

# Regionalist Parties in the European Union: A Force to Be Reckoned With?

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to portray the importance of regionalist parties in the European Union. The processes of globalization and European integration in the last two decades have substantially redefined the role of the nation state in Europe. When we talk about the dimensions of politics in the European Union, we speak of a national and a supranational level, yet a third, sub-national or regional level should not be overlooked. The Europeanization of national party politics and growing cross-border cooperation has increased the importance of regionalism and regionalist parties as an important factor of European politics and party competition. This article seeks to explore the role regionalist parties play in the European Union, spanning across several groups and party families in the European Parliament, working towards a Europe of Regions, instead of a Europe of Nations or a European Federation.*

**Key words:** regionalism, regionalist parties, European Union, European Parliament

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## 1. Introduction: the political meaning of space

The end of the Cold War and the bipolar world order opened up a period of increased global mobility, interdependency and interconnectedness. The processes of globalization challenge and question traditional notions of state sovereignty and diminish the role of central governments, as new economic (transnational companies and financial institutions) and social (transnational civil society) actors increasingly shape global governance. Cou-

pled with these changes, the world has seen major changes in the field of information and communication technologies, which have redefined not only the way trade and business are done, but also the course and art of electoral campaigning, as well as political decision-making processes. One of the elements of traditional state sovereignty is the attachment to territory. Proponents of globalization have expected that it would make the political importance of territory ever less important. Yet, the processes of global interconnectedness simultaneously erase borders and reinforce differences and make them more visible. In other words, one should talk about the process of globalization – global integration going hand in hand with (national, regional, local) fragmentation. The enduring importance of territory can be expressed

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with a statement that “social relations, regardless of whether or not they are ones of inequality, are also, and invariably, spatial relations” (Cox, 2002: 147). Thus, politics cannot be analyzed without taking into account spatial relations and the profound meaning of space and territory. Also, territoriality serves as a means of construction and reproduction of political realities (Blacksell, 2006: 20) and serves as a source of collective identity (see also Toft, 2003: 127). The emergence and importance of regionalist parties on one hand and the question about the nature and future of a united Europe on the other, cannot be understood without taking into account the role that space (territory) plays in shaping political identities and giving meaning to political actions.

## 2. EU: the state of the Union and the regional level

The processes of European integration and multifaceted Europeanization of states and societies represent a variation of globalization, yet scaled to a continental level. Modern European political history has always shown a dialectical relation between integration and fragmentation, a collision of forces of unity and isolation. In the context of an integrated Europe, the opposition of the national and the supranational and the regional and the national is being actively redefined in a way that regionalist movements act beyond both their regional, as well as national borders and use the European political context to achieve its goals. As contrasted with the traditional regionalist political movements which were, in fact, mostly characterized by minority nations fighting for self-determination this change of approach can be called “new regionalism” (Keating, 2001: 28). The specific, unprecedented political system of the European Union is meant to functionally link and politically transcend different levels of social and political interaction – supranational, national, regional and local (Kaiser, 2009: 14). In the current situation of a deep financial and economic crisis of the European Union, which is not only a crisis of the monetary union, i.e. the Eurozone, but also a crisis of European political leadership and a conceptual crisis in the sense of conflicting visions of a common European future, the question of the role European regions play or should play becomes ever more important. The main fault line in the debate on the future of the European Union lies between the sovereignists and the cosmopolists. While the

