

From Corsica to Scotland: Autonomy in Europe As The Progressive Alternative

An interview with Roccu Garoby

December 11, 2018

While attention is poured over globalisation and euroscepticism, political disaffection in Europe today is often more fueled by distant and unresponsive politics within the nation state. In regions from Scotland to Catalonia, progressive autonomist movements today represent powerful alternatives to mainstream parties and have checked the far right. We sat down with Roccu Garoby, a Corsican politician from *Régions et Peuples Solidaires*, the regionalist alliance in France, to discuss the place of regions in Europe's future and a new vision of politics beyond Paris, Westminster, or Rome.

Green European Journal: In the past few years, there has been a resurgence in autonomist movements, such as those in Scotland and Catalonia. But we have also seen these sentiments co-opted by the extreme right, as is the case in Italy today. How should we read this situation? Are territorial approaches necessarily identitarian and therefore potentially divisive?

Roccu Garoby: At times of crisis and tension in Europe, there is a regular and legitimate return to nationalist, autonomist or secessionist demands, either for a state or for the emancipation of a people within a region, from Scotland or Catalonia or from minorities in Romania or Greece. As we commemorate the First World War, it is important to see that the drift towards far-right warmongering and tension within nation states was there a century ago. The problem of this nationalist drift and the co-opting of autonomist and emancipatory vocabulary by the extreme right is nothing new.

More recently, at the beginning of the 1990s, around the time the Berlin Wall fell, there was an era of detente in Europe's nation states, with the birth of new states and even ideas such as the Europe of the Regions, notably with Jacques Delors' Committee of the Regions. There was a certain confidence in the fact that the emancipation of regions did not necessarily mean the end of nation states. A space then opened for these autonomist or secessionist parties, with some coming to power, as in Catalonia, Scotland, the Basque Country, Flanders, and elsewhere. Then, around 2008-2010, the financial crisis re-created serious tensions in nation states because Europe no longer had the means to act. The EU left nation states to act and when they acted, they gradually shut dashed all the hopes of peoples seeking emancipation.

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At the same time, nation states are today no longer able to cope with globalisation, the financial crisis, and climate change. Meanwhile, autonomist or secessionist movements, or in any case emancipatory movements, want to create something closer to citizens in a less intergovernmental Europe. We therefore have these three tensions: a desire to bring power closer to citizens, shared by most autonomist and secessionist movements; a tension in states born from a desire to take back political control in world affairs; and a need to build a European Union, because today it is the only relevant political space when it comes to global issues.

These nationalisms are very different historically. What explains the success of the far right and authoritarian populists in adopting these demands that are actually emancipatory, democratic, and are not automatically anti-European?

People are looking for alternatives to traditional parties. In most cases, if there is party in a region that claims the

people's right to self-determination – through autonomy, independence or a change in status – there is a three-party choice between the traditional right, the traditional left and autonomist or secessionist parties. In places where the traditional parties of the nation state do not offer this hope, the far right gains ground.

Today, Christian democracy and social democracy are collapsing in Europe. Which makes sense because they are partly responsible for the current situation. For almost 30 years, they have been unable to move the European project forward in a visionary and coherent way for citizens. In the vacuum left by their failure, something is growing. Either a hope offered by emancipatory political forces – the secessionists, autonomists, or ecologists like in Belgium or Germany – or by Salvini in Italy, Le Pen in France, Brexit, Trump's America. The latter all play on the same sentiment: “the world was better before, we are dispossessed, we are scared of this globalisation that we can't control.”

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The real divide today, in addition to that between left and right, is between those who think that globalisation is happening and must be corrected and those who think that openness is the mother of all evils and that globalisation dispossesses, causes suffering and unravels our very identities. It is here that the forces offering hope must proudly make the case for the idea of European integration. Reining in economic and financial globalisation can only be achieved through strong political power, and today both nation states and regions are too small. There needs to be a movement of power closer to citizens – not necessarily independent states, but entities that are stronger at a regional and local level – and a real capacity to act at European level.

For many progressive and autonomist movements, the EU's intergovernmental model is at the heart of Europe's democratic and institutional problems. How can we live with this and how can we envisage overcoming it?

