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Dreams of Secession – the case of Sardinia
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*Theodora Vasilopoulou, a journalist at the Greek newspaper Kathimerini, asked LSEE's **Dr James Ker-Lindsay** if the Canton Marittimo initiative has any chance of success – could Sardinia become the 27th canton of Switzerland? As debates on the parallels between Kosovo and Crimea continue unabated, Dr Ker-Lindsay discusses the history of contested states and the prerequisites for secession and political autonomy of a given territory.*

What are the necessary steps for an island, a region, a town, etc. according to the international law to become independent? Are there significant differences between regions of Europe and non-European ones?

The first and most important step is to get the agreement of the parent state – as the territory from which the area is breaking away is known. Without that, any attempt at secession is almost certain to fail. *Countries really do not like to undermine the principle of the territorial integrity of states except under the most extreme conditions*. **Kosovo** is the only case in the past twenty years where a territory has achieved statehood without permission. And even now, while it is recognised by more than a hundred states, it is still not a member of the United Nations. However, where there is consent, the process of gaining international acceptance can be very swift. For example, **South Sudan** was a member of the UN within a week of declaring independence in 2012. Likewise, if **Scotland** votes

A Sardinian "Nuraghe" – From www.flickr.com/photos/aoa-/

for independence this September, I do not envisage that it will face too much of a problem joining the international community. However, such permission is very rarely given. Few countries, even ones that are considered to be fully functioning democracies, are willing to accept the loss of territory. The UK and Canada, which has allowed **Québec** to vote on independence, are very much the exceptions. One need only consider the strong resistance Spain is putting up to **Catalonia**'s efforts to hold a referendum on independence.

Let us take for example the initiative of Canton Marittimo in Sardinia – apart from its independence, it wants the island to become Swiss as well. Would it be possible for the island to succeed in its goal and what would be the prerequisites? What are the greatest obstacles that Sardinia would need to overcome?

Again, the first and most important hurdle to overcome would be Italy's resistance to the idea. Like many other European states, Italy in fact faces several separatist challenges. For example, in the past few weeks citizens in and around **Venice** voted overwhelmingly to secede from Italy (however, I think few believe that this will go anywhere). Another perhaps more realistic challenge is **South Tyrol**, the largely German-speaking area on the border with Austria. Like many other countries, Italy no doubt believes that if one part goes, others will follow.

But even if Italy were to accept Sardinia's secession, would Switzerland be willing to accept it? I cannot imagine that it would, for a variety of reasons.

Given the fact that Sardinia belongs to a European country and wants to become part of Switzerland which is outside the EU and the Eurozone, would the whole procedure be much more difficult? Does the EU have the right to impose some restrictions or even sanctions in such a case?

I don't think there would be any major problems if Sardinia wanted to leave the EU. As long as it was a democratic decision of the people of Sardinia, I think that the EU would be willing to accept it. It can hardly force countries or territories to remain within the Union. That would be an affront to its very core values. Moreover, it is worth remembering that territories have left the EU before. Although it happened in a rather different era of the EU, both **Algeria** (as part of France) and **Greenland** (as part of Denmark) were both within the EEC and then left. Therefore, it can happen. However, this is not to say that it would necessarily be a straightforward process. If Sardinia then joined Switzerland, this would open up another set of questions. Most importantly, how would the terms of Switzerland's relationship with the EU be applied to Sardinia? There would be a lot of issues that would need to be tackled, such as trading rights and freedom of movement. This might not be as straightforward a

process as some might think. To this extent, in terms of the EU element of the scenario, breaking away from Italy might be a far easier process than then joining Switzerland.

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Do you see any similarities between the case of Sardinia and the one of Scotland, Catalonia or Crimea? For example, if Scotland can become independent why not Sardinia as well? Is the history of each place such a strong factor which determines the outcome?

Although there are differences between each of the cases, I believe that the essential principle at stake is the same. Do people have the right to determine their own political affairs? And should democratic states respect the rights of a defined portion of their state to express, through democratic means, their wishes? I am increasingly of the view that they do and they should. However, one also needs to accept that this right cannot be applied in all cases. There are examples where the right of self-determination of one group would directly challenge the rights of another group. For example, in many parts of the world lots of ethnic groups live in close proximity to one another and cannot be neatly divided into separate states. In other cases, the territory of the proposed state would simply not be viable. The question is therefore where do you draw the line? *My own view is that where there is a defined community with a historic identity that is tied to a territory with a defined boundary, where this community also has the means to effectively govern itself as a state, it should have a right to self-determination.* This quite clearly applies to Scotland. I believe it also applies to Catalonia. It also applies to many other parts of Europe.

Are there any similar initiatives that have been successful and did they last?

Very few states have been successful without parental support. The only one during the Cold War was **Bangladesh**, which broke away from Pakistan – although it was eventually recognised by Pakistan and joined the UN. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been many territories that have declared independence and have existed without widespread, or any, recognition – let alone UN membership. One can consider the cases of **Abkhazia** and **South Ossetia**, **Nagorno-Karabakh**, the **'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'**. However, in most cases these contested (or de facto) states have had a patron state that has been able to support it, such as Russia or Turkey. Even then, they have remained largely isolated on the world stage. Even **Kosovo**, which declared independence with the support of the United States and most of the European Union, is still trying to gain international acceptance after six years. For example, it cannot take part in major international sporting events. Seceding without the permission is not to be undertaken lightly. Again, states tend to regard it as being in their best interest to guard the principle of territorial integrity. They do not like to recognise violations of the principle against other states in case it is ever used against them.

Why do you believe that as the years go by we see a greater need for independence? What are according to you the most significant reasons behind this phenomenon?

I think that the wish for political autonomy is a fundamental wish of the people. Indeed, this has been widely understood for two hundred years, hence the growth in the number of states in the United Nations (currently 193). The key problem that has faced the international community is how to let this happen without undermining international stability. This has meant that a very high threshold for statehood – namely the consent of the parent state – has been introduced. However, the growth in the number of states after the Cold War, when the **Soviet Union** and **Yugoslavia** collapsed, has nevertheless acted as a spur for others to press for their independence. *I certainly don't think we will see the number of UN members remain at its current level. It seems highly likely that there will be more.* Could we see **Scotland**, **Catalonia**, **Flanders**, **Somaliland** or **Kurdistan** in the UN?

At the same time, in the European context, the European Union has provided a mechanism for small countries to work with one another and have a say in world affairs. A country like Scotland can see states like Luxembourg, Cyprus, Malta and the Baltic Republics, which are all far smaller than it is, operating as independent countries in the EU. This has led many in Scotland to ask why shouldn't they be independent as well?

If you want to find out more about the Canton Marittimo initiative (and can understand Greek), read Theodora Vasilopoulou's article [*'Οι Ιταλοί που θέλουν να γίνουν Ελβετοί' ("The Italians who want to be Swiss")*](#)*, 8 April 2014, Kathimerini.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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