**Headline:** The Status of Europe’s Autonomous Movements

**Teaser:** While the EU plays a dominant role in managing autonomous and separatist movements in member states, non-EU countries have their own rules, and can be more vulnerable to outside interference.

By John P. Ruehl

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**[Article Body:]**

Spanish officials reassuringly heralded a “new era” for the country after May 2024 elections. Catalonian pro-independence parties had [lost the parliamentary majority](https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/12/catalonia-polls-vote-gauge-support-independence-spain) that had enabled them to govern their region since 2015, and for the first time in decades, had failed to secure a majority of seats in regional parliament. Spain’s ruling Socialists meanwhile managed to emerge as Catalonia’s largest party.

Madrid’s political focus on Catalonia has intensified since 2017. After holding what was deemed by Spanish authorities an illegal independence referendum, Catalonia’s president and other officials fled to Belgium, [prompting a diplomatic crisis](https://www.politico.eu/article/diplomatic-spat-erupts-between-spain-and-flanders/). Spain then imposed direct rule over the region, with the EU backing the decision and citing the need for constitutional approval for referendums. In the aftermath, local support for Catalonia’s independence [declined](https://theconversation.com/catalonia-independence-electoral-shift-marks-the-beginning-of-a-new-era-in-a-region-fraught-with-political-tension-232733), offering Madrid a way in.

Spain’s [separatist](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/27/which-other-regions-want-to-secede-from-spain) and autonomous movements are among Europe’s most well-known, and its management of them is watched closely across the continent. [Many other European nations, particularly in larger countries, have autonomous movements](https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze_2018/Anderson_intro.pdf) seeking devolution, self-government, or outright independence. The [perceived failure of the EU](https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2016-1-page-24.htm), international diplomacy, and integration efforts to resolve these issues has led countries to maintain their own policies. Although few movements are considered serious threats, attempts to assert themselves often provoke direct interventions by national governments—when these governments have the capacity to do so.

Many of Europe’s once-distinct regional identities have only waned in recent times. [The rise of nationalism in Europe in the 1800s](https://ncert.nic.in/ncerts/l/jess301.pdf) led to unitary states that integrated peripheral regions with the capitals, a trend known as “capital magnetism.” [Additionally, increasing urbanization](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4540171/) in other large cities weakened [traditional ties to local communities](https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2006/Mellon.pdf) and support systems.

Integration and assimilation pressure was also exerted on regional identities to create more national identities. At the time of Italy’s unification in 1861, for example, [less than 10 percent](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=history) of Italians spoke the Tuscan dialect which began to be [promoted as standard Italian](https://the-patroclus.net/2021/06/26/a-brief-political-history-of-the-italian-language/). Steadily, its use in public and administrative life, mass media, and other methods led to a decline in the use of other regional dialects and languages. Similarly, French policies promoted the Parisian dialect as standard French, and the German Empire promoted High German.

Modern EU states face greater limitations on language suppression. The framework provided by the EU’s “post-sovereign” system implores member states to uphold [minority language protections](https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages) and other rights. Nonetheless, national governments have modernized their approaches to establishing national uniformity. Proficiency in majority languages is often a prerequisite for education, media, and employment opportunities, while immigration favors majority language learners. As a result, dozens of minority European languages are on the [brink of extinction](https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/europe-language-fundamental-rights-charter).

Nonetheless, autonomous movements in Europe do wield political power. Political networks like the [European Free Alliance](https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/diversity-and-representation-centre-stage-at-european-free-alliance-assembly/), a group of pro-independence political parties, operate in the EU parliament and serve as political outlets for separatist movements, using democratic processes.

Italy is constantly attempting to more effectively tie to itself its autonomous regions of Sicily, Sardinia, and several northern regions. The transformation of the regional political party Lega Nord [into a national one, Lega](https://www.slow-journalism.com/delayed-gratification-magazine/a-different-league-how-italys-far-right-lega-nord-let-go-of-its-roots-to-govern) in 2018, demonstrated some success. The autonomy movements, however, are similarly adaptive. Other northern Italian parties recently rallied to vote to approve legislation approving them greater autonomy [in June 2024](https://www.bluewin.ch/en/news/autonomy-law-gives-italys-regions-more-independence-2249749.html). South Tyrol, Italy’s German-speaking region, brings the added challenge of receiving support from Austria. Austrian leaders have repeatedly proposed [granting Austrian passports to German speakers](https://www.vindobona.org/article/discussion-in-the-austrian-parliament-on-dual-citizenship-for-south-tyroleans), and, in January 2024, voiced [support for further autonomy reforms](https://www.vindobona.org/article/austrian-chancellor-nehammer-reaffirms-support-for-south-tyrols-autonomy-reform), drawing a reflexive rebuke from Rome.

