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From Pipedream to Possibility: How European Integration has Helped Secessionist Movements

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ABSTRACT

The European project has brought the states of Europe ever closer together while inadvertently strengthening secessionist movements that seek to fracture the very states it has brought together. Through integration, many of the benefits a region with a potential desire for independence gains from remaining a part of its host state are transferred to the European level. Current academic consensus argues that European integration has overall harmed secessionist movements, but since the UK's decision to leave the EU, this argument has become outdated and no longer holds the strength it once did. This article uses current academic literature on the topic as well as statements from European politicians and separatist political parties to explore and compare the cases of secessionist movements in Scotland, Catalonia, and Flanders. While chosen for their strength and their diversity in circumstances, these independence movements are united in being transformed from pipedreams to possibilities thanks to European integration.

KEYWORDS

secession, European integration, Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, as empires and states rose and fell, the borders of Europe have been in a state of constant flux. Regular cycles of war and conflict encouraged the formation of larger political entities and regional identities and cultures were tucked within these larger states. In the more recent decades following the second World War, a relatively long era of peace and international cooperation has created a calm geopolitical atmosphere where the risk of aggression from other states has decreased significantly. This stable environment has reduced the competition between larger and smaller states, allowing the latter to flourish. While there have been many boarder changes in Eastern Europe after the fall of the iron curtain, the step-by-step process of accession to the EU has stabilized the states and their territories. Despite this stability, independence movements ranging in size and strength have risen and, in some cases, now pose a real threat to existing borders. European integration has transformed Europe and now may be leading to a redrawing of Europe's borders. If political actors and central governments want to prevent being blindsided by secessionist movements seeking to topple existing states, the effect of European integration on secessionist movements must be reviewed and understood.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research into the relationship between European integration of secessionist movements is not highly developed and the reality that there has not yet been a case of secession from an EU member state has made it difficult for both researchers and voters to predict exactly how the process of secession from an EU or former EU member state would be carried out. This paper will use existing academic literature alongside statements made by political parties and both former and current European politicians to analyze how European integration has impacted secessionist movements. The cases of Scotland in the United Kingdom, Catalonia in Spain, and Flanders in Belgium will be used to show how European integration is playing a role in different secession movements.

This paper is divided into three core sections. First, what sparks and drives secession movements will be covered. Second, the effects of European integration on secession movements will be analyzed and argued. Finally, a close look at the secessionist movements of Scotland, Catalonia, and Flanders followed by a comparison of these cases will be used to illustrate that the impact of integration can be seen in secessionist movements that differ from one another.

3. INDEPENDENCE 101: BASIS OF SECESSIONIST MOVEMENTS

In the past, secessionist movements were often spearheaded and lead by paramilitary rebel forces, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in early twentieth-century Ireland. Today, European secessionist movements are grounded in achieving independence through peaceful, democratic means via an agreed process with the host state, such as the 2014 Scottish independence referendum which was agreed to by the UK government, and lead by one or multiple pro-independence political parties.

Understanding what sparks and drives these movements is of vital importance for researchers trying to understand the impact of European integration on secessionist movements, but also for central governments to ensure that secessionist movements either do not begin or remain on the political fringe. Independence debates are often seen as “head vs. heart,” meaning that arguments based on logic surrounding topics such as the economy come into conflict with arguments that are more based on sentiments and national identity.

Topics that fall into the “heart” category are often the catalyst for the birth of a secessionist movement and serve as the core of the movement. Secessionists then use topics of the “head” to try and re-enforce arguments based on sentimental matters. Actors that support remaining with the host state often follow this model in reverse, using logic-based arguments around the economy, health care, social welfare, and overall stability as the core of their message re-enforced by sentimental arguments and messaging about shared history, achievements, and culture with the rest of the host state.

