new state would not have to restrict itself to a small domestic market as would once have been the case. Another benefit of the EU is the over-representation enjoyed by smaller member states.

This message of continuity is popular among voters, as the average citizen has no great desire to step into the unknown. This makes it fundamentally difficult to persuade a majority of the population to pursue the path to independence. As such, separatists are required to promise continued EU membership even when the tone emanating from Brussels is rather different.

At the same time, it is clear that the nation states remain responsible for offering a home for all regions and all national identities. There are plenty of ways to achieve this: granting increased autonomy after corresponding negotiations, for example, or increased participation in determining the national position with regard to the EU. After all, separatists and regionalists also want to have a say in the Europe that has given them so much.



Matthias Bieri
Zürich

Matthias Bieri is a researcher at ETH Zürich's Centre for Security Studies. He co-edits a German-language magazine about security policy.