It was to Brussels that Carles Puigdemont chose to flee, when he was faced with prosecution for organising the referendum of 1st October 2017 and the declaration of Catalanian independence.

The choice of the Belgian capital may have been influenced by the warm welcome he was promised by the Flemish separatists of the VVB1 and the NV-A2. Nevertheless, the presence in Brussels of the figure at the heart of the most serious constitutional crisis that any European Union country has seen, is also a challenge for the EU, which has already repeatedly been asked to rule on the Catalan issue. 18 months ahead of the 2019 elections, threatened at its borders by the instability and sometimes even hostility of its neighbours, shaken internally by the progress made by openly Eurosceptic political parties, which in some cases have even been elected to government, the EU now faces a new challenge: the re-awakening of old subnational fissures.

Even as the Catalan crisis was in full swing, inhabitants of the Veneto and Lombardy were voting in a referendum for more autonomy, in a much calmer and perfectly legal way, but with impressive determination. We at the ‘Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l’Europe’ wanted to understand the origins of these movements for self-government, not just in Spain and Italy, but also in Belgium split by the language divide, and in Scotland where separatist ambitions were revived by Brexit. We used electoral data and various studies for this purpose, including an analysis of Eurobarometer surveys. The four analyses that follow show that these four conflicts are caused by similar factors: the weight of history; the relationship with the national State and its borders by the instability and sometimes even hostility of its neighbours, shaken internally by the progress made by openly Eurosceptic political parties, which in some cases have even been elected to government, the EU now faces a new challenge: the re-awakening of old subnational fissures.

The question of Europe is always secondary, as these fracture lines date back to well before the Treaty of Rome. Nonetheless, it would be easy to assume that there are two distinct scenarios: northern Italy and Flanders on the one hand, where the ideology of pro-autonomy political parties has included a critical approach to Europe; and Catalonia and Scotland on the other, where the European Union could be seen as a remedy and an alternative to the national State. The table on page 12 shows that this is not the case at all. On the contrary, an analysis of the degree of attachment to the different entities is quite surprising.

Catalonia is the only region where the issue of attachment to the country clearly divides the population, for reasons analysed by Vicente Castellanos. Flanders is strongly attached to Belgium and northern Italy is very strongly attached to Italy, to the same extent as elsewhere in the country. As Pierangelo Ismeia and Davide Angelucci explain, the desire for self-government in Lombardy and the Veneto is more a matter of their relationship with the rest of the country – with the south of the country to be precise – than of hostility to the national State, with which they continue to identify.

A comparable phenomenon regarding the relationship with the rest of the country is apparent in Flanders; however, Jan Drijvers shows that pro-autonomy parties have renewed their agenda by placing greater emphasis on anti-European rhetoric, without having any impact on the Flemish population’s attachment to Europe.

Like Catalonia, Scotland is a particular case: Christopher Hanley’s analysis shows that although Scotland voted decisively against Brexit, the driver for this was the fear of the consequences of leaving the EU, rather than a stronger attachment to Europe. In Scotland – the only one of the four areas studied that is less prosperous than the national State as a whole – only a minority of citizens believe that the future would be better outside the European Union, in contrast to the majority opinion in the United Kingdom overall. But this does not imply a stronger attachment to Europe, compared either with the rest of the United Kingdom or with the other areas studied here.

Although the European Union is not at the heart of these subnational tensions, they remain a challenge for Europe. The historical foundation of these fissures, the belief held in these areas that they are deprived to the benefit of other regions, and the search for protection and solutions in a local identity, are mechanisms that run counter to a European project that seeks to overcome historical wounds and create an area of solidarity and a supranational identity. However, if demands for autonomy provide an opportunity to invent a system of subsidiarity in which responsibilities are assigned to their proper level, and if this makes it possible to improve citizens’ trust in the institutions and the transparency of their mechanisms, these needs could still be compatible with the ambitions and values of the European Union. If Europe has a role to play in these issues, it must be in helping to ensure that this can be so.

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We’d be happy to talk further about the research discussed in this paper. Please contact:

Emmanuel Rivière
CEO Kantar Public France & Chairman of
the Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l’Europe
emmanuel.riviere@kantarpublis.com

1 Vlaamse Volksbeweging - Flemish People’s Movement
2 Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie - New Flemish alliance

Ancient Fault Lines
Sub-National Tensions Within Its Member States: A New Challenge for Europe
Catalonia, Scotland, Northern Italy (Lombardy & Veneto) and Flanders

A Thought Piece by the Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l’Europe - April 2018
ANCIENT FAULT LINES

Jordi Pujol, structured Catalan’s autonomy in the 80’s by embodying the singular Catalan idiosyncrasy with its language and culture, and through the re-establishment of Catalonia’s institutions within this new constitutional framework.

The national democratic bipartisan rules that are foreseen in the Spanish Electoral Law, very frequently led to alternating majorities of PSOE\(^2\) and PP\(^3\) and provided larger nationalist parties (PNV\(^4\), and CiU\(^5\)) with a pivotal role. Stability, modernity and the economic growth of Spain, and in particular Catalonia, were showcased internationally at the Olympics of 1992. Staging the Olympics, Barcelona was showcased to the world. This further propelled its development as a world tourist destination.

