

An Intimate Friendship between Scotland and the European Union?

Written by Arjan Schakel

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ARJAN SCHAKEL, FEB 15 2017

Brexit has reinvigorated the debate about Scottish independence. Without Brexit, the 'no-vote' (55.3%) in the Scottish independence referendum of September 2014 would have silenced propagators for Scottish independence. But now, Scottish nationalists have all the reasons to forcefully voice their claim for independence. The Scottish National Party received a clear victory in both the Holyrood 2016 and Westminster 2015 elections with the promise that a second independence referendum will be held if there is a material change of circumstances, such as the UK leaving the EU. Nationalists clearly think that remaining in the EU is beneficial, but, considering the outcome of the referendum on Scottish independence, the Scottish people also think that remaining in the UK would be economically wise. When push comes to shove, will Scotland prefer the EU over the UK?

This is a question which not only affects Scotland but also other minority nations in Europe such as Catalonia, Flanders, and invented 'Padania' in northern Italy. Interestingly, all these regions find themselves in a political environment which is becoming increasingly Eurosceptic. Does this mean that in the aftermath of a Brexit and possibly Frexit, Itexit, Nexit, and Spexit, we will arrive at a patchwork of territories, some of which are part of the EU but others not?

Not so long ago (in the 1990s) utopian federalists foresaw a Europe of the Regions. In their view, the *finalité* of European integration implied the antiquation of national government and regions would become the natural unit for expressing cultural and territorial divisions within Europe. The EU institutions enjoy working with regions because national governments are often putting their feet on the brake regarding further European integration. Regionalists feel strengthened in their autonomy claims while their national governments will become obsolete when the EU provides for prosperity, solidarity and security. An intimate friendship between regions and EU institutions would develop while national governments would wither away.

A Europe of the Regions was seen to be inevitable when the Maastricht Treaty was concluded. This treaty consolidated the friendship between the EU and its regions. The Committee of the Regions obtained a formal role in the EU institutional fabric, cohesion and structural funds became the second largest item on the EU budget, participation of regions in spending the EU money was secured through the operational programmes of the EU funds, and regions would partake in the implementation of EU legislation because of the subsidiarity principle. However, pundits soon realized that a Europe **of** the Regions would not materialize but a Europe **with** the regions would be feasible and was deemed needed.

Are we moving back towards a Europe of the Regions? Will the friendship between the EU and its regions become more intimate? Probably not. Regionalists, just like other politicians, see the friendship in a rather instrumental way. The friendship remains and intensifies to the extent that this friendship is profitable. Together with colleague Emanuele Massetti from the University of Surrey I have looked at the relationship between European funding and positions on the issue of European integration of regionalist parties. We observe an evident Eurosceptic turn among regionalist parties.

For example, during the 1990s, the Chunta Aragonesista, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, Eusko Alkartasuna,

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Lega Nord, and the Scottish National Party were in favor of further European integration, and some of these parties even supported a federal Europe. Since the early 2000s, all these parties are Eurosceptic. What we find is that the Eurosceptic turn affected most regionalist parties but those parties that participate in elections in regions which obtain more structural funding tend to be less affected. For example, the Partido Andalucista and Plaid Cymru were in favor of a federal Europe in the 1990s and although they became less Europhile in the 2000s they remained supportive of the European integration project. Andalusia and Wales receive more structural funds per capita than other regions in respectively Spain and the United Kingdom. In other words, the EU can buy the support of regions.

The Brexit is a God-given gift for Scottish nationalists. Were it not for Brexit, the no-vote in the Scottish referendum of 2014 would have brought Scottish nationalism in a coma for decades –just like after the failed referendum in 1979. Independence for Scotland is now high up on the agenda and the EU is portrayed as a good thing to have. But most likely, Scottish nationalists will turn their back to the EU once their friend has served its purpose.

About the author:

Arjan H. Schakel is Assistant Professor at Maastricht University. His research interest lies in comparative territorial politics with a particular focus on regional government, regional elections and regional parties. More information about his research can be found on his website.