

Separatist Movements in Italy (1991–2016): Main Factors and Development Tendencies

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: Separatist parties of Northern Italy, South Tyrol, Venice and Sardinia are understudied. The objective of the article is to identify factors and tendencies in the development of separatist movements in modern Italy. **Methods:** The authors applied the historical neoinstitutionalism, as well as actor-centric approach and the "funnel of causality" model. The methodology of the historical neo-institutionalism has been modified here through the identification of long-term and short-term, objective and subjective factors of separatism. The economic, social, political and socio-cultural resources of the separatism actors' influence in Italy of 1991-2016 have been revealed. The empirical indicators of separatist movement strategies have been selected. **Findings:** The authors have determined the long-term and short-term factors influencing the choice of institutional structure and policies of separatist movements. The specific traits of the activity of separatist forces in different regions have been defined. The institutional forms of separatist organizations, the reasons for the growth of their public support have been identified. It has been proved that the fragmentation of the Italian party system blurs the line between the organizational forms of a political party and social movement and increases the chances of new regional parties. The political strategies of separatist movements and parties in Italy have been revealed. The Northern League alternates in its activity federalization and separatism strategies, depending on the macroeconomic cycle phases and the ratio of party coalitions. The "Venetian independence" Party and the Sardinian Action Party, Union of South Tyrol shooters have opted for radical secessionist strategies. Separatist parties and movements are characterized by the growing use of information technologies like online referendums and groups in social networks to promote their strategies. **Application/Improvements:** political analysis and assessment, comparative analysis of the political parties and movements, improvement of algorithms and conceptual framework of the analysis of modern separatism, teaching of comparative political science and country study at universities.

Keywords: Factors, Italy, Strategies, Separatist Movements, Tendencies

1. Introduction

The timeliness of the topic consists in the fact that there are growing separatism risks in many countries due to globalization. The global economic crisis has intensified separatist movements in the countries of the European Union. The society with a weak national identity and dominating regional and local identities are particularly susceptible to the separatism. The cross-national spread of ideologemes and methods of activity of separatist movements have acquired new forms. So, independence referendums in Venice, Scotland and Catalonia in 2014 boosted the growth of separatism in several regions of Europe. The issue of conditions for development of

regionalism into separatism has become significant.

Italy has been selected for the study due to the fact that this country holds key economic and geopolitical positions in Southern Europe. Italian separatism differs significantly by its causes, institutional forms and strategies from the one in other societies. The phenomenon of "competing" separatist movements in Lombardy, Venice, South Tyrol and Sardinia needs to be understood.

2. Literature Review

Typologies of separatism were explained,^{1,2,4} New forms of separatism, associated with anti-globalization and fear of migrant were identified^{5,6} Leading factors of separatist

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growth in Italy are considered to be unfinished nation-building and the weakness of the national identity⁷ perception of the territorial conflicts in terms of political culture⁸. Historical factors of the Italian separatism were revealed⁹ Short-term causes of separatism using the example of the Northern League are studies by^{10,11,12} Politico-cultural study of regionalism in the South of Italy¹⁴ Features of the Northern League ideology were revealed¹⁶ Issues to be discussed: the impact of the economic cycle on the level of popularity of separatism; the interaction of European, national and local factors. Separatist parties of South Tyrol, Venice and Sardinia remain understudied. These aspects have determined the research priorities.

The purpose of the article is to identify the main factors and tendencies in the development of separatist movements in modern Italy (1991-2016). This requires solving the following problem: to determine what factors influence the choice of institutional structure and policies of separatist parties in Italy; to reveal the features of activity of separatist forces in different regions: using the example of the North of the country (including Venice and South Tyrol), Sardinia and the South.

3. Method of Analysis

As the methodological basis of the article, the authors have chosen the historical neoinstitutionalism, as well as actor-centric approach and the “funnel of causality” model. The methodology of the historical neo-institutionalism has been modified in this article through the identification of long-term and short-term, objective and subjective factors of separatism. The economic, social, political and socio-cultural resources of the influence of separatism actors in Italy of 1991-2016 have been revealed. The empirical indicators of strategies of separatist movements have been selected.

4. Findings

Separatism is understood as a political movement which aims to separate from the state a part of its territory and to create there a new state. Separatism includes not only ideological projects and organized political entities (parties, movements), but also the manifestation of political identity, social activity practices: both conventional and unconventional. Separatism means the upper limit of the disintegration of the state and society. Centrifugal movements gain political character in “developed

peripheries”¹⁷, where there is a sufficient resource base of the struggle for raising the status of regional communities. The growth of separatism is possible with a combination of several factors: historical self-consciousness of the regional community; institutionalization of regional interests; consolidated and active elite; the nation-state crisis. The rise of separatism is uneven, depending on the phases of economic cycles and socio-cultural factors. Voters support such movements, when the authorities ignore or ineffectively solve the problems of regions. Separatism occurs both in the countries of consolidated democracy, and in more than 40 Third World countries⁴. There is no direct correlation between the quality of life and the level of impact of secessionism.