In the modern day political realm\(^5\), with four nationwide political forces (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos\(^6\) and Podemos\(^7\)), the weight of nationalist parties has severely diminished. Additionally, cases of corruption affecting prominent Catalan leaders of CiU (J. Pujol), led to the breakup of this party in 2015, leaving the nationalist-Christian-democratic voter out in the cold, at the mercy of independence forces or the unconventional left.

A growing aspiration for independence in the last ten years

A new statute of Autonomy of Catalonia was voted on and approved by the Catalans in 2006. However, at the request of the PP\(^8\), the Constitutional Court declared 14 of its main articles unconstitutional and dictated the interpretation for 27 more - those reflecting new nationalist proposals.

Spain’s territorial identity was formed during the Reconquest, and on two pillars, the Crowns of Castille and Aragón; the latter being the result of the dynastic union between the Kingdom of Aragón, the Earldom of Barcelona and their associated territories. With the marriage of the Catholic Monarchs in 1469, the process of convergence with the Crown of Castille began, forming the basis for what would later become the Crown of Spain, although the various kingdoms would retain their previous legal systems and privileges.

These specific territorial privileges were defended against the demands for financing the Kingdom with an increasing need for soldiers and resources (the Reapers’ War, 1640-1652). However, after the war of succession to the crown, Felipe V of the Bourbon dynasty eliminated most of these privileges and rights, resulting in significant protests among the supporters of the heir to the Austrian house (Hapsburg).

The story of Catalan sovereignty draws on these historical roots. It is an aspiration that at various historical times has peaked or waivered depending on how well its proposals fit with the national state as a whole. For example, during the first Spanish Republic (1873-1874), the Catalan nationalist party was first formed to restore some of its principal institutions.

More recently, in the first democratic elections of the recent period, in 1977, “moderate Catalanism” aligned to the political structures of the Spanish State and, together with the main political forces of the time, both right and left, participated in producing the Constitution. The Constitution was supported by the majority of Spanish people, and in Catalonia the level of support exceeded the average for the country as a whole. However, Basque nationalism did not join in this agreement.

At the inception of this new democratic era, a Statute was accordingly agreed for the autonomy of the communities that were considered to be historical, among them Catalonia, Basque Country and Navarre, thereby creating a similar system of decentralisation for all the Autonomous Communities of Spain in a movement called “café para todos” (Coffee for all), making Spain one of the most decentralised countries in the world. However, some differing aspects were acknowledged in the historical territories, notably in the case of the fiscal system of the Basque Country and Navarre.

In 1980, the first autonomous elections in Catalonia saw victory for liberal and moderate Catholic Catalanism, opening up a stage of stable political coexistence of Catalan nationalism with the central government. CiU\(^1\) led by

A long history

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\(^{1}\) Convergencia i Unió – Convergence and Union
\(^{2}\) Partido Socialista Obrero Español - Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party
\(^{3}\) Partido Popular - People’s Party
\(^{4}\) Partido Nacionalista Vasco - Basque Nationalist Party
\(^{5}\) J.V. Castellanos and V. Sobrino, in L’Etat de L’Opinion 2016, Le Seuil
\(^{6}\) Ciudadanos - The citizens
\(^{7}\) Podemos - We can
\(^{8}\) Partido Popular
This new statute was initially raised to increase autonomy with the hope of going further; it considered Catalonia as a nation and was intended to provide for autonomous taxation, its own judicial system and foreign representation. In 2010, the decision of the Constitutional Court on the statute of autonomy of Catalonia was published. This moment marked the take-off in Catalan public support for independence.

The failure to pass a new statute frustrated many Catalans. In spite of the fact that the majority of Catalans had never supported a full “independent state”, as promoted by Catalan parties (JxSi⁹, ERC¹⁰), certain segments of Catalan society started to ‘disconnect’ from the Spanish State. This trend, encouraged by the Catalanist parties, sparked an ideological transition towards pro-independence nationalism. This was further fuelled by the economic crisis, which resulted in social inequalities and a climate of frustration and stagnation among the young.

Following this, the aspirations for the “right to decide” surged, focusing on the non-binding referendum of 2014, the most crucial time for the pro-independence movement. The referendum served to consolidate a social movement institutionally promoted in the shape of citizen platforms (Asociación Nacional Catalana, Omnium Cultural…) with a triple crusade: that of a people rediscovering its history, an ever more unequal society in search of compensation for the effect the economic crisis with a liberal solution, and young people seeking a role in society.

Hundreds of thousands of people proclaimed the right to decide in the streets. Heading the Spanish State, the PP Government was fundamentally opposed to it and left the response in the hands of the law when the case arose. The elections of 2015, held in the manner of a “plebiscite” led to the creation of JxSi, a Catalan political alliance regrouping all pro-independence forces. From then until October 2017, the actions of the Generalitat Government, in accordance with its electoral commitments, strengthened its independence commitment, which led to the President’s unilateral declaration of independence to the Parliament of Catalonia on 10 October of that same year.

Since then Catalan society has remained ‘marked and divided’ by the political tensions of two opposing forces – independence seekers and constitutionalists - in a permanent showdown between democracy and the law which caused a great division at social level. King Felipe VI lent his support to the Government of Mariano Rajoy who, with the necessary support in Parliament, proceeded to invoke article 155 of the Spanish Constitution for the first time in history. Catalan autonomy was suspended and the Central Government took over its management.