former ones advocate a Europe of nation states and in a broader sense a Europe of Nations, the latter ones envisage a cosmopolitan, post-national Europe which will play a major role in global affairs and in tackling global issues and challenges by deepening its integration and developing a common political and civic European identity (see also Beck and Grande, 2007; Colomer, 2008). A third position, not as prominent as the first two concepts, advocates a Europe of Regions. The question is whether the development towards “more Europe” (deeper integration, towards a Federal Europe) also creates a nourishing ground for the emancipation of the regional level and the regional interests in the member states. In the heyday of European integration, at times of the Maastricht Treaty, proposals for a Council of the Regions failed because of a lack of consensus what regions are and what political functions they have in the broader European architecture (Harvie, 1994: 59). Instead, an advisory body, the Committee of the Regions with limited legitimacy and limited powers was created as yet another “foul European compromise”. Bearing in mind that roughly two thirds of EU legislation is implemented on regional and local (and not on national) levels and that Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund (see also Hix, 2005: 289) as the main channel of fiscal redistribution and economic incentive are targeted towards various regional levels of the EU member states, we should surely take into account the regional dimension of the European Union (see also Jeffery, 1997; Weatherill and Bernitz, 2005) and acknowledge the fact that numerous EU policies effectively “regionalize” national political arenas. Yet, despite such financial attention and the attempt at standardization through the introduction of common statistical territorial entities (NUTS - Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics), we cannot really speak of a regional level of government in the European Union as such (Keating, 2006: 8), because the differences between the EU member states on the federal/unitary and centralized/regionalized scales are far too great to develop a common political middle ground for European regional politics. However, we can say that the Europeanization of national politics, including party politics, as well as the increased impact of EU cohesion policies on institutional changes in sub-national spheres (see Börzel, 2002: 15), has added to the importance of regions as actors inside the political system of the European Union.

Regionalist parties across member states have to various degrees adopted the European idea and recognized European institutions as a vehicle for promotion of their own agendas and a way of bypassing obstacles met in national political and electoral systems (see also Keating, 2004; Laible, 2008: 151-152; Elias, 2009: 16). We shall now take a look at the nature and character of this group of parties in order to portray their strength in EU member states and finally explore their importance on the European level.

### 3. Regionalist parties: definitions, origins, classifications

Regionalist parties represent a type of political party which is the least researched in political science in general and comparative politics in particular. This is a consequence of the fact that this kind of political party cannot be easily classified and grouped in a distinctive party family. As the relevance of political parties (and thus the relevance of them as a research topic) is usually measured according to their ability to take part in coalition formation, this sort of party is often "relegated to a residual category" (Miodownik and Cartrite, 2006: 53). Insufficient research of such parties in European political science is sometimes justified by their (relatively) poor electoral track record (see also Müller-Rommel, 1998: 18). In order to understand the role regional parties play in the European Union and its institutions, it is important to give a short introduction to the various attempts of definitions and classifications of this type of political party. There is no single and commonly established definition of a regionalist party (Müller-Rommel, 1998: 18). The theory of social cleavages, as originally established by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, makes us search for specific cleavages in a given society (and thus, political system) which give rise to a specific type of a party. In their elaboration and further development of Klaus von Beyme's concept of party families, Peter Mair and Cas Mudde list regionalist parties as a separate family, yet stress out the fact that ideologically very different parties are bundled together in this group (see also Mair and Mudde, 1998: 222). If it is not an ideological position, then what cleavage does differentiate these parties from all other political parties? It is the centre-periphery cleavage (see also Swenden, 2006: 22-23) that is at the root of formation of regionalist parties. Some authors call this a "re-

gional cleavage" (Brancati, 2007: 137). In other words, voters in certain regions feel at distance towards the centre of power and authority and do not feel represented by nation-wide parties which cater to voters in the whole country, but instead turn to parties which specifically represent their region.

Another key aspect of definition of regionalist parties is their self-identification. All regionalist parties state in their key principles and party statutes a connection and devotion to a certain region and a certain territory. This brings us back to the role of space in politics, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Regionalist political movements and thus regionalist political parties arise from an identity inscribed into a certain territory. In such a fashion, politics of identity is derived from politics of space or politics of territoriality (see also Amin, 2004). Regional identity is often congruent with a distinct ethnic identity, yet this does not always have to be the case (we will see later on how the connection between regionality and ethnicity creates problems in the naming of this group of political parties). When we join the two aspects of regionalist parties – the centre-periphery or regional cleavages as a party source and origin and the territory-based identity politics as a key marker of specific regionalist policies, we arrive at a twofold meaning of territory and territoriality as the politicized expression of territory. Such twofold territoriality makes regionalist parties stand out from all other sorts and variations of political parties (Miodownik and Cartrite, 2006: 54). Regionalist parties inscribe meaning into a certain territory by contesting elections specifically in one territory (or by running for national elections only in electoral districts in that territory/region/province) and by claiming to represent the population, the identity and the interests of a given territory, usually with an expressed wish to change the administrative and institutional arrangements between the represented territory and the central government.