Based on historical evidence, it appears that secessionist movements that become mainstream and garner a sizable portion of public support share the following characteristics: 1) a regional and/or national identity different or stronger than the rest of the host state and 2) a deep, long-lasting dissatisfaction with the host state. These kinds of dissatisfactions include, but are not limited to: being a “donor region” which regularly contributes more in taxes to the central government than it receives back in services, being under the control of a central government often led by a party which holds little support in the region, holding and prioritizing a different set of political and social values from the rest of the host state, a feeling in the region that its voice and interests are not respected by the central government, and a feeling that the central government is ineffective.

4. EFFECTS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

European integration and secession both fundamentally interact with the concept of sovereignty, with integration transferring some national sovereignty to the European level and secession transferring sovereignty from the central government of the host state to the seceding region. In the process of transferring some sovereignty and competencies to the European level, many benefits of a region remaining with its host state were also transferred to the European level, paving a path for secessionist movements to take deep roots in regions such as Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders, and potentially more in the future. As Borne (2014) describes in her paper analyzing Europeanization and secession, integration has created both opportunities and constraints for secessionists and anti-secessionists (also known as unionists). This complexity is further highlighted by Muro & Vlaskamp (2016), who state that “the EU’s structure may stimulate support for an independent state while discouraging the act of secession” (p. 1116). However, a closer look at these effects can help simplify the impacts of integration.

In many ways, the EU has helped to stimulate support for independence movements, primarily by creating an environment where small states can be successful and the negative impacts of being a small state are significantly minimized. Basic arguments against secession are driven by fears that the new state will be too small to be successful, will become more isolated, and will lose the benefits of being part of a larger economic and political entity. These primary concerns against secession are reduced by EU membership or prospective membership because as long as the new state remains within the EU or becomes an EU member, it will continue to benefit from the EU’s large single market, borderless Schengen area, and common currency. These major elements would allow a newly independent state to feel minimal negative effects from secession because its market access and opportunities for its citizens would be essentially unchanged, use of the common currency would prevent the need to create a new national currency, and the Schengen area would ensure open borders within Europe. Because many of these key benefits are found at the European level, retaining EU membership becomes more important than remaining part of the host state. The EU’s own institutional structure, under which member state governments are the

leading political actor, also makes secession tempting. As a member state in its own right, a region which once depended on the host state's central government to represent its interests would be able to hold an equal seat at the table in Brussels. As an independent state, the region would have its own seat at the European Council, nominate a commissioner, and have a much greater influence across all policy areas than it previously had as part of the host state. Integration has also shaped the rhetoric and image of secessionist movements. While traditionally separatists are seen as insular and inward-looking, integration has allowed independence projects to be seen as outward- and forward-looking by searching for opportunities to play an active role in being part of a larger European family of nations. Pro-EU messaging and stances are essentially standard among pro-independence parties and leaders with regional national identities (such as Scottish identity) being linked to a European identity (Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016).

However, like everything European integration touches, there are several layers of both political and technical complexity. The benefits of independence for a region outlined above are dependent on continued EU membership or quick accession for regions from host states that are not EU members. Since the institutions in Brussels have not yet had to encounter such a scenario, the question of whether newly independent states would be able to keep its EU membership or be able to quickly rejoin is ultimately theoretical until a precedent is actually set. Trying to predict the real-world outcome of a region breaking free from an EU member state is difficult since the EU treaties do not specify what would occur and there has been mixed messaging from EU officials and political leaders on the subject (Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016). During the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the question of Scotland's EU membership was center stage. The pro-independence campaign led by then Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond argued that Scotland would be able to retain its EU membership while the Better Together campaign in favor of remaining within the UK argued that Scotland would lose its membership (Bourne, 2014). These two different arguments were grounded in two different theories. The case for continued membership was based around the idea of making an amendment to the EU treaties via Article 48 to allow continued Scottish membership by common agreement of all existing member states. The argument that Scotland would lose membership is based in the belief that because independence would automatically make the new state a third country, the new state would have to re-apply for membership through the often lengthy accession process.