Following the events of October, Catalonia and Spain will never be the same again, at a political, social or economic level. Political leaders are promising change in the territorial organisation of Spain, but are far from facilitating an open civil debate. The political debate confronts, divides and severs many families and friends who in many cases have banished their differences in family and friendship, but are far from facilitating an open civil debate.

The electoral process has triggered a constitutional crisis in Spain and social and political crisis in Catalonia, with serious consequences for the legitimisation of the autonomous government and coexistence of the two factions of Catalan society: the well-established independence seekers and the constitutionalists, more recently mobilised through events such as demonstrations initiated by the Catalan Civil Society.

Evolution the opinion of Catalans on the future of Catalonia (%)

More critics towards Spain than towards the EU

Catalonia secessionist movements do not propose to leave the European Union and show a greater attachment and confidence in its democratic operation than in the central State. According to Eurobarometer data, less than half of Catalans feel very or fairly attached to Spain (46%), fewer than those who say they feel attached to the European Union (52%, very or fairly attached).

In the rest of Spain, although the percentage of those saying they feel very or fairly attached to the European Union is the same, the feeling of national attachment is much greater (92%). According to the same data, Catalans are more likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU (44% of answers “very” or “fairly” satisfied), while only 30% of Catalans say the same about the way democracy works in Spain.

The result of the last elections brings us back in some way to square one: the critical situation of the 2015 elections. The electoral campaign moved on the axis of independence vs. constitution, overshadowing the vote on the ideological axis (left vs right). This effect led to lower participation among non-independence leftists and favoured the tactical centre-right vote – Ciudadanos, whose support reached an all-time high after an impeccable campaign.

The independence bloc performed very well. Overall, these elections were marked by a historic participation of 82%.

The consequence of the elections points to a new form of blocking, which will make Catalonia and even Spain more ungovernable, through lack of consensus among the main national parties (PP, Cs, PSOE and Podemos), which will most probably result in early general (and plebiscite) elections, to create a new framework of coexistence. In this new political context, a number of outstanding matters needs to be addressed: an electoral law that currently over-represents less populated provinces and rural areas (where the independenceists hold a majority of seats without a majority of the vote); a new referendum law which would help improve the democratic participation of citizens; the democratisation of the judicial system which would help restore the classic equilibrium between State powers.

Democracy, civil society participation, and regional solidarity are central in the debate on the sovereignty of European nation states. All are topics that Catalans, Spanish, Belgians, Scots, Poles, Italians, etc. would probably discuss more easily at European level than at national level, where they might appear threatening to the national unity.

UNITED KINGDOM – SCOTLAND
SCOTTISH SEPARATISM

It’s complicated

The Catalan Government’s decision to declare independence after holding an unofficial referendum on 27th October 2017 has underscored the importance of regional divisions in some EU Member States. Occurring only three years before this, the referendum on Scottish independence (‘Indyref’) took us close to a historic break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Scotland’s relationship with the rest of the UK is a matter that dates back to the Early Middle Ages – a power struggle that has swung between independence, reunification, home rule, devolution, more devolution and, most recently, the referendum on Scottish independence. It’s complicated.

The latest independence movement was propelled by many factors. But, at its roots was the desire to bring decision-making powers closer to Scottish citizens. Westminster has long been considered a parliament for ‘others’ - one that does not properly represent Scottish interests. However, the tone of the political dialogue has shifted post-Brexit. The Scottish National Party (SNP) maintains that the decision to leave the EU is not representative of Scotland’s views - Scotland voted 62:38 in favour of remain. This has provided Nicola Sturgeon with a platform on which to campaign for ‘Indyref2’ (a second independence referendum).
An analysis of Eurobarometer survey data reveals clues about how the UK came to find itself in this position and reveals major fault lines in British society. It also sheds light on the implications for the EU as it faces independence movements elsewhere within its territory.

A disunited Kingdom

Scotland’s relationship with the rest of the UK is a long one. However, some of the most significant changes in this relationship have occurred in the last 50 years. The devolution process can be traced back to 1969, when the Labour party set up a Royal Commission on the constitution. Five years later, the Commission came back recommending the creation of a devolved Scottish Assembly. In 1979, a first referendum was held on the matter but with a restrictive amendment made by a divided Labour party. This required at least 40% of the entire electorate to vote in favour of Scottish Assembly. For this reason, the referendum was unsuccessful: despite a vote in favour of devolution, only 32% of the total electorate supported the move.

Following the referendum’s failure, the Thatcher-led Tory Government was keen to sweep the issue under the carpet. Any proposition to devolve power to Scotland was met with strong resistance. It was another 17 years before Labour returned to power, with Tony Blair vowing to create a devolved Scottish Assembly. The referendum at the end of 1997 was successful, leading to the creation of the Scottish Assembly as we know it now.

Over this time, the Scottish National Party (SNP) took advantage of their pro-independence stance; their support strengthening as devolution became a reality. A vote for the SNP shifted from being a vote for a cause, to a vote that could really make a difference – a vote for a Member of the Scottish Parliament.