As we have already mentioned, regional identity and territoriality are often interwoven with ethnicity. Yet, not all regionalist parties are rooted in a specific ethnic context. While some regionalist parties possess a clear ethnic prefix (such as Basque and Catalan parties in the Spanish party system), other regionalist political parties such as Istrian Democratic Assembly (*Istarski demokratski sabor – Dieta democratica istriana*) in Croatia

or the North Bohemians (*Severočeši*) party in the Czech Republic express a historic cultural identity of a given region, yet are not an attempt to emancipate an ethnic (or yet national) identity. However, despite this clear distinction and the practical existence of two separate variants of regionalist parties (the ones with an ethnic prefix and the ones without it), many authors use the term ethnoregionalist (sometimes also spelled ethno-regionalist) parties (compare Dandoy, 2010; De Winter and Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002; Miodownik and Cartrite, 2006) as if all regional identities such parties politicize and utilize were ethnically defined. In order to encompass both the ethnically and the non-ethnically defined regionalist parties in the European Union, the usage of the term "regionalist party" is preferred in this article as a broader, umbrella name (as used by Peter Mair and Cas Mudde in their division of party families, see Mair and Mudde, 1998: 213). Some researchers (see also Brancati, 2005, 2007; Strmiska, 2003) tend to extend the breadth of the term in such a fashion that they use the name "regional parties". Yet, any political party which achieves electoral results only in a limited part of the country (or even fails to run for elections in all electoral districts due to new party formation or splitting of a regional branch from a nation-wide political party) could be called a political party with "regional characteristics". However, it is not to be understood as a regionalist party in a sense that it does not seek to represent a distinct territory (region) and a territory-based identity (be it ethnic or not). In some instances, as was the case with the Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (*Hrvatski demokratski savez Slavonije i Baranje*), shoot-offs of nation-wide parties which consist of several regional party branches and therefore had a regional prefix can transform themselves into regionalist parties. Again, in order to keep these fine distinctions as clear as possible, the usage of the term "regionalist" seems most appropriate. Finally, parties of ethnic and national minorities should not be confused with regionalist parties, because such parties seek to represent a given group no matter where they live in a given country, while the regionalist position stems from the wish to represent a territory and an identity which is derived from that territory. Also, political parties of ethnic and national minorities often enjoy a special status in the electoral system of a given country (either by reserved seats in the national legislative body or by lower or non-existent electoral threshold).

#### 4. Regionalist parties in the EU member states

Out of the current 27 EU member states, regionalist parties can be found in almost all of them (except for very small member states such as Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus). Yet, only a handful of them are truly electorally relevant on national level. In order to capture regionalist political representation across various member states whose national electoral cycles differ from each other, the most recent parliamentary election results in the period 2005 to 2011 have been chosen for inclusion. Although many European political scientists who have established themselves as researchers of regionalism and regionalist parties (see for example De Winter and Türsan, 1998) regularly include Belgian political parties with an ethnic prefix in cross-national analyses of regionalist parties, the author of this article explicitly chose to exclude Belgium from the cross-European (or better said cross-EU) analysis of regionalist parties because recent developments in the Belgian party system have shown that the forces of dissolution and discord in Belgium are so strong that more or less all Belgian parties could be labelled as having an ethnic and a regionalist prefix, with none of them striving to represent the electorate on the same territory and convey political identities stemming from a unified Belgian political and socio-cultural identity. Also, as mentioned before, I differentiate between political parties of ethnic and national minorities and regionalist parties which might have an ethnic prefix. Therefore, the Swedish People's Party in Finland (*Svenska folkpartiet i Finland/ Suomen ruotsalainen kansanpuolue*), a liberal party representing cultural and political interests of Swedish-speaking Finnish citizens, was not included in the list of regionalist parties in the EU member states as it does not possess a regional agenda and a regional identification. The Swedish-speaking Åland Islands are an autonomous region inside Finland which has a separate party system. The Swedish People's Party though is not active there, but in mainland Finland. The Hungarian party in Slovakia, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (*Strana maďarskej koalície/Magyar Koalíció Pártja*), a liberal conservative national minority party, cannot be viewed as a regionalist party either, due to its dominant orientation towards settling issues between Hungarians and Slovaks in Slovakia and addressing problems Hungarians face on the labour market and in public institutions. At the same time,

it neither advocates a certain region in Slovakia nor derives its identity from that region. Similarly, although there is a regionalist separatist party in Denmark, called Community of the People (*Inuit Ataqatigiit*) and advocating an independent Greenland, this Danish autonomous territory is not part of the European Union (because it has left the then European Economic Community in 1985) and thus could not be included in this comparison. The ex-

clusive concentration on parliamentary parties has produced a list of 20 regionalist parties and coalitions currently represented in national legislatures of the EU member states. These 20 political parties are present in six countries, three of which belong to the old member states (Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom), while the remaining three are to be found in the new member states (the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Romania).