Both theories are possible, but which scenario would carry out? If voters think that EU membership will not be disrupted in any substantial way, independence seems less threatening. However, if independence means being left outside the EU potentially for years, independence will seem riskier. While the European Commission has repeatedly stated that it would view any new independent states as third countries needing to re-apply for membership (Bourne, 2014), there are reasons to doubt that this is the approach the Commission and the EU member states would in fact take if faced with a newly independent state. If a region such as Catalonia or Flanders, both members of the Schengen Area and Eurozone, were to lose EU membership overnight due to independence, the EU would face significant disruptions and the risk of economic and political instability would run high. Particularly in the case of the Euro, if regions with strong economies were to be kicked out of the Eurozone, the economic impact would be felt across the Eurozone and the currency would likely lose some of its value. Both the negative economic and geopolitical impacts that the EU would face from losing a newly independent region, especially post-Brexit, would likely be damag-

ing enough for the EU to strongly consider making an exception to allow the new state to remain a member. While there is a risk of EU member states dealing with strong secession movements domestically vetoing an easy process for new states to hold membership in order to disincentivize secessionists in their own countries, the negative costs of expelling the new state and potential external pressure from other EU countries may reduce this risk of a veto. This is a point that pro-independence forces have argued to voters. The Catalan government has highlighted the region's economic strength as a reason that the EU would want to ensure Catalonia's EU membership. Flemish nationalists have cited the fact that the EU's capital in Brussels would make expelling an independent Flanders from the EU practically unthinkable. Given that Scotland is no longer in the EU due to Brexit, Scottish independence activists argue that Scotland would be welcomed back to Europe and cite access to Scotland's fishing waters as an incentive for the EU to fast-track re-admission. Public comments like those from former European Council President Donald Tusk stating that the EU "would be enthusiastic" if an independent Scotland reapplied for membership (Tamma, 2020), have served to soften concerns about the prospect of rejoining the EU after independence.

5. CASE REVIEW: SCOTLAND

Led by the center-left Scottish National Party (SNP) founded in 1934, the Scottish independence movement has a left-wing, pro-European nationalism at its core (Ceruleus, 2014). In 1999, a devolved Scottish assembly and government was established after a referendum on Scottish devolution passed in 1997. While for decades the Labour Party dominated in Scotland, evidence of a long-standing preference for left leaning policies, the SNP and its independence cause began to gain mainstream strength in 2007 after a surge in electoral support during Scottish Parliamentary elections. After winning a Scottish parliamentary majority in 2011 by campaigning on the promise to hold an independence referendum, the SNP government in Edinburgh and the UK government in London agreed to a legally binding Scottish independence referendum which took place in September of 2014. The referendum resulted in Scotland remaining within the UK with 45% of voters backing independence and 55% supporting the status quo.

Scotland's secession movement meets both of the requirements for a strong secession movement laid out earlier in this paper: 1) a regional and/or national identity different or stronger than the rest of the host state, and 2) a deep, long lasting dissatisfaction with the host state. In Scotland, dissatisfaction with the UK stems from a feeling of holding different values and a feeling of Scotland's voice being ignored. Scotland is often referred to as "southern Scandinavia," a reference to its left-wing tendencies and desire to pursue a Nordic-style egalitarian society (Curtice, 2020). These core social and political values in addition to Scotland's strong favorability for the EU seemingly run contrary to England, which is more center-right politically, Euroskeptic, and favors a smaller welfare state (Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016). Not only is the political distinction clear, many in Scotland often feel that Scotland's voice is overpowered by England and is not properly listened to. During the 2014 referendum campaign and still now, pro-independence campaigners argue that Scotland is governed by UK governments it does not vote for, in reference to the fact that it is common for the party leading the government in London to not be the party that won in Scotland. On specific issues, such as nuclear weapons and EU membership, Scotland's opinions seem to have made little difference. In Scotland, nuclear weapons are deeply unpopular with a sizable majority of Scots in favor of abandoning nuclear weapons altogether (Survation, 2016). Despite this, the UK's nuclear weapons which Scotland is so deeply opposed to

are stored in Scotland. With Brexit, Scotland voted by over 62% to remain in the EU while the UK as a whole voted to leave. After the result, Scottish leaders lobbied hard for both a second referendum on the finalized terms of Brexit and for a close relationship to the EU, preferably retaining membership of the single market, but their efforts were unsuccessful as the conservative-led government in London decided for a hard Brexit.