The goal must always be the abolition of intergovernmentalism. It is the *sine qua non* for the creation of a purely democratic space. Intergovernmentalism is what has been killing Europe for centuries, from the Concert of Europe to the League of Nations. Because it comes down to a raw power play between nations, and everyone loses. But intergovernmentalism won't disappear overnight so we need concrete and viable short-term alternatives.

For this, we need to use existing institutions and means. Regardless of the European Commission's political stripe, it has always wanted to strengthen transnationalism. This has always clashed with the (intergovernmental) European Council but, for example, through the EU's regional policy, has created mechanisms for cross-border regional cooperation. This is the case, for example, in the Mediterranean, in the Atlantic Arc, in the Baltic Sea where things no longer go directly or exclusively through states. The idea is still to move away from a purely statist approach and to say that a border is the result of history but should not be a wall, rather a bridge.

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We must then show that new institutions and statuses, as demanded by the autonomists and secessionists, make a difference. So we must bring together and exercise power and responsibility. We must in practice highlight the advantages and viability of the regional approach. This is centred on the citizen and not the state! For Corsica, for example, its centre is the island and not Paris. For the French state, Corsica is just an island south of the country. Citizens look all around them in 360 degrees, not just towards the capital. When you are a Basque from Bayonne, you might look towards Paris, but also, logically, towards San Sebastian, across the border that the Schengen area has erased from the daily lives of Basques. Recreating links between the Basque countries on either side of the border is already an important step.

Going beyond intergovernmentalism means making subsidiarity a reality and crossing the borders of nation states. What does that mean concretely?

A very concrete example, which should come to pass in 2019 between Corsica, Sardinia, Catalonia and northern Italy (Liguria, Tuscany and Piedmont) – proposed by the Corsican nationalist government – is the air metro between these neighbours. There are no direct connections between these islands and regions. Rather than an unprofitable project strictly linked to one region or another, the idea is to create an air metro with two lines running north-south and east-west. It is European integration, and the European Commission in particular, that makes these concrete initiatives possible. In France, there has been fierce opposition from Paris, which sees in it the emancipation of a region, without leaving the republic but simply because the decision can be made without going through Paris. It's absurd: to fly from Ajaccio to Rome or Bastia to Rome, you have to go via Paris. The same goes for the 14 kilometres that separate Corsica from Sardinia! This simple example illustrates how a region can find its own natural space, its own centre. Because no centre is more important than another, but each region is its own centre. And what's more, it saves thousands of airmiles and their environmental impact.

I think that more generally the main approach in Europe should be one of frameworks that enable new models of development, but these frameworks must offer flexibility to the competent areas – cities, regions, states. It's the very idea of Europe: "united" is the framework, "in diversity" is the flexibility in this framework.

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In Corsica today it is the opposite: the island is being suffocated by the Jacobin straitjacket and its rigidity. Another recent and concrete example, negative this time. Corsica is a tourist island and lots of vehicles arrive there in the summer by boat, particularly camper vans, which completely clogs up the road network. This is designed for 300,000 residents whereas in the summer there are 750,000 of them, generally concentrated geographically. A proposal by the Corsican Assembly, which was adopted unanimously, was to implement a camper van tax: paid upon landing in Corsica and reimbursed upon leaving, if all nights were spent in areas designated for camper vans. To implement this a vote in France's parliament was required. The request was made by the Corsican government, which received a mandate from the Corsican Assembly, tabled in parliament by Corsican MPs. The government opposed it, the majority opposed it, based on the single argument that citizens should be equal when it comes to taxation, and so a camper van taxed in Corsica should also be taxed everywhere else. Today, Corsica does not have the right to legislate, just to be exempt if a proposal is made and Parliament approves. So it's piecemeal, a proposal has to be made every time. There was a debate in the National Assembly with speeches by MPs from Savoy and Brittany on the Corsican tax on camper vans... which was of course rejected.

Looking at the geographical make-up of the European Free Alliance (EFA), it is striking how they have a big presence in large centralised EU states. Can you shed light on this situation in terms of what you have just said about the different nation states in Europe?

