

THE REGIONAL CALL FOR AUTONOMY: A CURSE FOR EUROPE?

An important trend in several countries shows the unhappiness of peripheral regions with the centralizing policy of their governments: Spanish Catalonia claims its independence, French Corsica wants more autonomy, Italian Lombardy and Veneto have also a strong political party aiming for as much autonomy as possible, Spanish Bask country wants to keep as much autonomy as it can, bilingual Italian Alto Adige/Südtirol is confronted with right-wing Austrian proposals to give double nationality to its German-speaking citizens, Croatian Istria has also a regional party and wants to keep and extend its regional competences, Danish Far-Oer islands have a strong demand for self-government and even independence, Belgian Flanders has a dominant right-wing party that also claims independence in its statutes, Polish and Czech Silesia have also a unneglectable trend for autonomy.¹ Regions that are located peripherally feel abandoned in the first place because they are unable to attract foreign direct investment and therefore large employers. Because indeed, multinationals care about location: proximity of a local market and proximity of human resources in vast quantities. And that is mostly close to large metropolises. So traditionally, peripheral regions are often not well represented inside the democratic institutions. In the case of Catalonia, Bask country, Flanders, Veneto or Lombardia, the motivation is different: they want to keep the wealth they developed in their own hands, unwilling to share it with “spilling” neighbours. Federal states such as Germany, Austria and Belgium tried to solve the problem by giving social and economic authority to its member states. Socially embedded countries, such as the Scandinavian countries, started from a point of view that everybody should have the chance to live his life decently in the place he wants to stay. And the small countries -small in size and in density of population-, such as the Baltics, Cyprus, Luxembourg or Slovenia have a democratic representation system that covers the entire country.

Regional consciousness based upon historical differences?

But then one can observe that the dissatisfaction is often expressed in a sentimental way, claiming a different historic past, cultural and/or linguistic differences. Whereas in general the fundamental motive is economical: whether they consider they contribute too much for the other regions or they do not receive enough from the others. One of the results of the European Union project has been indeed, that we start to consider ourselves as Europeans in the first place, with a common cultural and religious history and particularly, common values. Especially the young generation feels that way: they start to see through the allegations of populists who try to convince their voters of the inferiority of the others. Their political project is often inexistent or not well thought true: numerous have been the examples that occurred in the last two years.²

Through its Cohesion program, the European Union pleads for more involvement in social and economic matters of regions. It stimulates cities and regions to collaborate on matters that are close to the citizen. One of the elements to stimulate regional involvement is to stimulate them in taking responsibility on the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2017/oct/27/beyond-catalonia-pro-independence-movements-in-europe-map>

² The political program of Marine Le Pen for the 2017 French presidential elections did not go further than slogans, as did Geert Wilders' program for the 2016 Dutch parliamentary elections. The most striking was the independence declaration of Catalan Carles Puigdemont in September 2017, who had to consider, once the independence was declared, what the next steps had to be. And last but not least the Brexit adventure, where the political protagonists all disappeared from the political scenery without leaving a structured plan of execution, leaving the realization of their “impossible dream” to others.

management of the European Regional Development Funds based upon a regionally developed strategy.³ The difference in approach is striking: the UK manages the ERDF per member state of the Union: England, Scotland, Wales (2 programs!), Northern-Ireland and Gibraltar. Countries organizing the ERDF funds in a centralized way are Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Malta, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Finland, Estonia, Denmark, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Austria. Countries having developed various strategic plans for their regions –and enabling them most likely to manage the funds themselves– are Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. And then there is an overwhelming offer of some 330 cross border collaboration plans. Hereby the regional approach is aiming transnational regions, such as countries alongside the coast of the Adriatic and Ionian sea, the Low Countries and the North of France, the Danube countries or the countries alongside the Baltic Sea.

Continuing to promote the regional approach in the same way?

We do not always understand the purpose of the scattered approach, to be motivated in the first place by the lack of funding and that makes the acceptance of projects more like a lottery or the survival of the fittest. The total budget for all structural and investment funds in the period 2014-2020 is 347,737 million € and represents 1/3rd of the European budget. This overview shows, the EU is investing quite some money in regional development. On the other hand, it also shows, this investment is spread over 209 regions, 380 operational programs, 122 categories of intervention and 13 thematic objectives.⁴ If one considers this, it is understandable that less densely populated peripheral regions that suffered already from an important brain drain, feel abandoned and have a willing ear for populist stories, complot theories and other fake news. Nevertheless in 2017 an initiative has been initiated and organised for the prolongation of a modern EU-Cohesion Policy for all regions post 2020.

This does not mean though, that less favored regions do not accept the challenge. In general, even less prosperous regions can have charismatic figures, able to convince their fellow citizens to collaborate and to undertake challenging projects. Even in more remote regions (or should we say, because of its remote location), like Galicia in Spain, Bucovina in Romania or Norrbotten in Sweden, we found thrilling examples of applications for future oriented initiatives and employment creation.⁵

³ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/

⁴ <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/esif-viewer>

⁵ The Statistical Implementation Unit North-East Romania created a Regional innovation board in which commodities such as water and energy and waste have been discussed and initiatives taken. A Water cluster has been created, integrating all players for waste, sewages, water and energy. In Iasi Veolia started to treat the waste. They started to take initiatives on circular economy. Although there is no central energy policy in Romania, nor is there regional or local policy, there are exceptions: in Suceava there are electric buses (thanks to a Swiss fund). There is now a covenant of Mayors of Nord-East Romania trying to reduce CO2 emission per city. They want to turn municipalities in carbon neutral entities. Town mayors are looking for examples of renewable energy. They do not care in this term of the classic electric grid, creating stand-alone alternatives for their city. Projects for public illumination based upon hydro power or solar energy are very popular. Also in terms of circular economy and short value chains (localization) initiatives have taken, e.g. cultivation of hemp as biodegradable basic material.

