

The 'domino effect' from Scotland's referendum is increasing demands for independence in Italian regions

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While the independence movements in Scotland and Catalonia have received substantial attention, other countries across Europe are also facing demands from regions for greater autonomy or secession.

Eve Hepburn writes on three such movements in Italy: in South Tyrol, Veneto and Sardinia. She argues that the result of the Scottish referendum is likely to shape the immediate future of these regions, with regionalist parties either calling for official independence referendums or greater devolution of powers.



Something peculiar is happening in Italy. A country that was reluctantly soldered together by the efforts of Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi in the late nineteenth century looks like it's beginning to come apart at the seams. And I'm not just talking about Italy's struggles with political corruption, organised crime, economic malaise, institutionalised gender inequality and social inequality. Though that does have something to do with it. No, I'm talking about the increasingly restive regions of Italy getting tired of being stuck on board the Italian mothership. From Veneto and South Tyrol in the north to Sicily and Sardinia in the south, Italy's regions want full autonomy and constitutional change. And they want it now.

Little of this will come as any surprise to anyone familiar with Italian politics. The grievances and demands of regionalist and nationalist movements have long been a part of the political scene in Italy. However, something has changed in their discourse in the last couple of years, and with it, so have their demands. No longer content with trying to seek reform 'from within', for instance by creating stronger forms of regional governance in the semi-federal Italian state, many regionalist parties have now abandoned those plans altogether in favour of outright secession.

'Why now?' you might ask. Well, that's a good question. Ten years ago I would have told you that it might have something to do with European integration. Italian regionalist parties – like so many across Europe – had their hopes of a post-sovereign political order dashed with the failure to create a 'Europe of the Regions' in the early 2000s. Some turned against Europe. Others radicalised their demands, realising that independence – and not some nebulous form of regional autonomy in Europe – was the only way to get what they wanted: real self-determination.

But if you asked me today, I would say it had something to do with inspiration from foreign shores, or in more social scientific language, 'policy transfer'. Italian regionalist parties have been watching with fascination the independence debates unfolding in Scotland and Catalonia, and they are wondering why they can't implement the same model at home. Certainly, there are some challenges for direct policy transfer: there's the small issue that any referendum on independence would be illegal under Italian constitutional law. But when has that ever stopped anyone?



Venice, Credit: MorBCN (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Indeed, in the last year, three regions in Italy have held their own 'unofficial' referendums on independence, inspired by their Scottish and Catalan counterparts.

South Tyrol

South Tyrol went first, holding an online referendum on secession from Italy and annexation to Austria last year. This may sound a little strange to those unacquainted with South Tyrol politics, so let me explain: Südtirol is a northern Alpine province in Italy which used to be part of the Austrian empire and was annexed to Italy after the First World War. Despite Mussolini's attempts at *Italianisation*, the majority of the population remains German-speaking and claims an Austrian/Bavarian heritage.

The South Tyrol question has been the source of bitter rivalry between Austria and Italy, but an agreement was reached in the 1970s when the region was given considerable self-rule and it has since been governed by the pro-autonomy hegemonic [Südtiroler Volkspartei](#) (SVP). However, in the last few years, calls for secession have been on the rise and a new party, [Süd-Tiroler Freiheit](#), organised a referendum in October 2013 on the reunification of South Tyrol with Austria. Of the 61,000 people who voted (out of a total electorate of 400,000), the result was a clear endorsement of secession from Italy: 92 per cent voted in favour. In response, the Austrian Prime Minister, blushing, had to deny any move to annex the territory, and the ruling SVP has said it is firmly in favour of maintaining its ties with Italy. Despite this, Süd-Tiroler Freiheit has subsequently done well in provincial elections and separatism appears to be gaining traction in South Tyrol, especially for young people. This may mean that we see more demands for independence in the future.

Veneto

Turning to another northern territory in Italy, Veneto has also been making moves towards independence this year, holding an online referendum on secession in March 2014. Veneto, like South Tyrol, is one of the wealthiest regions in Italy and it has its own dialect, culture and history of previous statehood. When the post-war constitution of Italy was created in 1948, many Venetians were frustrated not to have been given an autonomous special statute and a regionalist movement – the [Liga Veneta](#) (Veneto League) – emerged in the 1970s demanding self-determination.

