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Between Consolidated Autonomy and Separatist Claims: a European Perspective on Present-Day South Tyrol

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Abstract

This article looks at the development of the autonomy in South Tyrol (Italy). It traces its path from a minority protection instrument contested by the Italian-speaking majority population to being viewed as a necessary precondition for an efficiently managed region with peaceful cohabitation of all three linguistic groups (German, Italian, Ladin). Using official statistical and survey data as well as previous scholarly research, the article argues that the autonomy is now consolidated and enjoys broader acceptance than ever before among all linguistic groups; South Tyrol has therefore reached a state of consolidated regionalism. However, nationalist and separatist ideas are on the rise in many European countries, and South Tyrol does not constitute an exception. By contextualizing South Tyrolean separatists with other separatist movements in Europe, the article will try to show that support for secession is low in South Tyrol, and even if an official referendum was possible, a pro-separatist outcome would be far from secure. Meanwhile, Austria, being the kin-state of South Tyrol's German-speaking population, is discussing different means for establishing closer ties with the German community in South Tyrol, e.g. granting Austrian double citizenship to German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans. An analysis of the recent developments and the potential pitfalls of such provisions will therefore constitute the final part of the paper.

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The last few years have seen a rise in both separatist and nationalist movements in many European countries. This is a dichotomy which recreates itself through action and counteraction on behalf of the involved parts, e.g. a state responding to separatist claims by a certain group with stronger nationalism (the role of Spain in the Catalan referendum conflict 2017 would be a prime example for this development). The process may also happen in a reversed way, if a state's increased nationalism triggers further separatism, or if increased nationalism by non-state actors in turn increases claims for secession by other groups. Separatist ideas may rise in different forms of government, but they stand on more difficult ground if an autonomy backed by the majority of the population represents a viable alternative.

The present paper looks at a case study where such a consolidated autonomy is in place, namely the Italian Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano, more widely known as South Tyrol. It aims to trace the way leading towards this consolidation, to identify the necessary framework conditions and to outline possible reasons for the shared preference for autonomy. The paper also analyses the recent separatist and nationalist developments within the two main linguistic groups in the region (namely German- and Italian-speakers). It looks at the ongoing discussion about the *Doppelpass* (the planned possibility to acquire Austrian citizenship for German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans), and analyses its implications for the provincial elections held in October 2018. One of the main arguments is that while a rise in both nationalist and separatist activities is visible, autonomy represents the option preferred by all three linguistic groups. It is consolidated and internationally protected, and is therefore difficult to endanger by secessionist or repressive nationalist claims. However, the *Doppelpass* (double passport) discussion does hold the potential to refuel ethnic tensions, through the difficulties in determining the criteria for eligibility and their implications, but also through the simple measure of again focusing on national identities over regional and European ones, and thus contributing to the current re-nationalization processes endangering European integration.

The article begins by outlining the history of South Tyrol, and its way from fascist minority repression to a consolidated autonomy model, nowadays accepted by all three linguistic groups. The region's history is marked by violent ethnic conflict. But it has moved from separatist ideas to accepting an autonomy solution, which was a long-fought process both by the German- and Ladin-speaking minorities as well as on part of the Italian majority. The article will also look at the conflict's international dimension, and especially at European integration as a facilitating framework.

The second part will focus on present-day South Tyrol and outline how its citizens from different linguistic groups evaluate their own situations. The official statistical data show that there is a growing preference for collaboration and that the autonomy is seen as an asset by all linguistic groups, although Italians tended to view it more as a nuisance in the past. The focus will then shift to the separatist developments on behalf of the minority and to the rising nationalism on behalf of the majority group. While both developments may contribute to a more heated ethnic climate, they are not supported by the majority of the population, and thus do not have the potential to endanger the autonomy.

The third part then looks at a discussion that is not new but has gained considerable momentum over the last six months since the new Austrian government was formed, namely the *Doppelpass*. It proposes the possibility to become Austrian citizens for the minority population, but no concrete details have surfaced yet. The prerequisites have been the subject for heated discussion, and some Italian politicians have expressed their outrage over the concept. While practical questions of to whom to grant citizenship are a difficult matter, the symbolic message sent is one of minority inclusion and connection, but also one of re-nationalization that runs counter to the European project and to the concept of European citizenship. In the provincial elections held on October 21, 2018, the German-speaking right-wing parties and thus the main advocates of the *Doppelpass* suffered significant losses; this outcome indicates that the *Doppelpass* is not a topic of primary interest for the majority of the population. To conclude, a summary of the findings and an outlook on potential future developments and their implications will close the paper.