During the 2014 referendum, European integration played an important role. The question over Scotland's membership was a major point of contention and uncertainty, which has largely been seen to have helped unionists in the campaign. The SNP, however, used the EU and European identity to create an open, inclusive, and outward-looking public perception of independence, which made independence more acceptable to people. Secessionists also used EU membership to minimize potential negative economic impacts and maximize Scotland's potential to have an influential voice in Europe and on the world stage as a whole (Bourne, 2014). While Scottish independence dreams were not achieved in 2014, European integration aided secessionists in building a strong movement. As a result of Brexit, independence is once again a high priority topic in Scottish politics, with polling showing that a second independence referendum would have a realistic chance of independence (Curtis, 2020), winning a majority with pro-EU voters with moderate nationalist leanings seemingly more willing to back independence (Muro & Vlaskamp, 2016). In the current post-Brexit environment, the SNP has called independence Scotland's only way back into the EU and have pushed hard to equate EU membership with independence (Sturgeon, 2021). As a result of integration, Scottish independence is not solely about leaving the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – it is about joining the larger union of European nations, a narrative that will be more attractive to voters than an inward-looking, isolationist type of separatism would be.

6. CASE REVIEW: CATALONIA

After an illegal unilateral independence referendum in 2017, followed by a failed unilateral declaration of independence, Catalonia's secessionist movement quickly gained worldwide recognition. As recounted in Öner (2019), Catalonia's position within Spain has long been a topic on the Catalan political agenda, with most people supporting Catalonia remaining part of Spain with substantial devolved powers (*ibid*). In 2006, the Spanish and Catalan governments agreed to a revised Catalan Statute (Catalonia's mini regional constitution) which granted further powers to Catalonia's devolved government. The expansion of devolved powers was popular and mostly satisfied Catalan nationalists with the exception of nationalists pushing for fiscal competencies since the 2008 global financial crisis. However, the expanded powers were short-lived. In 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court ruled several parts of the revised Catalan Statute unconstitutional and reinterpreted other parts in ways that favored central institutions in Madrid. The ruling was grounded in Section 2 of the Spanish Constitution, which states that “[t]he Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards; it recognizes and guarantees the right to self-government of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them all.” The expanded powers to Catalonia were interpreted as a violation of Spanish unity, thus were unconstitutional. The court gave similar reasoning in 2017 when it ruled the Catalan independence referendum unconstitutional. The Spanish government in Madrid have also used this logic to deny authorization for an agreed, legally binding independence referendum. After the Constitutional Court's 2010 ruling, support for independence rose as nationalists who were satisfied with expanded

devolution moved to support secession.

Enjoying growing support in Catalonia, the separatist movement is not a fully united movement and is mainly led by two political parties, the center-right Together for Catalonia (JuntsxCat) and the center-left/left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC). As Öner (2019) explains, the two main factors that drive the movement are: (1) Catalonia's own culture and language differing from that of the rest of Spain, and (2) Catalonia's economic position of being a donor region. Catalan nationalists argue independence is the best way to protect and embrace the region's distinct culture and language, which are not treated with the respect it is due by Spanish authorities. Catalonia's strong economy has led to the region contributing more to the Spanish budget than it directly sees in returns through public services and investment. Nationalists have used this economic argument to claim that an independent Catalonia would be able to invest money previously sent to Madrid into Catalan communities.

Catalan nationalism holds EU membership in high regard and fully supports integration. This holds firm with Catalonia's history of being supportive of integration. In 1982, Catalonia opened its first representative office in Brussels, four years before Spain became an EEC member, and in the 1990s was a vocal advocate of a "Europe of Regions" model for the European project and wanted to see more powers granted to the Council of Regions (Öner, 2019).

Integration has helped Catalan secessionists avoid being seen as insular and, given that continued EU membership is granted, has weakened economic arguments against secession. This has allowed independence to become more popular than it likely would be if the EU did not exist.