4.1 Historical Context

In Italy, the Northern League has arisen on the basis of a number of regional Leagues (the Lombard League, the Savoy League and others). Most regional parties have been formed on the basis of mass social movements, initially requesting cultural and economic autonomy of their territories². The parties are striving to instill in voters’ minds the idea of historical continuity. Northern League uses the attractive historical images of the medieval city-republics. The objective of this type of parties consists in the regional mobilization on the basis of territorial identity, the vital interests of the community as a whole. Two types of parties are as follows: “ethnic” (German parties in South Tyrol) and the regional leagues.

Italian separatist parties have traditionally existed in the form of regional leagues. Their influence is based on a sustained political and cultural division of the country into the post-industrial North and the more backward South¹⁸. The North is characterized by esteem of values of civic culture, shared responsibility and cooperation. The Southerners are focused on corporatism, irresponsibility, avoidance of public debt, authoritarianism. The opinion poll under the supervision of¹⁹ showed that “local-municipal affection” is on the 4th of 11 places (64% of responses) in the hierarchy of Italian features. “The feeling of the citizen, the credibility of the state” is on the last place (16% of responses). The regionalism reveals more clearly the issue of the level of authority, whose jurisdiction should be expanded first. 78% of respondents indicated the local level, 71% stated the regional one and only 44% acknowledged the central level²⁰.

The North, where there is a centuries-old tradition

of city-republics since the 12th century, the people are dissatisfied by central government institutions. Northerners believe that the criminal and the lazy South takes the money of hardworking and active taxpayers. For example, in the prosperous Trentino-Alto Adige the level of unemployment is not higher than 4%, while the average level in Italy is 11%, in Sicily it is 20%²¹. In South Tyrol, the gross regional product per capita is 37 thousand euros, while in Naples it is 16 thousand euros per year²². On this basis, in the mid-1970s the regional Lombard, Piedmont, Venetian, Friuli and other leagues were formed. All of them opted for the expansion of powers of the regional and municipal authorities and for benefits for northerners, against “parasitism” of Southerners and immigrants from the Third World countries²³. The leagues rigidly criticized the bureaucracy and corruption of the central authorities and national parties. In order to distance themselves from the Italian identity, the leagues are using the myth of the “hardworking Celts” standing against “the thievish Rome”²⁷.

As,²⁴ Italy more than other countries is subject to the threat of disintegration, due to its belated establishment of the nation-state. Absence of a system of interest balance between the North and the South, allowed the Northern League to “easily call for full independence... Such an alloy of populist argumentation and economic simplism emphasizes the urgent need for careful constitutional formalization of the subsidiarity principle”. It is necessary to clearly define the extent to which regions can make demands upon the State.

The leagues social support initially consisted of protest population groups: self-employed, unemployed people, farmers. The regional leagues originally appeared in of agrarian and relatively underdeveloped municipalities in the Lombardy and Veneto²⁵. But the leagues are also supported by affluent business groups and municipal elite, the new middle class. They criticize the bureaucracy and corruption of the central administration, using the cross-border connections of the Italian regions with neighboring countries.

Regional leagues unified into the Northern League in November, 1989, having received 5.4% of votes in the Italian parliamentary election in 1990²⁵. The Northern League headed by U. Bossi requested transformation of Italy into a federation of three republics: Padania, Etruria and the Republic of the South. It was planned to leave under the supervision of the central administration only defense issues, foreign policy, currency and the court. In general election in 1992, the League received 8.6% of votes across the country, and 14-25 % of votes in the Northern

Italy regions. Resounding success was confirmed in 1996 and later²³. The Northern League became a member of the government coalitions with the “Forza Italia!” center-right movement and the post-fascist National Alliance (1994-1995 and 2001-2013).

4.2 Strategies of the Separatist Movement

The actions and ideology of the Northern League manifested the presence of separatism, although in 1998-2007 it opted for federalization. The League was supported by the Rector of the Catholic University in Milan, professor of political philosophy J. Miglio. He called the nation state needless in the context of globalization; he said that the European Union was obliged to develop forms of political cooperation between the new territorial entities²⁵. The judgements of the League ideologist were contradictory. J. Miglio talked about both “the United States of Italy” and an “Italian Union” consisting of the “free association” of Padania, Etruria and the Republic of the South. A free self-determination of regions was proposed: the dissolution of the state and its “reassembling” on a voluntary basis within the new borders¹⁴.