The fight for Caledonia

The first election for the Scottish Parliament was in 1999, resulting in a Labour-Liberal government, coinciding with a strong Labour showing south of the border. As Labour’s popularity began to wane in Scotland and the rest of the UK, the SNP seized their chance, achieving a minority-led government in 2007 under Alex Salmond. For the first time, a referendum on full Scottish Independence was firmly on the table, becoming an integral part of the SNP’s manifesto in 2011. Ultimately, despite holding a majority in the Scottish Assembly, the SNP were unsuccessful in achieving their aim, losing the 2014 referendum by a margin of 45:55.

Political life following the referendum on Scottish independence took an unexpected turn – despite their failure, the SNP emerged stronger than ever – seeing their support surge, taking 56 seats in the 2015 UK general election compared with just six in 2010. They also maintained stable support in the Scottish Parliament. This movement was spearheaded by a new SNP leader - Nicola Sturgeon - who performed remarkably well in the leadership debates, and tipped the scales in SNP’s favour in almost all Scottish constituencies.

Spanner in the works

Brexit threw another spanner in the works of the British government. The UK, as a whole, voted to leave the European Union by 52:48, while Scotland voted to remain by 62:38 - a difference of more than 600,000 votes in favour of remain in Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon immediately jumped on the result and used it to argue for a second referendum on Scottish Independence. However, this has been met with strong resistance from Theresa May’s government. Since the October SNP conference, Sturgeon has softened her stance, suggesting Scotland should wait until we see what Brexit will look like. However, as our analysis of data from the Eurobarometer and other sources will show, basing a case for a second referendum on the strength of ‘Scottish Europeanism’ may not be the best approach for the SNP.

Disillusioned and disaffected

Various indicators in the latest Eurobarometer studies show that, despite another Indyref being off the cards in the short-term, a chasm remains between Scotland and other parts of the UK. The Scottish are generally more pessimistic about the economy – the majority (52%) think it is, on-balance, in bad shape, compared with 45% south of the border. They are also slightly more likely to think the economy will get worse in the coming year.

Further, more than half in Scotland (56%) do not trust the British legal system. This compares with 43% elsewhere in the UK. Scottish residents also have marginally more negative views of Westminster. More generally, Scottish residents tend to be more dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the UK (44%), compared to a third (34%) elsewhere in the UK. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the campaigns and outcomes of the two referendums (Indyref1 and Brexit).

On most indicators, it seems that Scottish residents tend to have more negative perceptions of public life in the UK.

The paradox of Scottish identity

Given the backdrop of Indyref, it would be reasonable to think that people in Scotland are feeling more Scottish these days. However, data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey suggests this is not the case. “Scottish-ism” - the proportion who describe themselves as Scottish not British - has actually been in decline since its peak in 2000 (when 37% described themselves as Scottish not British). In the year of the Scottish

1 http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/morena-national-identity-5#table
It does look like Scottish nationalism may be in decline. However, just because people in Scotland are feeling less Scottish, it does not necessarily mean the window for independence has been closed. Instead, the independence movement might refocus on the distaste for Westminster and UK democracy that is evident in Eurobarometer data (see previous section).

**Europhile or Eurosceptic?**

Despite what we might be told about Scotland and its closer ties with the European project, overall opinions about the EU are similar in Scotland to elsewhere in the UK – they seem equally unhappy (or happy). Around three in ten in both Scotland and the rest of the UK have a negative opinion of the EU – 29% in Scotland and 31% in the rest of the UK. Similarly, if we look at how Brits view the functioning of democracy in the EU, differences in opinion are negligible – 39% are not satisfied with it in Scotland, as are 41% below their border.

When asked whether the UK would better face the future outside the EU, a wider margin appears. In total, 41% in Scotland think the UK would be better off, compared with 48% elsewhere in the UK (a 7-point gap). The small difference is perhaps surprising given the 62:38 pro-remain referendum result in Scotland.

Data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey may shed more light on this, which allows us to track sentiment towards the EU over a longer period. It shows that Euroscepticism not only exists but is ingrained in Scotland. Furthermore, Euroscepticism increased in the run up to and during the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. As shown below, the proportion of people in Scotland wanting to leave the EU more than doubled from 10% in 1999 to 25% in 2016. The proportion wanting to remain but reduce the EU’s powers also grew from 30% to 42% over the same period. These two figures combined suggest that two thirds (67%) of people in Scotland espoused some degree of Euroscepticism in 2016 (up from just 41% in 1999).

**Brexit may actually mean Brexit**

Decision makers within the European project, where unity and solidarity lie at the core, may draw some bitter sweet conclusions about Scotland.

Similar levels of Euroscepticism seem evident in Scotland as elsewhere in the UK. Certainly, Eurobarometer data suggests this and data from the Scottish Social Survey points to an increase in Euroscepticism in Scotland over time. Yet this view is in sharp contrast to starkly different Brexit voting patterns north and south of the border. This being the case, a campaign for Indyref2 centred on retaining EU membership may not be the most effective strategy for the SNP. They may alienate core parts of their support if they ignore the 38% of Scotland that voted for the United Kingdom to leave. The SNP’s position might also be weakened if the UK Government is able to achieve some kind of “soft” Brexit, since this would chime with the 42% of Scottish people who would like to remain in the EU but reduce its powers.