The Liga, which is now part of the [Northern League](#) political group, has recently gained momentum and is the largest party in the regional government. In March 2014, the President of the Region, Luca Zaia, gave support to an unofficial referendum on independence for Veneto, in which 89 per cent of participants voted yes. Although the poll has been strongly criticised as illegitimate (as many Latin Americans of Venetian descent were found to have voted), subsequent polls carried out by researchers found that a majority of Venetians – about 55 per cent – did want independence. With President Zaia's support, the regional council approved two bills in June 2014: one on increased autonomy for Veneto in the form of a special statute, and a second passing legislation on an independence referendum – which will be held in due course.

Sardinia

While the demands for independence made by political actors in South Tyrol and Veneto were made on economic grounds (to stop sending their hard-earned cash to 'corrupt' officials in Rome) as much as identity concerns, the situation is quite different in another Italian region. Lying 200km off the Italian coast, the island of Sardinia is one of the poorest regions in Europe. Sardinia had a history of semi-independence through its position in the Kingdom of Sardinia, and the island was granted special status in the Italian constitution of 1948.

This was largely due to the formidable inter-war nationalist movement, which won 36 per cent of the vote in Sardinian elections in 1919. The [Partito Sardo d'Azione](#) (Psd'Az) demanded self-determination within a federal Italian state and the recognition of Sardinia's distinctiveness. But although the Psd'Az was a catalyst for recognition of Sardinia's *specialità*, its electoral fortunes have waned and other parties in Sardinia have taken up the banner. In particular, three new nationalist parties that seek independence – the [Partito dei Sardi](#), [Rossomori](#) and

[Indipendentzia Republica de Sardigna](#) (iRS) – are currently in coalition government in Sardinia with the centre-left, and are trying to re-write Sardinia's special statute (constitutional law) to give it more powers.

Moreover, several days after the Veneto plebiscite in March, the Psd'Az declared that it was going to hold its own referendum on independence – having now moved to supporting secession. The Psd'Az also pledged to bring another motion to the regional assembly calling for an official referendum on independence. The Psd'Az had already tried this before in 2012, when the motion had failed by one vote. Next time, however, given the popularity of independence referendums in Scotland, Catalonia and Veneto, we may expect to see a plebiscite on independence approved in Sardinia too.

The 'domino effect' on Italian independence movements

What these three independence-seeking movements clearly have in common is their growing confidence in holding a plebiscite on independence in light of the growing success of such movements elsewhere. The Sardinian nationalists have made numerous references to Scotland in their discourse and demands for independence, and some parties – such as Partito dei Sardi – have been forging ties with the Scottish National Party. In Veneto, the cross-party organisation 'Veneto decides' – which includes the Liga Veneta and other independence-seeking parties – make multiple references to Scotland and Catalonia as the two 'most important nascent republics' in Europe other than Veneto. In South Tyrol, the regional media and independence-seeking parties make frequent references to the referendums in Scotland and Veneto. And across Italy, the national media has focused on the Scottish and Catalan referendums in terms of their potential impact on regionalist fervour in Italy.

This is a salient issue. For it is undeniable that the referendums in Scotland and Catalonia are raising the question of what this means for Italy. So what might happen in the case of a 'yes' result in Scotland on 18 September? Well, SNP success in winning independence for Scotland will likely give strength to independence-seeking movements elsewhere. In particular, it may encourage some of the more 'moderate' regionalist and nationalist parties seeking forms of devolution and autonomy within the state to radicalise their demands in favour of secession. A 'yes' result in Scotland may also give succour to those in Italy who oppose the constitutional stipulation that Italy is indivisible and secession is illegal. Instead, a peaceful negotiation of Scotland's exit from the UK may give legitimacy to consultative referenda on independence in Italy (and elsewhere – including Spain).

And what might the effect be in the event of a 'no' vote? It is very likely that this will strengthen the arguments of anti-independence actors in Italy, who may similarly articulate that regions are 'better together' within the larger Italian state, especially in times of economic recession.

However, a 'no' vote in Scotland may not herald the end of constitutional change, either in Scotland or elsewhere. The pro-UK parties – Labour, Lib Dems and Conservatives alike – have all promised to grant the Scottish Parliament further constitutional powers in the event of a 'no' result. If they play their cards right, independence-seeking parties in Italy may use this fact to put pressure on the national government to do the same for Veneto, Sardinia and South Tyrol. In particular, it will likely give strength to demands to create a special statute of autonomy for Veneto, and to increase the powers of the Sardinian and South Tyrol devolved institutions. Whatever the outcome of the Scottish vote, therefore, the end result is very likely to be constitutional change – be it independence or devo-max – not only for Scotland but for stateless nations and regions seeking stronger forms of self-determination elsewhere.

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