Table 1: Regionalist parties in national legislatures of the EU member states

Member State	Regionalist Party	Regionalist Seats	
		Lower House	Upper House
Czech Republic	North Bohemians ( <i>Severočeši</i> ) (2)	0	2
Italy	Autonomy, Liberty, Democracy ( <i>Autonomie Liberté Démocratie</i> ) (1, 0) Movement for Autonomies ( <i>Movimento per le Autonomie</i> ) (4, 2) Northern League ( <i>Lega Nord</i> ) (59, 25) South Tyrolean People's Party ( <i>Südtiroler Volkspartei</i> ) (2,3) Valdotanian Union ( <i>Union Valdôtaine</i> ) (0, 1)	66	31
Lithuania	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania ( <i>Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie/Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija</i> ) (3)	3	N/A
Romania	Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania ( <i>Româniilor Magyar Demokrata Szövetsége/Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România</i> ) (22, 9)	22	9
Spain	Amaiur (Basque Solidarity, Alternative, Aralar) ( <i>Amaiur (Eusko Alkartasuna, Alternatiba, Aralar)</i> ) (7, 3) Asturian Forum ( <i>Foro Asturias</i> ) (1, 0) Basque National Party ( <i>Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea/Partido Nacionalista Vasco</i> ) (5, 4) Canarian Coalition – New Canaries ( <i>Coalición Canaria – Nueva Canarias</i> ) (2, 1) Catalan Agreement of Progress (Socialists' Party of Catalonia, Initiative for Catalonia Greens, United and Alternative Left) ( <i>Entesa Catalana de Progrés (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya, Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds, Esquerra Unida i Alternativa)</i> ) (0, 7) Coalition Commitment ( <i>Coalició Compromís</i> ) (1, 0) Galician Nationalist Bloc ( <i>Bloque Nacionalista Galego</i> ) (2, 1) Geroa Bai (Basque National Party, Atarrabi Group, Zabaltzen) ( <i>Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea/Partido Nacionalista Vasco, Atarrabi Taldea, Zabaltzen</i> ) (1, 0) Convergence and Union ( <i>Convergència i Unió</i> ) (16, 9) Republican Left of Catalonia – Realignment for Independence - Catalan Solidarity for Independence ( <i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya - Reagrupament Independentista - Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència</i> ) (3, 0)	37	25
United Kingdom	Sinn Féin (5, 0) Scottish National Party ( <i>Pàrtaidh Nàiseanta na h-Alba/Scottish National Party</i> ) (6, 0) Plaid Cymru (3, 0)	14	0

For parties represented in both chambers, seats in the lower house are listed first. All data was derived from national electoral commissions of EU member states for the period 2005-2011 and represents regionalist seats at the time of completion of this paper. Party names in original languages are given in parentheses.