Furthermore, by banking on a Brexit-backed Indyref2, Sturgeon may risk putting all her eggs in the wrong basket: a recent YouGov poll suggests that a considerable share of Scots (47%) would not support another Scottish Independence referendum, even after Brexit. However, at this period in time – less a year since Article 50 was triggered – the true repercussions resulting from Brexit are yet to materialise. There is no telling how opinion could swing once the true effects of Brexit eventually surface. For now, the debate about independence seems to be on the backburner, but depending on the outcome of Brexit, it could quite easily return to the fore.

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2 http://www.ssa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38910/ssa16-2k8m-Indyref-2-Indyr8f-twotwo.pdf
3 https://d25d2506stsp4s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/une1vahgjl/TimesResults_180716_Westminster_Scotland_VI_w.pdf
ITALY – LOMBARDY AND VENETO
IS ITALY STILL THE COUNTRY OF THE MANY BELL-TOWERS?

The Catalan referendum for independence in 2017 and the Brexit referendum of 2016, with their trail of consequences, testify to the rising relevance of national and sub-national identities in fostering political (in)stability in Europe. This is the context in which, on 22 October 2017, two regional consultative referenda were held in the Italian regions of Lombardy and Veneto. Citizens were asked whether they wanted their regional governments to start negotiations with the central government to increase regional autonomy from the central state. The results\(^\text{1}\) were impressive. 38.3% of those eligible to vote turned out in Lombardy and more than a half (57.2%) of the citizens eligible to vote cast their vote in Veneto. In both regions, an overwhelming majority (95.3% in Lombardy and 98.1% in Veneto) voted ‘Yes’, supporting their regional governments in opening up the negotiations with the central government.

Although perfectly legal - the Italian Constitution explicitly allows, under certain conditions, each regional government to open negotiations to increase autonomy from central State authorities\(^\text{2}\) – the consultations had no binding effects and they do not imply any mandatory commitments. However, although the referenda have not produced significant juridical consequences so far, their political value should not be overlooked, for several reasons.

First, the two referenda rekindled the simmering debate on the North-South divide, the Questione settentrionale, and fiscal federalism. The issue is especially relevant since the Great Recession has in fact, further widened the century long gap between Northern and Southern regions. In 2007, the gap in GDP per-capita between North and South was of €14,255 (the average GDP per-capita equal to €32,680 in the North and 18,425 in the South). In 2015 it had increased to €14,905. Similarly, the gap in the employment rate has increased over the same period of time from 20.1 percentage points (in favour of Northern regions over the Southern ones) up to 22.5 percentage points in 2016. Lastly, inequalities have also increased at a different pace, with clear implications for social inclusion and poverty. In 2007, 42.7% of the population in the South was reported to be at risk of poverty compared to 16% of the population in the Northern regions. In 2015, these proportions have increased to 46.4% and 17.4% respectively\(^\text{3}\).

Second, the consultations were held in two regions governed by prominent leaders of the Northern League, the party that has over the last two decades been pushing more than any other for the transformation of the country into a federal State. True, during the most acute phase of the economic crisis, the party widened its perspective, moving its rhetoric from purely regionalist to national. The Northern League has successfully politicized both the European integration process and the migration crisis, shifting the blame for the precarious economic conditions of the country onto the EU and/or immigrants. However, the party has not abandoned its traditional regionalist stances, being responsive to feelings for greater autonomy that are ostensibly still well rooted in civil society (especially in certain regions of the North). And, with a sort of contagion effect, the Northern League has aligned on the regionalist issue, other political parties and leaders, who express a positive orientation towards a greater regional autonomy for Lombardy and Veneto.

How do these developments play out in the country of the many bell-towers? And how do these national and sub-national schisms affect the European project? To contribute to the discussion on these topics, we have considered three questions:

1 Is there a local vs national identity divide in Italy and is this divide distributed differently across the Italian regions and macro-regions?
2 Are there systematic differences between the different areas of the country on issues related to the civic-mindedness and political culture of citizens?
3 What are the main implications, if any, of these differences?

\(^{2}\) art. 116, Chapter V
Attachment to Nation and Town in Italy over time and across regions

Looking at levels of attachment for different territorial units, according to the last Eurobarometer survey (EB88, autumn 2017), more than 90% of respondents say they are attached to both Italy and to their Village/Town. These results are consistent with a stable, long-term trend over more than a decade, of high attachment to both localities and to the nation. Considerably lower was, in 2017, the proportion of respondents who said they were attached to the EU (45%). This seems to suggest that whereas there is no rift between local and national attachment, more problematic is the attachment towards the EU.

However, these aggregate data might hide a more nuanced picture, as local identities might have a diverse intensity and interact differently with national and European identities in different Italian regions. Our data suggest this is not the case. Comparing the degree of territorial identification in five macro-Regions of Italy (North-East, North-West, Center, South and the Islands), we found that the differences are really minor. Center and Southern regions display a slightly higher level of attachment to both the local and the national territorial entities than the North, either East or West. Again, the only substantial cross-regional gap is related to the attachment to the EU, that is higher in the North-East than in the rest of the country (57% in North-West feel attached to Europe, as compared to 40% in the North-East and in the Center, 41% in the South and 46% in the Islands) (EB88, autumn 2017).

