

European elections highlight growth of regionalism

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Next month's European elections highlight a further dramatic growth of regionally based parties and movements like the Northern League in Italy, the Scottish National Party and others. Given that many right-wing political opponents of European integration rail against the dangers of a new "super-state" trampling over national sovereignty, it is significant that these new nationalist and separatist formations have embraced European integration.

The old historically developed nation states are of declining relevance to globally organised production. A host of regions and zones within Europe now see the European Union (EU) as a vehicle for weakening the grip of their former parent states and are asserting their independent interests. These movements claim their right to negotiate directly with global investors and lobby individually and collectively within the European Union for lucrative cash subsidies. They are seeking to develop their own industrial strategy in direct competition with their near neighbours, and form economic and political links with other regions independently of the old national boundaries.

Recently, this has received press coverage in Britain, with the establishment of the new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, but the same phenomena can be seen in Belgium, Spain, France, Germany and Italy. Every gain for a regional movement in one corner of the continent triggers similar demands in another. At the same time, all the regional movements, regardless of their ostensible political coloration, look expectantly to the EU for cash and political support.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Belgium, which hosts the European Parliament in its capital city Brussels. A series of upcoming elections, local and national, as well as European, threaten to plunge the country further into crisis. Since the 1970s, political life in Belgium has been dominated by divisions between the French and Dutch-speaking areas of Wallonia and Flanders. The Belgian social democrats split in 1978 along these linguistic and regional lines, and other parties followed suit. These divisions have grown ever since, to the extent that regionalist parties of both blocs paralyse much of the Belgian state apparatus. This is most aggressive in Flanders, where the extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) effectively sets the political agenda to which the other Flemish parties adapt.

Underlying Flemish regionalism is the economic growth of the Flanders area—including the port of Antwerp—compared with the relative industrial backwardness of the French-speaking southern region, including Charleroi and Liege, historically dominated by heavy engineering. Flemish nationalism urgently wants to free Flemish-based business from the social cost of supporting French-speaking Belgian workers, whose industries are in decline or which have already collapsed.

Flanders won a degree of regional autonomy in 1989, with its own parliament, to which the first direct elections were held in 1995. In 1997, Flemish Prime Minister Luc Van den Brande hailed the tax raising powers that the British Labour government had promised to the new Scottish parliament, and demanded similar rights for his own legislature. In a 1998 interview with *de Standaard* newspaper he said, "We have to be able to provide Flemings with a programme for the future. What about Belgium in this scheme of things? Belgium can only be diluted in this scheme of things. It is a sort of intermediary stage between Flanders and Europe. Governing Belgium means finding the lowest common denominator, but that does not allow for much policy anymore. Belgium is a state with no programme for the future, with no ambitions."

While the leaders of the political parties of all the regions lay great stress on the unique cultural heritage and social characteristics of "their" region, the underlying similarities of their approach are clear. These parties are all trying to exploit whatever industrial and financial advantages happen to have fallen to them, under conditions where the nation state no longer provides either an adequate framework for industrial organisation, a large enough market, or a guarantee of social peace through national welfare provisions.

Scotland tries to exploit its lead in electronics over England and Wales. Bavaria and Northern Italy rest on broadly developed industry. Catalonia is by far the most economically developed area of Spain, like Flanders in Belgium. To a greater or lesser extent, the separatist movements employ chauvinist language to the same ends—to defend the interests of a wealthy regional minority while encouraging regional divisions in the working class.

The manifesto of the SNP for the elections to the new

Scottish parliament made this agenda clear, with its call for lower business taxes and the greater exploitation of Scotland's work force. "An independent Scotland," they wrote, "would be able to pursue a macro economic policy designed to meet Scotland's needs rather than those of the south east of England economy, boost the growth rate of the Scottish economy, make the personal tax system much fairer and bring about a major shift in trade and industry policy including following the precedent of Austria, Ireland and Sweden—all small European countries—who have *reduced the rate of corporation tax substantially and increased revenues as a result of developing more high value added operations* " (emphasis added).

Encouraging regional competition is official EU policy. Fully one-third of the EU budget—most of what is leftover after the Common Agricultural Policy and paying the Brussels administration—is directed to "structural funds" handed out on a regional basis. There are four categories of funds, the most important being those with "objective one" and "objective two" status, which dispense support to economically backward areas, or areas that have recently suffered from economic decline. Other funds relate to infrastructure development and new industries.

In their manifesto, the SNP focussed on the possibility of Scottish representation on the EU Council of Ministers and securing more positions on the EU Committee of the Regions, in addition to the existing Scottish Euro MPs. The party also works closely with similar areas in Europe on an ad hoc basis, and through the European Radical Alliance formation of MEPs, to which the SNP belongs. A recent article by leading SNP commentator George Kerevan called for Northern Ireland and Scotland to collaborate as a political counterweight to London and Dublin. "Scotland asking for a seat on the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee will be ignored by Gordon Brown," wrote Kerevan. "Alex Salmond, Donald Dewar, Gerry Adams and David Trimble asking for such representation might get the attention of Eddie George [the Bank of England governor]. It would certainly get mine."

In 1997 the Northern League, whose project is the secession of "Padania" from Northern Italy, wrote to the EU and the US and Japanese governments announcing that they fully supported the EU, called for a strong euro and hinted that the Italian state was an obstacle to the launch of the new currency.

Many of the issues in the new regionalism were summed up in a speech given by Jordi Pujol, president of the Catalan region in Spain, who favours secession, to a conference organised last year by the British Council and the *Financial Times*.

Commenting on the coming together of the EU and regionalism, Pujol said, "This evolution in the objectives of substate nationalisms has to do with the European integration process that, in aiming at preserving the national diversity of the States, legitimates and helps to defend cultural and national diversity within the States."

"Another important factor behind the greater disposition of

the States to devolve powers below the State level is the new situation created by the transfer of macroeconomic powers—the monetary, fiscal and customs policy, for example—to the European Union and the increasing importance of structural policies, such as the planning of infrastructures, vocational training, education, industrial planning, social security, etc.

"In any case, they [the states] are too big to ensure the nonmaterial components of economic competitiveness. I now refer to factors, such as social cohesion, civil spirit, shared values, self-assurance and self-esteem, all that determine the creativity and the spirit of initiative among human collectives."

Translated into plain language, this means that the expansion of profit ["economic competitiveness", "spirit of initiative"] in any area now depends on fostering regional divisions ["civil spirit"], whether or not there is an existing regional movement.

With the planned enlargement of the EU to incorporate many former Eastern bloc countries, a range of poorer areas have suddenly become potential recipients of structural funding, but will be competing for less money. At the same time, countries that are net contributors to the EU budget (i.e., their total contribution exceeds funds paid back under the various funds), particularly Germany, are demanding their payments be reduced and that funding be more directly geared to expansion in the East. Thus structural funding, initially intended as a means to raise living standards in backward areas, has now become an instrument to provoke regional tensions and competition.

The growth of these regional antagonisms was graphically illustrated immediately after the Scottish elections. The SNP suddenly discovered that the arbitrary border delineating Scottish and English territorial waters and fishing grounds in the North Sea had been moved slightly northwards, transferring 6,000 square miles of open sea from Scottish to English legal jurisdiction. Under normal circumstances this would be an insignificant legal nicety, but the SNP promised to make it the major issue in June's European elections. Gordon Wilson, ex-party leader and spokesman for the most aggressively separatist wing of the party, called the move a "seizure" and spoke of the "potentially huge implications as to the future ownership of [North Sea] oil and gas resources if the boundary lines are to be moved from Berwick upon Tweed to Carnoustie."



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