All of the three old member states, which have regionalist parties present in national parliaments, display decentralization processes to a various degree. The United Kingdom is a unitary parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy with some powers being devolved from the British to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. Italy is a unitary parliamentary republic with five out of 20 regions enjoying special autonomy (Aosta Valley, Trentino-South Tyrol, Sardinia, Sicily and Friuli-Venezia Giulia), while Spain is a unitary parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy with 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities, enjoying asymmetrical degrees of self-rule. On the other hand, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, unitary parliamentary democracies, and Romania, a unitary semi-presidential republic, have a low degree of decentralization. While in most cases, regionalist parties are more often represented in lower houses of national legislatures, in the Czech case, the regionalist party of Northern Bohemians (*Severočeši*), representing the Ústí nad Labem Region, is present in the Czech Senate, but not in the Chamber of Deputies. Most regionalist parties are situated in the Spanish legislature (*Cortes Generales*), with nine regionalist parties and coalitions holding seats in the Congress of Deputies and six regionalist parties and coalitions represented in the Senate. The single strongest regionalist party compared to the regionalist parties in other EU member states is the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), holding 66 seats in the Italian Chamber of Deputies. When we compare the more decentralized cases from old member states with the less decentralized cases from the new member states, we can see that there is a positive correlation between the overall number and seat strength of regionalist parties present in the national legislature and the degree of decentralization and regionalization. Yet, taking into account that from all 27 member states, such parties are also to be found in centralized new democracies (i.e. new member states), we cannot claim that decentralization is a prerequisite for electoral success of regionalist parties. The reasons for electoral success of regionalist parties remain one of the key questions in the study of regionalism and its impact on party competition and formation of specific traits of national party systems. When we look at the three new member states with significant regionalist parties, we have to single out Spain as the country with the most regionalized party system.

There the two nation-wide parties – the People's Party (*Partido Popular*) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) dominate the party system, while almost all other parties have a regionalist prefix. Out of the 20 regionalist parties and coalitions represented in national legislatures of EU member states, almost all of them have an ethnic prefix, while only a minority (like the Northern Bohemians (*Severočeši*) in the Czech Republic) are based on historic and cultural identity which is not rooted in ethnicity. On the other hand, the already mentioned single strongest regionalist party in the European Union, the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) is not rooted in ethnicity either, but is based on historic regional identity.

Table 2: Share of regionalist seats in national legislatures of the EU member states

Member State	Percentage of Regionalist Seats	
	Lower House	Upper House
Czech Republic	0	7.4
Italy	10.47	9.84
Lithuania	2.12	N/A
Romania	6.58	6.65
Spain	10.57	9.47
United Kingdom	2.15	0

When we sum up the overall share of seats held by regionalist parties in national legislatures of the six evaluated EU member states, we can see that the Italian and Spanish party systems are markedly characterized by regionalism and regionalist political groups, as one tenth of all seats in both the lower and upper chambers of the respective national legislatures are currently held by members of regionalist parties.

### 5. Regionalist parties in EU institutions

The two European Union institutions where regionalist parties can and do achieve representation are the European Parliament as a legislative body of the Union and the Committee of the Regions which serves as an advisory body with only limited powers. At the European Parliament elections in 2009, six out of 27 member states elected MEPs who were members of regionalist parties. The European Parliament has been, ever since the first election of its members in 1979, dominated

Table 3: Regionalist parties in the European Parliament

Member State	Regionalist Party	Regionalist MEPs
France	Party of the Corsican Nation ( <i>Partitu di a Nazione Corsa</i> ) (1)	1
Italy	Northern League ( <i>Lega Nord</i> ) (9) South Tyrolean People's Party ( <i>Südtiroler Volkspartei</i> ) (1)	10
Lithuania	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania ( <i>Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie/Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija</i> ) (1)	1
Romania	Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania ( <i>Româniai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség/Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România</i> ) (3)	3
Spain	Basque National Party ( <i>Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea/Partido Nacionalista Vasco</i> ) (1) Democratic Convergence of Catalonia ( <i>Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya</i> ) (1) Democratic Union of Catalonia ( <i>Unió Democràtica de Catalunya</i> ) (1) Initiative for Catalonia Greens ( <i>Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds</i> ) (1) Republican Left of Catalonia ( <i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i> ) (1) Socialists' Party of Catalonia ( <i>Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya</i> ) (1)	6
United Kingdom	Scottish National Party ( <i>Pàrtaidh Nàiseanta na h-Alba/Scottis Naitional Pairtie</i> ) (2) Plaid Cymru (1)	3
Total number of regionalist MEPs		23
All data was derived from the European Parliament and represents regionalists MEPs at the time of completion of this paper.		

by the two major political blocks or European parties – the Christian Democrats (European People's Party) and the Socialists and Social Democrats (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats) and has functioned in a "two-plus-several party system" (Hix, Noury, Roland, 2007: 21). Regionalist parties have won seats in the European Parliament at all elections, yet the successful formation of transnational party federations (European parties) has been problematic for the regionalist group because of stark ideological differences existing between the various regionalist political parties in EU member states (Hix, 2003: 308). Currently, there are regionalist MEPs from France, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. We can thus see how participation in national legislature is a good predictor for the possibility of electoral success on the European level.