While Italians seem to be firmly attached to both the nation and the town, the picture is different if we turn to the political institutions operating at either level. Italians in general do not trust regional political institutions, with some variations across regions. People in the South (including the Islands) display a higher level of skepticism toward regional political authorities than those living in the North. 33% of the respondents in the North-West trust regional authorities, as compared to 14% in the South and the Islands. People in the North-East and the Center find themselves in-between, with 24% trusting regional authorities. Similarly, 44% and 40% of the respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in Italy in the North-West and the North-East respectively. In the South, this figure is down to 27%. Last, 46% of the respondents in the North-West and 29% in the North-East think that “their voice counts” in Italy. Only 19% agrees with this statement in the South (and 22% in the Islands) (EB 88, autumn 2017).

When one turns to the European level, the picture blurs, revealing not only the persistence of a North-South divide, but also some intra-regional divergences among Northern regions. Overall, the North is more trustful of the EU and more satisfied about the way in which democracy works at the European level as compared to Southern regions. 49% and 32% of respondents in the North-West and the North-East declare to trust the EU, as compared to 27% and 20% in the South and the Islands. Accordingly, 58% and 43% in the North-West and the North-East are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU as compared to a significantly lower proportion in the South and the Islands (29% and 34%). By large and far, the data suggest a North-South gap. However, Northern regions do not constitute a homogenous bloc when it comes to the EU. In the North-West around half of respondents display some forms of trust and satisfaction towards the EU, as compared to the North-East, where the level of trust and satisfaction for European institutions matches the lack of trust in the regional ones (24% of respondents trust regional authorities vs 32% who trust the EU; 40% are satisfied with the way democracy works in Italy and 43% with the way it works in the EU). These results might shed some light on the different results of the two regional referenda in Lombardy and Veneto, with the former more lukewarm toward the referendum as shown by voting turnout. In Lombardy (a North-Western region), the high support for the regional autonomy is coupled with a relatively higher level of trust and satisfaction for the EU. The desire for greater regional autonomy does not work at cross-purpose with the positive orientations towards the European Union. On the contrary, in Veneto (a North-Eastern region), support for more autonomy is related to a higher dissatisfaction towards both national and supranational institutions. In what is possibly an overstretched inferential leap, one might suggest that the North-East is the area in which the Northern League, that combines a critical reading of both the national and supranational authorities with a traditional regionalist posture, might capitalize on its new, and more nationalistic, political strategy.

Nation, community, and mutual perceptions in Italy over time and across regions

It is also interesting to explore how strongly people of different regions feel that they are part of the same political community. Here, some differences do emerge across different areas of Italy. To the questions whether “People have a lot of things in common in Italy,” the latest Eurobarometer survey (EB88, autumn 2017) somewhat counter-intuitively reports that in the South 66% agrees with this statement, while in the North-East, the area where the Northern League has one of its stronghold, the proportion goes up to 80%.

Prejudice and stereotypes

Is Italy a country of two different nations united by a common language? Back in 1994, as part of a wider study to understand the sources of Italian prejudice toward immigrants, Sniderman et al. (2000: 84–89) found that among those living in the North of Italy, there was a remarkable similarity in prejudices toward both immigrants and Southerners, with the former scoring even more favorably than the latter. As an example, in 1994, among Northern Italians, only 35% agreed that Southerners were “law-abiding” and 57% agreed that they were slackers. It is remarkable how stable this level of prejudice has remained over the years. Fifteen years later, in 2011, a LAPS (Laboratorio Analisi Politiche e Sociali, Università di Siena) survey found remarkably similar figures. On this occasion again, the Northerners
considered the Southerners less favorably than immigrants (namely the Moroccans (see table above)). A remarkable 47% of those living in the North thought that those in the South “do not respect the law” while only 30% of them said the same of Moroccans. These negative images are not reciprocated in the South. Only 18% of those living in the South think the Northern Italians are not law abiding, a perception similar to the one of Southerners concerning themselves. On the other hand, the Southerners see the Northerners as less generous than the Northerners see themselves.

The 2011 data broadly confirm the persistence of a North-South divide in their reciprocal perceptions. In particular, a great deal of prejudice seems to undermine the relation between the North and the South, with the former being more prone to qualify the Southerners in a negative way. The identification of Southern people as ‘lazy’ and not ‘law-abiding’, might project the image of Southern regions as essentially unreliable and corrupt, in fact representing a burden for the development of the country. The combination of these perceptions might, if exploited, contribute to foster centrifugal forces and autonomist stances in the North. In other words, the prejudices could play a role in feeding and strengthening arguments (strictly related to a logic of efficiency, especially in economic terms) that support autonomist positions.

No coincidence then that the Northern League has become so popular in the North in recent decades, taking advantage of these widespread stereotypes and depicting Southern regions as a parasite ‘leeching’ resources off the North. In this connection, however, the recent move toward a more “national” message (that has dropped the reference to the North in the party symbol) might be pouring a little oil on the trouble waters of North-South prejudice.

### Most important regional divide: the sense of being part of a shared political community

This analysis confirms some persisting characteristics of Italy but also shows some unexpected results. In fact, there are three elements in the present situation that could lead us to expect a much wider gap between center and periphery to emerge. First, socio-economic differences between North and South are still persistent and the recent economic crisis has widened them even further. Second, the desire for greater autonomy at the regional level is still widespread in civil society, at least in some regions (as witnessed by the consistently high proportion of citizens in Veneto and Lombardy who voted ‘Yes’ in the two regional referenda). Third, there are political parties (the Northern League being not the only one), which might articulate the desires and aspirations for greater autonomy among the general public.