Hungary’s disputes with its neighbors are even more notable. The 1920 breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire left significant Hungarian communities across [Romania](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/11/24/romanias-hungarian-problem-a-minority-caught-between-integration-and-self-segregation/), [Slovakia](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/11/24/romanias-hungarian-problem-a-minority-caught-between-integration-and-self-segregation/), and [Ukraine](https://hhrf.org/on-our-radar/hungarians-in-ukraine/). Today, the Hungarian government supports these communities by funding cultural institutions, providing financial aid, and fostering solidarity, which has sparked tensions with these countries. However, as a smaller nation, Hungary struggles to exert significant influence, especially in EU member states like Romania and Slovakia, and has also found limited success in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, EU countries generally tend to avoid interfering in others’ separatist movements. This has helped France to consolidate its rule over its mainland territory. However, it hasn’t yet done so over the Mediterranean island of Corsica, purchased by the French in [1768](https://www.thethinkingtraveller.com/blog/history-of-corsica). The rollback of the French Empire after World War II reignited historical tensions, further inflamed by the arrival of many French people and Europeans in [Algeria to Corsica in the 1960s](https://www.jstor.org/stable/260461). Though violence largely subsided in Corsica after the 1970s, a ceasefire was not reached [until 2014](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/corsican-separatists-to-end-military-operations-in-october), and pro-separatist riots in 2022 show the situation [remains](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20220315-what-s-driving-nationalist-separatist-violence-on-french-island-of-corsica-autonomy-politics-yvan-colonna) [tense](https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/03/french-authorities-probe-corsican-nationalist-groups-terrorism-claims).

[Following the unrest](https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220316-french-government-floats-corsican-autonomy-as-unrest-jolts-election-campaign), French President Macron raised the possibility of granting Corsica greater autonomy. Previously, [in 2017](https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/fr-64-ia.html), as tensions were building in neighboring Spain over Basque separatism, France raised the administrative autonomy of its own Basque territory by granting it single community status, unifying several local councils under one regional authority. Contrastingly, the merger of the region of Alsace [in 2016](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/alsace-fights-back-french-david-vs-goliath-story/) with two other French areas reduced its autonomy and integrated it more into the national apparatus. The different approaches demonstrate the diverse policies used by national governments to manage their regions.

Germany, the most populous country in the EU, administers several regions with aspirations for greater autonomy. However, [its federal system](https://aer.eu/regionalisation-germany-advantages-federal-state/), which grants states greater authority over areas such as education and language, has helped temper separatist sentiment and reduced the need for management from Berlin.

A federal system has not resolved the challenges faced by Belgium. The country’s [Flemish-speaking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flemish_dialects) and French-speaking regions have sought greater autonomy, with some advocating for unification with a greater Dutch or French-speaking state. While increasing regional autonomy has been part of the solution, the regions remain interconnected through the capital, Brussels, and its wider role as the capital of the EU.

That has not deterred breakup advocates from proposing a similar “[Velvet Divorce](https://scalar.usc.edu/works/dissolution-of-czechoslovakia/the-dissolution-of-czechoslovakia)” between Belgium’s regions, like the peaceful split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992. [Polls indicated](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/30/ceci-nest-pas-un-divorce-why-surging-separatism-wont-break-belgium) a victory in June 2024 for Vlaams Belang, a party whose leader ran on reaching an agreement to dissolve the country or declaring Flanders’s independence. But their shock defeat ensured Belgium’s continuity and thus the stability of the EU.

Outside the EU, Europe’s autonomy issues are also in flux. [In the late 1990s](https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/devolved-institutions/), the UK granted greater autonomy to Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Scottish independence efforts were then disrupted after a failed 2014 referendum and the UK’s subsequent EU departure two years later. The Scottish National Party established a Brussels office to maintain EU connections, as did the European Friends of Scotland Group, [founded in 2020](https://www.politico.eu/article/scotland-eu-lobbying-push/). The Scottish Independence Convention plans to hold a convention in [Edinburgh in October 2024 featuring more than a dozen European groups to coordinate their independence initiatives](https://www.thenational.scot/news/24447062.scotland-host-major-conference-european-indy-groups/), though the participation of separatist movements within EU countries may limit the extent of EU involvement.