At the heart of the EFA there are three stands: minorities, autonomists and secessionists. In France, Spain, and the United Kingdom there are many member parties because these were formerly great colonial powers. Almost all the colonies have regained their independence, which has created similar desires in regions that are peripheral in centralised states: Galicia, the Basque Country, Catalonia, Andalusia and the Balearic Islands in Spain; Corsica, the Basque Country, Brittany and Alsace in France; Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. There is always this relationship between the centre and the periphery. Historically, the more the centre has tightened its grip, and often been violent, the more the periphery has wanted freedom. When the periphery is recognised for what it is, that is to say its own centre, it has perhaps less of a desire to leave. That's what centralised states haven't understood. France is a caricature of herself in this regard. Almost all European countries

have evolved in over the past 50 years, including Spain and the United Kingdom, while France is stuck in time.

What about in Eastern Europe where the history is quite different from that of France or Spain?

In Eastern Europe, it's mainly minorities. For minorities, it's difficult to exist electorally, especially in centralised states that do not give space to these minorities. Greece, for example, applies French Jacobinism to perfection: the Macedonian minorities in the north and the Bulgarian minorities in the east have no possibility for expression. In Romania, the Hungarian minority numbers in the hundreds of thousands and has absolutely no political space in which to exist. In some of these countries, there is a history of regions being artificially carved up by great powers and so tensions with the existing state.

It is also why the beginning of the 1990s was a time of hope, with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. That's why the utopia, the dream of European integration, must never be abandoned. European integration must also be a way to force us collectively – not just some against others – to improve and to respect minorities, to move away from the centre.

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What is certainly worrying today is that certain structures are crumbling, and there is nobody to think about or prepare for afterwards. Each time that Europe has collapsed, militarily, politically, morally, a resolve has always formed that has enabled the creation of something else and a revival. Even intergovernmentalism, as catastrophic as it is, has been used to keep Europe's head above water. With the European treaties of the 1950s, it was states that discussed them first, even if there was a tendency towards the community method. The Single European Act was about leaving behind disastrous intergovernmentalism to find a compromise, even with Margaret Thatcher! Today, there is nothing of the sort and that's precisely why we must not lose sight of the utopia of escaping intergovernmentalism. Otherwise, those who from the outset have wanted to deconstruct Europe will be in a position to succeed. In some states, this is already the case, they have a majority or are in power.

In an interview with the Green European Journal in 2016, you said that the alignment between the Greens and members of the EFA was clear and would grow. Do you still stand by this?

It makes even more sense today. There may be disagreement between the Greens and the EFA, but they've been sitting together in the European Parliament for 20 years and all the signs are that things are going very well. Secondly, we've seen that in all the examples of emancipation and self-determination, there has always been a closeness – not necessarily on the final goal but on the tool of emancipation – between the EFA and the Greens.

On Scotland and Catalonia, the Greens were in favour of holding a referendum. This utopia of building a Europe beyond states (the title of next year's manifesto for Régions et Peuples Solidaires [a federation of French regionalist parties] is "Going beyond states"), is one that we share. The same goes for the idea that we should bring power closer to citizens, produce locally, decide locally, etc. We share these broad aims, so there's a natural convergence.

How important is the 2019 European election for you as a Corsican and a member of the EFA?

In France, the European election is always a shot in the arm. It's the only pure proportional representation election in a country that permanently lives with majoritarian voting system, personality, politics and no debate of ideas. In France, we talk about France above all else and so during the European elections we talk about other things a bit, particularly Europe. For Corsica, or any other party belonging to Régions et Peuples Solidaires (Bretons, Alsatians, Occitans, Basques, Catalans), it's a way to escape the power struggle with Paris where everything is blocked by

centralisation and it is impossible to have a voice (and even to speak your language).

This European election in 2019 is particularly important for Corsica. For three years now the nationalist majority, comprising two thirds autonomists and one third secessionists, has been in power, chalking up success after success in regional elections, then general elections with three out of four MPs (compared to none in the past), then an absolute majority of seats and votes in 2017. I think that it's important to confirm this desire for emancipation in a completely peaceful, democratic and political process to send a message to Paris and Brussels by electing a Corsican MEP.



Roccu Garoby has been a policy advisor working on budgetary affairs for the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament since 2011. Politically engaged in the Partitu di a Nazione Corsa (PNC) since 2010, he was the President of the European Free Alliance Youth between 2011 and 2016. He also publishes weekly articles on European affairs in the Corsican weekly newspaper ARRITTI.

Published December 11, 2018

Interview in English

Translation available in French

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/from-corsica-to-scotland-autonomy-in-europe-as-the-progressive-alternative/>

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