On the contrary, the most recent data and trends show no real divide between local and national sense of attachment in Italy as a whole and across regions. In general, Italians show intense feelings of attachment to local and national entities that are sharply in contrast with the relatively lower level of identification with the European dimension. Also, in each macro-region, we find similar levels of attachment to national (YOUR COUNTRY) and sub-national (YOUR CITY/TOWN/VILLAGE) entities (see table 1): this somehow reinforces the idea that “local” identities are not stronger than the national one.

The most relevant divide is not the rift between Center and periphery; it is not about the sense of identification with the nation (or the locality). Instead, it is about the sense of being part of a shared political community, and it cuts across the North-South divide. The North is slightly more trustful and less cynical than the South when it comes to political issues. But, and most importantly, there is in the North a substantial (and persistent) amount of prejudice toward the South.

### An anti-European strategy electorally rewarding?

In conclusion, Italy seems a country divided not so much along a center-periphery divide – all Italians feel closely attached to both the country and their own localities, irrespective of where they live – but rather along a North-South divide centered on prejudice and stereotypes. Whether this rift is going to be politicized and become a source of political conflict depends on political parties’ strategies and their willingness to seize the issue – something that, probably is not going to happen in the near future for two reasons: on the one hand, the parties across the entire political spectrum have become more responsive to autonomist and federalist stances of civil society, making it a less salient source of fracture in the party system; on the other hand, a new political divide (the one that pits the nation against the EU) has gained saliency in the Italian political system. As a consequence, for those parties (such as the Northern League) with a past record of politicization of regional divides, an anti-European stance could be a more electorally rewarding strategy than the one based on the North-South divide.
In Belgium, the relationship between the different language communities has always been – since the state formed in 1830 – one of the main schisms in the political landscape, alongside the economic battlegrounds (state vs. market) and religious differences (Catholicism vs. secularism). The early Belgian State fought for its independence from the Netherlands and the new ruling elite made French the official language for politics, administration and law.

The Flemish bourgeoisie (particularly in big cities like Brussels, Antwerp and Gent) soon adopted French as their mother tongue to distinguish themselves from the ‘common people’ in rural Flanders, who mainly spoke one of the local Flemish dialects. In the aftermath of World War I, where many Flemish soldiers died because they could not understand the French commands, an emancipatory movement grew, claiming the right of the Flemish people to use ‘Dutch’ language in public life and also in higher education (University of Gent).

After World War II, Belgium underwent a period of major economic and social change. The de-industrialisation of Wallonia – a region that had depended heavily on steel and coal for its wealth – caused major economic and social upheaval; while Flanders and Brussels (with a now dominant French-speaking majority) - reinforced by migration from countries including Italy, Spain and Morocco - ensured the successful reconstruction of the country by investing heavily in a service oriented economy.

As a consequence, the economic and social power shifted in favour of Flanders, which now claims a more dominant role in politics and public affairs. While two thirds of the Walloon population today feel negative about the country’s economic situation (65% in the Standard Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2017, E88), this is the case for only a quarter of the Flemish (27%) and a fifth of the Brussels population (20%).

**Evolution, not revolution**

This shift in power was supported – by all leading Flemish parties – albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. This resulted in a reform agenda. Instead of claiming independence, the political parties across language communities (Flemish, French, and a very small German minority) and the geographic regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) negotiated a State Reform programme, working towards an ever more federalised structure.

In a process which took 50 years, propelled forward by some moments of crisis, an ‘untouchable’ language border was drawn. Language communities and territorial regions were institutionalised, and each region was assigned its own devolved parliaments and governments, which gradually acquired more powers from the federal government. In the latest stage – the Sixth State Reform (2015) – a finance law gave the regions the power to impose their own taxes.

The end result is a country now with six governments and nine parliamentary bodies. The federal government retains exclusive authority only over Law and Order (Justice, Police, Army, Immigration), Foreign Affairs, Social Security and Health, while responsibilities for Trade, Energy, Finances, Economy and the Environment are shared.

Since there is no agreed hierarchy between regional decrees and federal laws, conflicts have to be negotiated between the political parties. On the federal level, an ‘alarm bell’ procedure can be invoked by any community that fears their rights will be endangered by decisions enforced by another language group.

The imperfections of this State reform often result in conflict between the federal and regional governments and limit the trust that Belgians have in their leaders. It is likely that this partially explains why only half the Belgian population claim to trust their national government (47% “tend not to trust” according to the Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2017).

The de-federalisation process in Belgium endowed the different language communities with extensive cultural, educational and economic autonomy, which reflect their different ideological backgrounds (a more ‘market’ oriented Flanders vs. a more ‘state’ oriented Wallonia). This has also led to a societal schism where both communities are bereft of any interest in each other’s culture (e.g. media, literature, music). The fact that...
this process of reform was not only steered by the main ideological families (Christian democrats, liberal, socialist), but also involved the commitment of regional parties (Volksunie (FL), Rassemblement Wallon (RW), FDF- DéFI (Brussels)) took the wind from the sails of more radical voices arguing for independence.

