Most importantly, how would the terms of Switzerland’s relationship with the EU be applied to Sardinia? There would be a lot of issues that would need to be tackled, such as trading rights and freedom of movement. This might not be as straightforward a
process as some might think. To this extent, in terms of the EU element of the scenario, breaking away from Italy might be a far easier process than then joining Switzerland.

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\text{Do people have the right to determine their own political affairs? And should democratic states respect the rights of a defined portion of their state to express, through democratic means, their wishes? I am increasingly of the view that they do and they should.} \quad \text{– Dr James Ker-Lindsay}
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Do you see any similarities between the case of Sardinia and the one of Scotland, Catalonia or Crimea? For example, if Scotland can become independent why not Sardinia as well? Is the history of each place such a strong factor which determines the outcome?

Although there are differences between each of the cases, I believe that the essential principle at stake is the same. Do people have the right to determine their own political affairs? And should democratic states respect the rights of a defined portion of their state to express, through democratic means, their wishes? I am increasingly of the view that they do and they should. However, one also needs to accept that this right cannot be applied in all cases. There are examples where the right of self-determination of one group would directly challenge the rights of another group. For example, in many parts of the world lots of ethnic groups live in close proximity to one another and cannot be neatly divided into separate states. In other cases, the territory of the proposed state would simply not be viable. The question is therefore where do you draw the line? My own view is that where there is a defined community with a historic identity that is tied to a territory with a defined boundary, where this community also has the means to effectively govern itself as a state, it should have a right to self-determination. This quite clearly applies to Scotland. I believe it also applies to Catalonia. It also applies to many other parts of Europe.

Are there any similar initiatives that have been successful and did they last?

Very few states have been successful without parental support. The only one during the Cold War was Bangladesh, which broke away from Pakistan – although it was eventually recognised by Pakistan and joined the UN. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been many territories that have declared independence and have existed without widespread, or any, recognition – let alone UN membership. One can consider the cases of South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’. However, in most cases these contested (or de facto) states have had a patron state that has been able to support it, such as Russia or Turkey. Even then, they have remained largely isolated on the world stage. Even Kosovo, which declared independence with the support of the United States and most of the European Union, is still trying to gain international acceptance after six years. For example, it cannot take part in major international sporting events. Seceding without the permission is not to be undertaken lightly. Again, states tend to regard it as being in their best interest to guard the principle of territorial integrity. They do not like to recognise violations of the principle against other states in case it is ever used against them.

Why do you believe that as the years go by we see a greater need for independence? What are according to you the most significant reasons behind this phenomenon?

I think that the wish for political autonomy is a fundamental wish of the people. Indeed, this has been widely understood for two hundred years, hence the growth in the number of states in the United Nations (currently 193). The key problem that has faced the international community is how to let this happen without undermining international stability. This has meant that a very high threshold for statehood – namely the consent of the parent state – has been introduced. However, the growth in the number of states after the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia collapsed, has nevertheless acted as a spur for others to press for their independence. I certainly don’t think we will see the number of UN members remain at its current level. It seems highly likely that there will be more. Could we see Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders, Somaliland or Kurdistan in the UN?

At the same time, in the European context, the European Union has provided a mechanism for small countries to work with one another and have a say in world affairs. A country like Scotland can see states like Luxembourg, Cyprus, Malta and the Baltic Republics, which are all far smaller than it is, operating as independent countries in the EU. This has led many in Scotland to ask why shouldn’t they be independent as well?

If you want to find out more about the Canton Marittimo initiative (and can understand Greek), read Theodora Vasilopoulou’s article ‘Οι Ιταλοί που θέλουν να γίνουν Ελβετοί’ (“The Italians who want to be Swiss”), 8 April 2014, Kathimerini.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.
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