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Editors: Richard Gillespie and Caroline Gray (University of Liverpool)

EvoNat Research Brief No. 3 – November 2015

Between Secession and “Full Autonomy”: Party Competition over Self-Determination in South Tyrol

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Summary

South Tyrol, together with the province of Trentino, forms one of the five Italian regions with a special statute, out of 20 regions in total. It is often considered to be a model region in terms of how to deal with violent ethnic conflict through the implementation of group rights and territorial autonomy. Implemented to tame centrifugal tendencies, the consociational system has for a decade been losing its balance, with pro-autonomy stances ceding ground to secessionist pressure in the German-speaking arena. Focusing on their strategic behaviour, this brief examines the centre-periphery dynamics and the sovereignty proposals of South Tyrolean ethnic minority parties. Challenged by the electoral success of the secessionist opposition, the hegemonic and autonomist South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP) is responding with a new pro-European devo-max objective. The rise of secessionism is accompanied by an end to the pro-European elite consensus.

Highlights

- The SVP is one of the most successful ethno-regionalist parties in Europe. A key regional power player since 1945, it commanded an absolute majority of seats in parliament until the 2013 elections. It has never wavered from its autonomist stance since the introduction of autonomy in 1946.
- In contrast, the main German pro-sovereignty opposition parties advocate secession from Italy either through independence or reunification with the Austrian kin-state.
- The continuous electoral success of secessionist parties puts pressure on the SVP's centre-periphery agenda, confronting the party with a dilemma regarding the question of self-determination, which at the moment it seeks to solve with a new devo-max objective.
- While the SVP frames internal self-determination increasingly in a European cross-border context, the secessionist parties consider Europe less as a political space for external self-determination and adopt Eurosceptic positions.



This series originates from the research project on 'The Dynamics of Nationalist Evolution in Contemporary Spain' (<http://nationalismsinspain.com>), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK [grant number ES/J007854/1]. The study originally focused on the Basque and Catalan pro-sovereignty movements before moving on to European-level comparison.

Landmarks

The call for external self-determination in South Tyrol was essentially silenced after the Gruber-De Gasperi agreement (or Paris Agreement) in 1946. This bilateral agreement between Austria and Italy guaranteed the German and Ladin minority territorial autonomy, as well as group rights and protection mechanisms. Collectively organised in the SVP, the ethnic catch-all party for German and Ladin speakers, the minority opted at the time for an internal solution, i.e. territorial autonomy, not external self-determination.

The unsatisfactory implementation of the agreement by the Italian state led to violent action and the attention of the United Nations in the 1960s after the intervention of Austria as a 'protecting power'. The negotiations culminated in the adoption of the Second Autonomy Statute in 1972. Through the transfer of the main legislative and administrative powers from the region to the province over the period until 1992, when the conflict was finally settled, the Statute empowered South Tyrol with a high level of autonomy in financial, cultural and social matters.

Towards the end of the 1980s, either from the camp of the former violent activists of the 1960s or as splinter groups of the SVP, new right-wing secessionist movements emerged in opposition to the SVP's de facto abandonment of the right to self-determination after the acceptance of the final conflict settlement in 1992. Competition between parties for German votes has increased at the provincial level and, especially over the last decade, demands have shifted from autonomy to secession. At the 2013 provincial elections, a third of the German electorate voted for a secessionist party.

The most significant parties of the secessionist camp today are South Tyrolean Freedom (SF) and the Libertarians (DF). SF stands in the irredentist tradition of 1960s violent activism and in 2008 emerged as a party to campaign for a referendum on self-determination with the aim of reuniting the two Tyrols under a common Austrian roof. DF, which was modelled on the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), on the contrary promotes the creation of an independent South Tyrolean free state.

Autonomy vs. Secession: The arguments

The SVP has been the main architect of South Tyrolean autonomy since 1946 and has consistently maintained its autonomist stance, arguing in favour of internal self-determination (i.e. political rights within the state), as follows:

- *International matters:* South Tyrol's protective power, Austria, upholds the agreement with Italy and thus is not a potential partner for external self-determination claims. European integration and Austrian EU membership removed borders, enhancing cooperation with northern Tyrol.
- *Credibility:* The SVP opted for internal self-determination in 1946. For the hegemonic party it is not possible to claim autonomy and external self-determination at the same time, otherwise South Tyrol would lose credibility in its negotiations with Rome.
- *Success:* Exemplary minority protection and a well-functioning legislative and financial autonomy (turning the dominated into a dominant minority) makes it difficult to argue that there is any kind of threat to the minority, which would justify claims for external self-determination.

In opposition to the SVP's pro-autonomy policy, the secessionist parties promote separation from Italy using the following arguments:



- *Identity*: Autonomy does not guarantee a permanent solution guaranteeing the linguistic-cultural survival of South Tyroleans in a foreign nation-state. Ongoing assimilation by Italy as well as immigrant integration (as Italians) threatens the preservation of linguistic-cultural identity.
- *Economy*: The Italian economic situation has a negative effect on South Tyrol. All relevant data and indicators show that Italy is being relegated to a third-class country: Italian state debt is higher than annual GDP, and competitiveness and the purchasing power of citizens are declining.
- *Reforms*: Compared to other EU countries, Italy is among those least willing to push for reforms. This mainly concerns information technology, innovation, liberalization, financial services, the economic environment and sustainable development.