7. CASE REVIEW: FLANDERS

Led by two right-wing political parties, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Flemish Importance (VB), Flemish nationalism has brought the idea of an independent Flanders onto the mainstream political stage. Envisioning a gradual defederalization of Belgium resulting in an independent Flemish state, Flemish nationalists believe that the federal Belgian state and its extremely fractured political spectrum is ineffective, and that there is no true unified Belgian national identity (N-VA, n.d.). Flemish separatists tend not to hold a strong European identity, if any at all, but do support many core elements of European integration such as the Euro, single market, and common foreign and defence policy, calling it a "euro-realist stance" (Cerulus, 2014).

Fueled by holding a different national identity, speaking a different language than the other Belgian region (Wallonia), being a donor region, and the belief that the Belgian central government is ineffective, the separatist movement advances its mission by regularly pushing for more federal powers to be devolved instead of calling for an independence referendum. Flanders enjoys a strong economy boosted by foreign investment and hosting the headquarters for several EU agencies and institutions. Belgium's southern region of French-speaking Wallonia was once an industrial powerhouse, but now has a struggling economy with relatively high unemployment rates. As a result, tax revenue generated in Flanders is used to supplement the underperformance of Wallonia's economic output (Drozdiak, 2016).

European integration's establishment of an environment that is peaceful and stable for small states has allowed for Flemish independence to become a credible, viable option. EU membership is not a main point of discussion in the Flemish independence debate, which is

focused almost entirely on domestic issues, but its impacts have allowed for the viability and possibility of such a small would-be state to be taken seriously.

8. CASE COMPARISON

The three cases detailed above were selected for both their diversity and their strength—the three arguably being the strongest secessionist movements in Europe. The three cases mainly differ in how and by whom they are led as well as how they are pursuing independence. Scotland's secessionists are mainly led by a single political party while Catalan and Flemish secessionists are led by two political parties. In Scotland and Flanders, secessionists are mainly unified politically either on the left or the right, however Catalan nationalists are politically divided between the center-right and the center-left/left. In regard to the path to independence, both Scotland and Catalonia's devolved administrations want to hold referendums. Scotland's government has ruled out, at least for now, any chance of holding a referendum not legally recognized by the UK government, while the Catalan government, facing a Spanish government that refuses to grant a recognized referendum, has held a unilateral referendum and has signaled a willingness to do so again if the Spanish government continues to stick to its hardline unionist stance. Flanders' regional government has not pushed for a referendum and instead has opted to advocate for a gradual process of transferring powers to the region with this process eventually resulting in independence once all powers have been defederalized.

Despite these differences, the three secessionist movements are helped by European integration in nearly the same ways, primarily by allowing small states to be viable and prosperous, and by creating an overarching European identity that allows secessionists to be seen as more outward-looking and forward-thinking.

9. CONCLUSION

Secessionism and European integration, two political projects that seemingly run contrary to each other, in practice go together hand-in-hand. Unlike many other issue areas, European integration's effect on secessionist movements is not fully known due in part to a lack of substantial academic research into the topic as well as uncertainty over how the EU institutions and member states would act in response to a case of secession. However, from what can be observed, it appears that while integration has not yet led to any new independent states, it has created an environment that has allowed secessionist movements to build considerable strength. While only time will reveal whether these secessionist movements achieve their goals of creating new states, current observations should send a stark warning to capitols across Europe and cause central governments to be observant and responsive to potential secessionist movements.

Moving forward, further academic research needs to be conducted to come to a more complete understanding of the impacts of integration on separatism. Researchers should conduct extensive data collection in the form of on the ground interviews and surveys in areas with strong independence movements as well as in regions with small movements still relatively on the political fringe. Further research should work to target the influence of European integration on views surrounding independence and how important it is to citizens. Through rigorous academic study, a full picture of integration's impact on secessionist movements can be developed. A wave of successful secessionist movements would have the potential to drastically reshape Europe; it is therefore imperative that we understand these movements better before they become more prevalent.

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