Actions of the Northern League were especially radical in the mid-1990s, when it went into opposition towards the center-right government. In 1995, the congress of the League decided to convene the Federal Assembly of the North. Founder and leader of the League U. Bossi proclaimed in Venice on September 15, 1996 “the freedom and independence of Padania”, named after the Latin name of the Po River. Bossi called on citizens of “henceforth independent Padania to throw off the colonial yoke of the hateful Roman imperialism and to cut all ties with Rome, a symbol of oppression”²⁶. Bossi appointed the election of self-proclaimed parliament of the Republic of Padania for October, 1997. The self-proclaimed parliament consisting of 200 people was headed by the former mayor of Milan²⁶. It was not required to submit documents in order to vote. Election to the “parliament” was held illegally and did not have legal force.

The Italian Prosecutor’s Office opened a case on the violation of state unity. The protest mobilization comes fast to an end, if the goals are utopian. In addition, the slogans of decentralization and federalism were intercepted by other parties that raised the question of the League survival. These factors forced U. Bossi to dramatically change the strategy of the party in 1996. League held a course for a support of the introduction of the Federation, seeking to increase its faction in the

national parliament and turn the Senate into a “Chamber of Regions”. But the reforms of the political system were limited within a framework of the unitary model. The condition of the Northern League unit with the center-right “Freedom House” coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi in 2001 was the recognition of the political unity of Italy. U. Bossi held the post of Minister for Administrative Reform and Decentralization. The League also controlled Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy²⁷. Soon, however, the League representatives withdrew from the government. In the election to the Chamber of Deputies in 2001 and 2006, the influence of the League was increased only from 3.9% to 4.6% of votes¹⁵. This inspired the party to put forward populist slogans to revive the importance of the family and the church, to ban abortions, to introduce the castration of rapists, to license mosques, to allow border guards to fire at illegal immigrants and to exclude Italy from the Eurozone²⁸.

Constitutional reform in 2001 for the first time distinguished between the powers and competences of the central and regional authorities. Regions got the right to participate in international relations, foreign trade and relations with the EU. For its part, the European Union carries out financing of Italian regions, especially the southern ones, bypassing the national government in Rome. The regions increased their rights in the new statutes^{14,27}. Expansion of financial and tax autonomy of regions caused the non-uniformity of decentralization in the North, in the Center and in the South of the country. The immigration laws were toughened up. In the long run, the reforms contribute to the fragmentation of the state.

The global economic crisis has led to a revival of the popularity of the League. We should also take into account the stimulating effect of the European integration, weakening the state in favor of supranational and sub-national government institutions. In the parliamentary election in 2008, the number of the Northern League representatives in parliament doubled²⁹. Taking advantage of the weakening of Berlusconi's office in 2011, the leader of the League U. Bossi demanded transfer of several ministries from Rome to the Northern cities³⁰.

5. Discussion

5.1 Separatism in the North of Italy: Comparison of Regional Cases

Starting from 1991, the traditional party system in Italy is getting more and more fragmented. This is a consequence of the economic processes of region diversification and

the formation of the “Third Italy” in the highly developed regions: South Tyrol, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna¹⁴. The importance of the municipal elites and leaders has increased. As noted by L. de Winter, as far back as in 1998, “ethnoregional parties had already the largest impact on the party system in terms of the size, dimensions and character of competition in the elections”. There were many “pseudo-autonomous party systems” in the Italian regions that may encourage the regional mobilization².

There is an important tendency: according to the results of national and regional elections in 2011, dividends from separatist slogans were received not by the Northern League (its importance was twice reduced in the national elections in 2013), but by the regional parties of the “new generation”³¹. Currently, the new leader of the Northern League Matteo Salvini seeks to consolidate the positioning of the party members as eurosceptics, immigration opponents, allies of the National Front in France and the Danish Freedom Party, the small regionalist parties of Italy (Veneto, Sardinia, and South Tyrol et al). According to the opinion polls and forms of activity, namely the opposition to the illegal migration and the request to abolish the Euro in the Padania and to return to its own currency, were the main factors of the growth of separatist influence³². The Northern League managed to increase its influence in the election to the European Parliament (May, 2014), the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto (2014-2015). The intraparty opposition led by U. Bossi and F. Tosi got weakened.

The greatest success was achieved by separatism in the Veneto region, which was expressed in the support of 65-80 % of citizens and in the independence and popularity of the “Venetian Independence” party³³. The Venetian League became active in 1997, when its activists held a demonstrative seizure of Campanile (the famous bell tower located in the St Mark's Square). The relations of Venetian separatists with the Northern League are competitive and conflictive³⁴. In 2006, a regional law on the referendum was adopted, its introduction was supported by the regional governor L. Dzaya (representative of the Northern League), referring to the right of nations to self-determination. The Constitution and the laws of Italy do not provide for procedure of referendum on secession. Chairman of the Committee for the independence of Veneto region D. Buzatu emphasizes the continuity of the region's status: “We have 1100 years of history of the independence of the Republic of Venice behind us”. He insists on the illegality