The Spanish region of Galicia disposes of natural gas in Orense: Gas natural Fenosa. The region meets almost by 100% the renewable energy goals set up for 2020. Given Galicia's location and geographic features, the establishment of hydroelectric and thermal power stations, hydraulic operations, wind farms, and solar power stations is ideal. They have developed 2 wind energy parks and the region is on the brink of remarkable growth in solar energy capabilities. It also disposes of 2 biomass centrals. Another example is an initiative of regrouping all activities of the port of Vigo under one umbrella, enabling the port to develop its business model. This initiative has been taken by the president of the port of Vigo, in close collaboration with the dean of the university of Vigo. The involved also the president of the Xunta de Galicia for the development of infrastructure inside the port. The University created also the "campus do mar". Campus do Mar is a project spearheaded by the University of Vigo and promoted by the three Galician universities, the Spanish Council of Scientific Research (CSIC) and the Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO). It therefore brings together socio-economic agents and marine researchers from the Galicia-Northern Portugal Euroregion, in order to harness the best possible potential and optimize the available resources.

The Swedish city of Luleå, although situated very north in Europe is a fast growing urban region. Luleå has the seventh biggest harbor in Sweden for shipping goods. It has a large steel industry and is a centre for extensive research. Luleå University of Technology is one of Sweden's three technology universities and the northernmost

Update the regional approach?

In most cases, old school regionalism starts when national governments are not taking care of the welfare of all citizens. Politicians tend to think sometimes in a very short-term and narrow-minded way: they only take care of their own supporters. And provided these supporters are located in a certain area or within a particular group of the population, they don't feel they have to take care of the rest. The most extreme example in Europe is Belgium, where only two minor parties are represented in both parts of the country: the Green party and the far-left party. All other parties limit their activity to one or two of the regions. Politicians are not even interested in being interviewed by newspapers or television stations from areas that cannot vote for them. This leads to ignorance about the needs of the others. Catalonia is suffering from the same disease.

New regionalism is found in France, with strong historical regions, but also with a historically strong centralised government. A French region is at the same time an administrative division of the territory of France, a decentralized territorial collectivity endowed with the legal personality and a freedom of administration, an electoral district and an administrative district of the deconcentrated services of the State.⁶ When they were created in 1956, they were 27. Since 2016 they are 18. Because of ineffectiveness or because of a lack of budget. But because of the definition here above, the protest was quite limited and the reorganisation implemented smoothly. France showed the effectiveness of the statute of regions for social and economic development.

A quite effective regional approach is also found in the Netherlands. The authority of the 12 Dutch provinces covers: regional economics, spatial planning, security, education (municipalities), culture and health (hospitals with municipalities). The collaboration between the provinces is striking: they have created an Association of Dutch Provinces in 2000 as an issue of the Dutch interprovincial concertation. This association represents the 12 Dutch provinces and defends their interests. Jointly they are represented in Brussels with an office that is following the European policy and tries to influence it. The aim of the Dutch provinces is to stimulate the financing of projects to promote regional economy. With own budgets and where possible with European money, currently the ERDF and ESF funds. ERDF funds are managed in the Netherlands by the provinces, ESF funds by the municipalities. The association pays attention on European Cohesion Policy, European Agricultural Policy, Energy Union and Decentralized Natural Policy. They are very much aware of the changes that are taking place by the Brexit, which will affect European funding. Moreover the use of resources for refugees and cybersecurity puts this distribution under pressure.

Regions: a curse for Europe?

Catalonians were shocked by the words of EU Commission president Juncker declaring he did not back Catalan independence, fearing others may follow the same path and because it could result in a region too complicated for the European Union (EU) to govern.⁷ The Spanish legislation about the regional approach is a very complicated one, laid down in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Spain did not want to become a federal state, with the Franco nationalist heritage in mind and quite some Franco supporters still on high

university in Sweden. The information technology industry in Luleå has about 2000 employees (2008). Luleå is the home of several major innovations and technological milestones. On 27 October 2011, Facebook announced it would locate its first data center outside of the United States in Luleå. The establishment of Facebook in Luleå has also led to other companies realizing the potential of establishing in Luleå. The positive effect has also been noticeable at the university where the applications rate has risen with 18 percent- Luleå Science Park has also had an increase with 25 percent of new established companies. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luleå>)

⁶ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%A9gion_fran%C3%A7aise

⁷ BBC News, 13 October 2017, [EU Spain: Juncker does not want Catalan independence](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41610863), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41610863>

positions. It is up to the Spanish government to decide where modifications in their legislation should be introduced. But Europe, bearing in mind that 1/3rd of its budget goes to Cohesion funds and regional development, should stimulate the central government not to hide themselves behind “the law” and to strive for solutions satisfying all inhabitants of Spain.

The EU structure could become indeed extremely complicated should it have to find unanimity within all regions of the EU, considering the current NUTS 2013 classification lists 98 regions at NUTS 1, 276 regions at NUTS 2 and 1342 regions at NUTS 3 level.⁸ But even with 27 member states, the principle of unanimity becomes unbearable and leads to inertia. The United States of America have also their states, with specific legislation, with its own fiscal authority, its own police force and its own decisional power. And under those states, there are counties and cities representing the regional and local authorities and striving for a better life for its inhabitants. So Europe should strive to a common authority grid, inviting every member state to take into account the wishes of all its citizens, not only the ones that vote for the party in power.

Louis Delcart, board member European Academy of the Regions, www.ear-aer.eu

⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts>. Socio-economic analyses of the regions: NUTS 1: major socio-economic regions, NUTS 2: basic regions for the application of regional policies, NUTS 3: small regions for specific diagnoses