The makeup of regionalist MEPs again shows, just as it was the case at the level of national legislatures, that the most prominent presence is achieved by Spanish and Italian regionalist parties with a total of six regionalist MEPs from Spain and 10 regionalist members of the European Parliament coming from Italy. Again, the single strongest regionalist party represented in the European Parliament is the Northern League (*Lega Nord*). This also means that Italy has the largest percentage of regionalist MEPs in its national delegation to the European Parliament.

Table 4: Share of regionalist MEPs

Member State	Percentage of Regionalist MEPs in National Delegations
France	1.38
Italy	13.88
Lithuania	8.33
Romania	9.09
Spain	12
United Kingdom	4.16
Total Share of Regionalist MEPs	3.2

Table 5: Group affiliation of regionalist MEPs

Member State	Political Groups in the European Parliament							
	EPP	S&D	ALDE	ECR	Greens - EFA	GUE /NGL	EFD	Non-attached
France					Party of the Corsican Nation ( <i>Partitu di a Nazione Corsa</i> ) (1)			
Italy	Sout Tyrolean h People's Party ( <i>Südtiroler Volkspartei</i> ) (1)						Northern League ( <i>Lega Nord</i> ) (9)	
Lithuania				Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania ( <i>Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie/Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija</i> ) (1)				
Romania	Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania ( <i>Româniai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség/Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România</i> ) (3)							
Spain	Democratic Union of Catalonia ( <i>Unió Democràtica de Catalunya</i> ) (1)	Socialists' Party of Catalonia ( <i>Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya</i> ) (1)	Basque National Party ( <i>Euzko Alderdi Jeltzaleal Partido Nacionalista Vasco</i> ) (1) Democratic Convergence of Catalonia ( <i>Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya</i> ) (1)		Initiative for Catalonia Greens ( <i>Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds</i> ) (1) Republican Left of Catalonia ( <i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i> ) (1)			
United Kingdom					Scottish National Party ( <i>Pàrtaidh Nàiseanta na h-Alba/Scottis Naitional Pairtie</i> ) (2) Plaid Cymru (1)			
TOTAL	4	1	2	1	6	0	9	0

All data was derived from the European Parliament and represents regionalists MEPs at the time of completion of this paper. The full names of political groups in the European Parliament are as following: EPP – European People's Party (Christian Democrats); S&D – Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE – Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; ECR – European Conservatives and Reformists; Greens – EFA (European Free Alliance); GUE/NGL – European United Left/Nordic Green Left; EFD – Europe of Freedom and Democracy.



As we have already mentioned, coordination of regionalist interests in a single European party group in the European Parliament is difficult due to conflicting ideological positions. The European Free Alliance (EFA), which forms a joint political group in the European Parliament with the Greens, is meant to represent regionalist political parties in the European Parliament (mostly with an ethnic or minority nationalist prefix). However, although many minor regionalist parties, not represented in national legislatures and not standing a chance at European elections, form the core membership of this European party group, only a fraction of regionalist parties represented in the European Parliament are members of the EFA. Due to the overall dominance of the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) among regionalist parties in the European Parliament, the most MEPs belong to the Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Democracy group. However, six regionalist MEPs from five regionalist parties (Party of the Corsican Nation (*Partitu di a Nazione Corsa*), Initiative for Catalonia Greens (*Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds*), Republican Left of Catalonia (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*), Scottish National Party (*Pàrtaidh Nàiseanta na h-Alba/Scottis Naitional Pairtie*) and Plaid Cymru) belong to the European Free Alliance. Both the ideological differences, as well as various degrees of demands for autonomy/devolution/decentralization, divide regionalist parties in the European Parliament preventing them to speak with a single voice, which would enable them to jointly work towards a Europe of Regions, a broad concept of a European Union based on strict subsidiarity and decreased authority of the central government. All regionalist political groups generally support this concept.