of the plebiscite of 1866 on affiliation of Venice to Italy as supposedly fraudulent that provides the possibility for the restitution of independence³⁵. Residents of the region could register on the website and express their opinion regarding the status of Veneto on March 16-21, 2014. According to managers, 2.36 million persons (63.2% of eligible voters) took part in the online poll. Among them, 2.1 million persons (89.1% of participants) supported the independence having voted for the following: "I support the creation of an independent, sovereign, federal republic of Veneto". The poll was not recognized by the Italian authorities and a criminal complaint of results rigging was filed. 24 movement activists, including a former member of parliament and founder of the "League of Venice" F. Rocchetta were soon arrested for "actions, including violence, in support of the separation of Veneto and other parts of the Italian state"³⁴.

In Trentino-Alto Adige, a prosperous region, where ethnic Germans make 70% of the population, the regional authorities are discontent over the fact that the Centre requests from them to pay 120 million euros to cover the national budget deficit. Instead, the region Economics Minister T. Widmann proposed in 2012 to "buy out" the independence of the South Tyrol region for 15 billion euros or to reduce contributions to the budget of Italy from 10 to 3% of regional tax revenues³⁶. The radicalization of public opinion was influenced by the split in 2008 in the ruling South Tyrolean People's Party. Votes for its "Freedom" separatist wing grew from 5.0 to 14.3% (2003-2008), and the cumulative influence of radicals reached 30% in 2012. They appeal for support on the Government of Austria²¹. The "Union of South Tyrolean Shooters" and the "Away from Rome" movement organized a peaceful demonstration (5 thousand participants) with slogans calling for secession from Italy and joining Austria³⁷. There is also a minority opting for the independence of South Tyrol.

5.2 Separatist Movements in Sardinia and Southern Italy

Unlike the cases of Veneto and South Tyrol, Sardinia separatism has no deep historical tradition and represents a pragmatic project. There is a "Maritime Canton" group created in the Facebook social network calling for joining Sardinia to Switzerland. It expresses the position of Sardinian Action Party. One of the founders of the "Maritime Canton" movement A. Caruso said:

"The uniqueness of Sardinia would be less threatened in Switzerland with its federal system that respects the rights of national minorities and its experience in dealing with different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups". He offers to give the island to Switzerland as compensation of public debt,³⁸ as the officially recognized unemployment rate on the island is 18.1%. The fact that Switzerland is not an EU member is considered by the movement's leaders as a competitive advantage³⁹. In 2012, the survey showed that 40% of citizens of Sardinia would have voted for separation from Italy, although the survey method is disputable.⁴⁰ Activists are planning a referendum on independence, following the example of the Venetian one.

There is an acting party named "Movement for autonomy" in Sicily, it is headed by the Governor of the region R. Lombardo. The party is represented, albeit by small groups, in both Houses of the Italian Parliament. Its program is center-right; it lies within the framework of the general economic and political autonomy. The party participates in coalitions with other center-right regionalist movements. "Two Sicilies Cultural Association" stands out for the protection of the southern culture and the southern Italian dialect from the "corrupting influence of the North". Other small parties such as the "League of the South", "Land and Freedom" and "Federalist Alliance" are presented only in local government. The most radical is the Movement for the Independence of Sicily, the successor of a group of the 1940s. But the influence of all these groups is insignificant^{41,13}.

6. Conclusion

The authors have determined the long-term factors influencing the choice of institutional structure and policies of separatist movements. They include: the belated and fragile nation-building, weakness of the economic and socio-cultural integration of the state, institutional format of the parliamentary republic, impact of globalization and European integration. The short-term factors of separatist movements have been identified. They include: the global economic crisis, the low popularity of national political leaders and populism. The authors have determined specific traits of the activity of separatist forces in different regions: in the North (including Venice, South Tyrol), in Sardinia and in the South of the country. The institutional forms of separatist organizations, the reasons for the growth of their public support have been determined.

It has been proved that the fragmentation of the Italian party system blurs the line between the organizational forms of a political party and social movement and increases the chances of new regional parties. The political strategies of the main separatist parties have been revealed. The Northern League alternates in its activity federalization and separatism strategies, depending on the macroeconomic cycle phases and the ratio of party coalitions. Programs of regionalist parties of southern Italy contain demand of broad powers of economic and political autonomy. The “Venetian independence” Party and the Sardinian Action Party, Union of South Tyrol shooters have opted for radical secessionist strategies. Separatist parties and movements are characterized by the growing use of information technologies like online referendums and groups in social networks to promote their strategies.

Possible prospects for further studies regarding the subject are related first of all to the carrying out of cross-national comparisons of separatist movements in Europe, with the determination of the political implications of mutual support of separatists in Italy, Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country, Flanders. A more detailed and in-depth analysis of the social basis and identity of separatist movements and their political communication technologies is needed.

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