Brexit also reignited secessionist sentiment across the UK, particularly [in Northern Ireland](https://www.politico.eu/article/united-ireland-look-more-likely-brexit-study-uk-belfast/), but also in Wales. Even in England, regional parties like CumbriaFirst, the East Devon Alliance, [and Mebyon Kernow advocate for their own regions’ autonomy](https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/think-without-borders-the-rise-of-separatism-in-europe-mick-ohare/), and devolution within England has been increasingly discussed [in recent years](https://theconversation.com/inequality-is-dividing-england-is-devolution-the-answer-220616). While London has struggled to counter these movements since Brexit, it has succeeded in preventing a resurgence in paramilitary activity since it ended it in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.

Western Europe’s relative success in reducing armed conflicts over the last few decades contrasts with its resurgence in Eastern Europe. The region’s fragile borders and the emergence of weak states in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union have seen separatist movements gain increasing power.

The EU and NATO played a pivotal role in the collapse of Yugoslavia and the emergence of new states, often at the expense of Serbia. In response, ethnic Serbian separatism has surged across [Bosnia](https://www.euronews.com/2024/05/23/bosnian-serb-leader-threatens-secession-ahead-of-un-genocide-vote) and [Kosovo](https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/269-northern-kosovo-asserting-sovereignty-amid-divided-loyalties), with supporters citing the EU’s and NATO’s support for separatist movements in the 1990s as justification for their actions.

Russia has also inflamed separatism in parts of the former [Yugoslavia](https://braveneweurope.com/john-p-ruehl-moscows-leverage-in-the-balkans) and the former Soviet Union to counter EU and NATO expansion or to incorporate these regions into it. Beyond supporting Serbian interests in the Balkans, Russia has utilized, to varying degrees, separatist movements in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to advance its interests.

Russia has long performed outreach to [separatist movements in the West](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/what-s-behind-russian-support-world-s-separatist-movements-n614196), including inviting representatives to conferences like the [Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia](https://gfsis.org/en/russia-and-western-separatist-movements/), though largely consisting of fringe groups. Russia itself has its own separatist and autonomy movements, however, including in Chechnya, Tatarstan, and elsewhere. These have found support from Western actors, including through the launch of the [Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum](https://www.hudson.org/events/new-architecture-northern-eurasia-sixth-free-nations-post-russia-forum). [Turkey](https://jamestown.org/program/the-chechen-diaspora-in-turkey-2/) has also supported Russian separatist movements, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meanwhile [recently celebrated](https://www.politico.eu/article/turkish-president-erdogan-dashes-hopes-resumption-cyprus-talks-invasion-50th-anniversary/) the 50-year anniversary of the Turkish invasion of EU member state Cyprus in 1974 in support of local Turkish separatists.

Most separatist movements in Europe lack the infrastructure to become independent states without external support, but persist in their pursuit of independence, nonetheless. And European countries with territories outside of Europe, such as [France with New Caledonia](https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/new-caledonia-riots-the-azerbaijan-factor/) or [Denmark with Greenland](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-would-greenlands-independence-mean-arctic), must manage their burgeoning independence movements. Access to the EU may be influential in convincing them to remain, but [external factors](https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/new-caledonia-riots-the-azerbaijan-factor/), such as Azerbaijan’s recent support for New Caledonia’s independence, could potentially play a stronger role.

A new concern for national governments may emerge closer to home. [In the Baltic States](https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-strategic-interests-and-actions-baltic-region), the tension between Russian minorities and national governments remains evident, and the situation faces uncertainty amid the war in Ukraine. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland political party in East Germany has in turn highlighted the enduring divides within the country less than 40 years after reunification, and how new political entities can emerge to exploit such sentiments.

Yet the most pressing issue appears to be emerging in Western Europe’s major cities. French President Emmanuel Macron, aiming to address concerns over what French authorities describe as “parallel societies” of Muslim immigrants and their descendants, proposed a law in 2023 to [disrupt the education, finances, and propaganda networks](https://apnews.com/article/religion-paris-france-emmanuel-macron-islam-40615a00b39123ff8bcbd5ce705b88f5) of radical Islam, often from foreign countries. Macron labeled this phenomenon as “separatism.” He was referring to marginalized communities on the outskirts of major French cities in the famed banlieues, which are increasingly beyond state control and driven by domestic grievances and dissatisfaction with French foreign policy. While France’s situation appears the most severe, such sentiment is common across Western Europe.

The EU’s handling of autonomous and separatist movements has frequently faced criticism from nationalist governments, and balancing separatism with nationalism remains a sensitive challenge. However, major countries like Germany and smaller ones like Denmark demonstrate it is possible to manage these issues within national frameworks. Switzerland, a non-EU state, shows similar success in keeping itself together. Clearly, despite nationalist policies, centuries-old communities are resilient and difficult to absorb and erase, even without outside support. Managing these long-standing issues, as well as emerging movements, will require continual adaptation.