Some authors see the regionalist parties as a force which prevents Europeanization, modernization and further integration in the European Union as they promote local and regional traditions and particular interests (see also Brancati, 2005; Hix, 2007). Other researchers, however, have shown that the Europeanization of party systems has enabled regionalist parties to pursue their goals more actively through EU institutions (see De Winter, 2001) and bypass obstacles met at national political levels. Therefore, despite the fact that the strongest regionalist party, the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), belongs to a Eurosceptic party group (yet, *Lega Nord* has been known to frequently shift its stance on the European Union), regionalist parties can be seen as strategically pro-European, since their Europhile orientation helps them wage their own battles against unitary political forces on national levels (see Jolly, 2007).

The second European Union institution offering an opportunity for representation of regionalist interests is the Committee of the Regions, an advisory body that cooperates with the European Parliament in legislative issues pertaining to the regional and local policies. At the time of its creation in 1994 the expectations of this body were high – it was envisaged to be a regional chamber of the European Parliament and to lay a foundation to the future Europe of the Regions (Rowe, 2011: 51). It is not only the limited capacities and powers vested in the Committee of the Regions which has made it ineffective and powerless. It is also the wide range of particular interests present in more than 250 regions of EU member states and the lack of internal unity of the group which is sometimes called the “regionalist lobby” (Rowe, 2011: 208).

Table 6: Regionalist members of the Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Member State	Region	CoR Member	Party
Italy	Aosta Valley ( <i>Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste</i> )	Luciano Caveri	Valdotanian Union ( <i>Union Valdôtaine</i> )
	Trentino-South Tyrol ( <i>Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol</i> )	Luis Durnwalder	South Tyrolean People's Party ( <i>Südtiroler Volkspartei</i> )
Spain	Canary Islands ( <i>Islas Canarias</i> )	Paulino Rivero Baute	Canarian Coalition ( <i>Coalición Canaria</i> )
	Catalonia ( <i>Catalunya</i> )	Artur Más i Gavarró	Convergence and Union ( <i>Convergència i Unió</i> ) (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia ( <i>Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya</i> ))
	Navarre ( <i>Navarra/Naffaroa</i> )	Yolanda Barcina Angulo	Navarrese People's Union ( <i>Unión del Pueblo Navarro</i> )
United Kingdom	Scotland ( <i>Alba</i> )	Roger Knox Stewart Maxwell	Scottish National Party ( <i>Pàrtaidh Nàiseanta na h-Alba/Scottis Naitional Pairtie</i> )

The analysis of representation of regionalist parties in this EU body which was specifically created to represent regions shows that only a handful of members of regionalist parties are present in the Committee of the Regions. This is partially due to the fact that members of the Committee of the Regions are not directly elected by citizens of EU member states but are appointed as representatives of elected regional and local governments. In this light, currently, there are only seven regionalist members of the Committee of the Regions, coming from three most regionalized national party systems, the Italian, Spanish and British ones. These seven members include two of the most prominent leaders of regionalist parties in Europe - Artur Más i Gavarró, head of the Catalan regional government (President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*), leader of the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (*Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*) and chairman of Convergence and Union (*Convergència i Unió*) and Luis Durnwalder, governor of the autonomous province of South Tyrol, vice-president of Trentino-South Tyrol, as well as leader of the South Tyrolean People's Party (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*). The presence of such regionalist party leaders would make one assume that the Committee of the Regions would make a powerful medium for representation of regionalist politics in the European Union. However, the limitations and shortcomings of this EU body make regionalist politics in it silent and ineffective.

## 6. Conclusion

Our research of the role that regionalist parties play in the European Union has shown several things. Firstly, it has highlighted that successful regionalist party politics in the European Union is concentrated in a few member states, with Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom as the most regionalized party systems. Secondly, it has shown that a regionalist party could use the EU institutions to bypass obstacles met at the national level, yet only regionalist parties with a strong electoral track record at national elections can hope to achieve a significant presence at the European level. Thirdly, it has shown that the heterogeneity of this group of parties prevents them from fighting for common goals in the European Parliament. Furthermore, strong regionalist party leaders cannot overcome the weaknesses of the Committee of the Regions. In order to answer the question posed in the title of this article, we have to say that regionalist parties in the European Union are not a strong force to be reckoned with. Yet, hoping that "more Europe" (more integration) also means "more space for regions", we can say that regionalist parties could possibly play a more active role in the shaping of the European Union's change and transformation into a more stable and balanced political and economic community.

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