Independence as a political, not a public project

In Wallonia and Brussels there is very little support by the French-speaking community to split up Belgium and create an independent state. If confronted with such a scenario, the community would more likely gravitate towards some form of ‘re-attachment’ to France than create a country of their own. This is mainly due to the fact the ‘Walloon or Franco-Belgian identity’ is almost non-existent. In a political survey conducted by Kantar TNS in January 2017, 37% of the French-speaking population chose ‘Belgian’ as their first identity, while only 7% claimed the identity of their region (Brussels or Wallonia) and only 4% their membership of the French-speaking community – less than those who declared themselves European first (13%). In an earlier opinion poll conducted by Kantar TNS in 2011, 44% of the Flemish population claimed to prefer their Belgian nationality over being ‘Flemish’ (41%) or ‘European’ (13%).

The cry for independence is thus only heard in the Flemish region, but this is the more prosperous part of the country, and also harbours the majority (+/- 60%) of the Belgian population.

So this claim for Flemish independence continues to be a sword of Damocles hanging over the Belgian political landscape, with two parties that are both represented in the Flemish and Belgian parliament having Flemish independence written into their statutes as their ultimate goal – Vlaams Belang and the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA).

Vlaams Belang was first conceived in 1978 when a group of dissidents within the regionalist Volksunie, formed a splinter party out of discontent with the active involvement of the party in the State Reform. The new Vlaams Blok, as it was originally known, would only accept Flemish independence as the outcome. After the party was condemned for racism it changed its name to Vlaams Belang and gained almost 25% of the Flemish votes in the 2004 elections. All other parties blocked Vlaams Belang from entering into power by creating a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around its representatives, effectively turning the party into a lame duck. However, this did not deter Vlaams Belang from continuing with its extreme right agenda, later proclaiming Islam as the prime enemy of Western civilisation.

In 2001, history repeated itself. A new group of politicians founded the N-VA (New Flemish Alliance). After a disastrous start (with only one representative in parliament), and an unsuccessful alliance with the Christian-democrats (CD&V) which failed when the N-VA refused to support the CD&V’s engagement in new talks about State Reform in the 2009 Flemish elections, the autonomous N-VA grew into a mid-size contender, earning 13% of the votes. To raise electoral support, the party – now led by the brilliant strategist Bart De Wever – re-oriented its programme towards a neo-liberal economic and a conservative cultural agenda, with a new focus on safety and national identity. At the same time, De Wever shifted the positioning of the party towards an anti-establishment one with a promise of change. (In the Eurobarometer of autumn 2017, 76% of Belgians claimed to distrust political parties, with this opposition more prominent in Wallonia (89%) than in Flanders (70%). So this positioning resonated well with voters.) This new strategy allowed the N-VA to source a new electorate from both the centre parties as well as frustrated right-wing (Vlaams Belang) voters. In 2010 the party doubled its vote to 28%, taking control of the Flemish government; in 2014, the N-VA became the biggest Belgian party in parliament, supported by 1/3 of Flemish voters.

Between them, these two ‘pro-independence’ parties – N-VA and Vlaams Belang – now represent almost 40% of the Flemish population. However, as shown by a Kantar TNS post-electoral survey (2014), the claim for independence is only supported by 15% of the Flemish electorate (against 19% who expressed the willingness to return to a unified Belgian State). Although N-VA and Vlaams Belang account for 77% of those who favour independence, even within their own party electorate, only a third support independence. It would appear their electorate vote for them more for their radical positions on Islam and immigration and their anti-establishment rhetoric, than for their desire of independence.

Euro-scepticism

In 2014, the N-VA entered the federal government but was forced by its partners to tone down its independence agenda. No surprise, however, that the NV-A overtly supports the Catalan nationalist movement in its struggle for independence. And in its support of the Catalan cause, the N-VA did not spare any criticism of the European institutions. Although in their electoral programme the party expresses high hopes for Europe as an umbrella institution covering the common goals and interests of old and new nation states, the N-VA has started to espouse a more hostile vision. This is not only because they are reluctant to cede responsibilities (for example on asylum and migration) to a higher entity, but also because they joined the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE-ECR) after the 2014 European elections, a Eurosceptic and anti-federalist faction (ECR) in the EP, inspired by the Eurosceptic British Conservatives. Their stance was also bolstered by the European Commission’s stance on the Catalan crisis, siding with the Spanish Federal Government, in its refusal to condemn the violence used by the Spanish government. Despite this, trust in the EU
remains higher in Flanders (58% trust the EU vs 38%) than in Wallonia (41% vs 56%). (This may also be due in part to the recent clash between the Walloon government and the EU over the CETA trade agreement with Canada).

It remains to be seen whether this new-found Eurosceptic approach will create a sustainable platform for the N-VA. The handling by the EU of the refugee crisis (N-VA being in favour of a hostile asylum policy) will throw a lot of weight in the balance. What is clear is that the pro-independence parties today find more support from the Belgian population in their criticism of Europe than in their hostility to the Belgian State. The Eurobarometer reveals that only about half of the Belgians are attached to Europe while 76% of the Flemish and over 90% of the French-speaking are attached to Belgium.

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Source: Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2017 (EB88), for Spain, Belgium and Italy. In the UK, the Eurobarometer surveys of spring (EB87) and autumn 2017 (EB88) were aggregated to ensure having a sufficient basis of individuals in Scotland.