The continued electoral success of secessionist parties puts pressure on the SVP's centre-periphery agenda, confronting the party with a dilemma regarding the question of self-determination. The SVP's realist autonomy policy, based upon consensus with Austria and Italy, is not compatible with claims for secession.

The response to the challenge: devo-max and European cross-border policy

After the 1992 conflict settlement, so-called "dynamic autonomy" constituted the SVP's long-term constitutional objective. This post-devolution strategy referred to a gradual adaptation of autonomy to the changing state-wide and European political context. The claims for external self-determination by the newly formed right-wing opposition were successfully answered by largely dismissing centre-periphery issues and by focusing especially on the socio-economic issues of governing the territory until the mid-2000s.

State-wide political developments helped strengthen the secessionist discourse of the German opposition parties. These developments included the territorial policies pursued by centre-right governments historically hostile to further devolution and recent violations of South Tyrol's constitutionally-guaranteed financial autonomy amid Italian austerity efforts during the Monti government. The instant success of SF campaigning on a self-determination referendum and the establishment of DF as the second force of the *Landtag* led the SVP to lose its absolute majority of the votes for the first time in 2008, followed by the majority of seats in 2013.

After switching the focus to centre-periphery issues during the 2008 election campaign and in the run-up to the 2013 autonomous elections, the SVP changed its territorial goal from "dynamic" to "full autonomy". Without moving or creating borders, the new strategy refers to reaching a maximum level of devolution in several steps:

- Agreement with the Italian government on a transfer of all competences that are not assumed by the state (such as defence, foreign and monetary policy).
- Full financial autonomy: upgrading the competence to decide and collect all the main direct taxes (now up to 90%).
- Assumption of internal security matters by the creation of a new provincial autonomous police force.
- Capacity to conclude international agreements as a competence after the devolution process.
- Double citizenship for South Tyroleans.

Together with the claim for full financial autonomy, the cornerstone of the new territorial strategy is the politicisation of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino. Created in 2011 by means of a co-operation agreement in order to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion between the three political entities, it has increased the level of cross-border cooperation. According to the SVP, the new functional entity strengthens South Tyrol's room for manoeuvre for the transfer of competences and the capacity to convert European law into provincial law without state influence.

Through this new territorial goal, the switch to a more accommodative strategy involves a shift away from issues of ethnicity and focuses more on issues concerning new competences. Such a strategy enables the SVP to accommodate more demands for self-government, while respecting the pacts with the Italian state

and its Italian coalition partners. Like its old strategy, however, much still depends on the evolution of state-wide politics. The Italian economic situation has repercussions on South Tyrol and the transfer of competences depends on the orientation of the Italian government.

Concerning the recent centralist constitutional reforms of Prime Minister Renzi, the SVP has been promised the following concessions as a result of negotiations:

- In the future, 90% of tax revenue in South Tyrol will be transferred directly to the region's account, instead of being transferred first to the ministry of finance in Rome and then back, as happened before.
- While other regions have to transfer any budget surpluses to regions with a deficit, South Tyrol can keep its own. It is the only province that has already managed to secure primary competence over local finances and council taxes.
- The new PR electoral system of 2015 will not be applied in South Tyrol, Trentino and the Aosta Valley. Minorities are exempt from the nationally applied threshold of 3%, as 20% of votes at constituency level is sufficient.
- The centralist constitutional reform will not apply to South Tyrol and other regions with a special statute. It contains the clause that any amendment to the autonomy statute can only be passed with the consent of South Tyrol.

No place for Euroscepticism

Although sitting with the European People's Party rather than the European Free Alliance, the SVP is one of only two ethnic-regional parties that have always been represented in the European Parliament since the introduction of direct elections in 1979, the other being the Scottish National Party. After initial fears that the deepening of European integration might threaten autonomy negotiations, the SVP adopted a Europhile position and supported the creation of a "Europe of the Regions", seeing the EU as a potential ally against Rome. Moreover, Austrian EU membership and the Schengen treaty brought South Tyrol closer to northern Tyrol.

In the German sub-arena, the debate about Europe always commanded a positive elite consensus, because of the rapprochement with northern Tyrol. Like the SVP, the pro-sovereignty parties framed their constitutional projects for a self-determined European Tyrol region in a European federal context. Since the 2008 elections, however, SF, and later DF, have ceased to consider Europe as a space for self-determination and they now avoid the European debate in their electoral agendas. In contrast, by integrating the EGTC into its territorial agenda, the SVP continues on a Europhile path.

At the 2014 European elections, DF, in coalition with the Lega Nord for the first time, challenged the SVP as a Eurosceptic ethno-regionalist party. The Europhile tradition in South Tyrol, combined with the minority provisions in the electoral system, contribute to the SVP's European success.