1. South Tyrol – from minority repression to consolidated autonomy

South Tyrol, or the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano, is situated in the very north of Italy and borders Austria. The province (and the neighbouring, largely Italian-speaking province of

Trento) were part of Austria-Hungary until 1918, when Italian troops occupied the territory after a cease-fire had been signed. In 1919, the province officially became part of Italy through the Treaty of Saint Germain, which it did not include any minority protection or autonomy provisions. The Entente Powers had promised South Tyrol to Italy in the London secret agreement of April 26, 1915, in return for Italy entering the war on their side. Minority repression began in 1920, when the so-called *Lex Corbino* required Italian parents to send their children to Italian schools; a commission ascertained Italian nationality to as many families as possible, including to the Ladin minority, who speak a Rhaeto-Romanic language (Steininger, 2003: 5-10). However, the situation got considerably worse after the Fascists came to power in 1922. In 1923, Ettore Tolomei presented his 32 'provvedimenti per l'Alto Adige'.¹

For example, Tolomei called for: the unification of Alto Adige and Trentino to form a single province with Trento as the capital (thus outnumbering German-speakers in all decision-making bodies); banning the name *South Tyrol*; the Italianization of German place names, street signs, public signs and inscriptions, and family names; and measures to facilitate the purchase of land and immigration by Italians (Steininger, 2003: 19-20). From 1925, only Italian was permitted in courts of law, rendering it impossible for many South Tyroleans, who had not yet mastered Italian and were not able to pay for a translator, to understand their trials. German language newspapers were first subjected to pre-publication censorship and then shut down completely. In 1923, the *Lex Gentile* introduced an Italianized school system, rendering minority language education increasingly difficult. German-speaking teachers were declared to be unfit for teaching, or transferred to the south of Italy, while Italian-speaking personnel were recruited for South Tyrol, often through the offering of perks like government-paid apartments, and without knowledge that they were about to become second language teachers in a hostile environment. In response to the Italian-only school system, unemployed teachers set up the so-called 'catacomb schools', in which children were illegally home-schooled in German (Steininger, 2003: 21-30).

In 1928, the *Victory Monument* was inaugurated in Bozen/Bolzano; its Latin inscription translates to 'Here are the borders of the fatherland. Put down our weapons. From here, we brought to the others language, laws, and arts' (Steininger, 2003: 37). The monument remains contested to this day and is still seen as a constant provocation by many German-speaking South Tyroleans. A motion by the city of Bozen/Bolzano in 2002 to change the monument square's name from *Victory Square* to *Peace Square* was overturned by a referendum, in which 62% of the city's largely Italian-speaking population voted to reinstall the old name (Der Standard, 2002). However, a

documentation centre was installed in the monument's crypt in 2014, providing information on South Tyrol during the Fascist period and working with light and sound installations to transform the monument into a museum. A similar process was conducted for the Mussolini relief situated on the provincial finance office in Bozen/Bolzano; its inscription 'credere, obbedire, combattere' (believe, obey, fight – the Fascist motto) was put under a see-through panel displaying a Hannah Arendt quote ('Nobody has the right to obey').

While the Fascists installed symbols underlining their claim to the territory, they also made concrete plans for Italianizing it, namely the 'majorization' – fostering immigration of Italian-speakers until they outnumbered the German-speaking population. To do so, a large industrial area was constructed in Bozen/Bolzano, and workers (mainly from the neighbouring Italian regions such as Veneto, Belluno, Vicenza, Padua, Rovigo and Verona) were recruited. Workers' houses were built close to the new industrial zone (Steininger, 2003: 43-45). While many South Tyroleans thought that the expanding Nazi Germany would also soon annex the province of Bozen/Bolzano and thus put a stop to Italian immigration, Hitler and Mussolini made different plans. In 1938, the Hitler-Mussolini Agreement lined out the so-called *Option*: South Tyroleans could opt for German citizenship, and would then be resettled out of their homeland, or they could decide to keep their Italian citizenship, which meant renouncing their language and culture and potential resettlement within Italy. About 86% of South Tyroleans voted to leave (Steininger, 2003: 49). The *Option* resulted in a deep rift between "goers" and "stayers", which was present in South Tyrolean society for decades, often dividing families. "Stayers" were attacked as traitors, and often had their property damaged or smeared with feces. Almost 75,000 South Tyroleans left their homeland in the years after the *Option*, only about 20,000 returned after 1945. The beginning of World War II prevented the large majority of the population from following through on their plans to leave (Steininger, 2003: 61). In 1943, South Tyrol became part of the German-administered *Operationszone Alpenvorland* (operation zone alpine foothills). Mussolini had been arrested after significant losses and the arrival of the Allied Forces in Southern Italy in 1943; he was then freed by German paratroopers and established the *Repubblica Sociale di Saló* (Social Republic of Saló), a Fascist state backed by Nazi Germany. On May 3, 1945, the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (National Liberation Committee), the main Italian resistance organization, took over the administration of the province. They made clear that South Tyrol should remain within Italy, and in many communities, former Fascist Party members were reinstated as mayors (Steininger, 2003: 74-75). In 1945, the South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP, or *Südtiroler Volkspartei*) was founded.

It demanded the right to self-determination leading to a return to Austria; however, the Allied Forces were against this proposition. Austria campaigned for an international document protecting the German-speaking minority that was now to remain with Italy, leading to the Gruber – De Gasperi or Paris Agreement of September 5, 1946. It granted ‘special provisions to safeguard the ethnical character and the cultural and economic development of the German-speaking element’ (Gruber – De Gasperi Agreement, 1946). Among the measures included were elementary and secondary teaching in the mother tongue, the right to re-establish German family names and autonomous legislative and executive regional power. The Agreement also established an international context for the South Tyrol question, granting Austria the right to ‘protect’ South Tyrol, and taking an internal Italian affair to the international level.

However, the Agreement’s practical implementation proved difficult. The autonomy outlined in the First Autonomy Statute of 1948 had been given to the Autonomous Region of Bozen/Bolzano and Trento, meaning that the German-speaking population was clearly outnumbered in decision-making bodies. The lack of war veteran pensions, public housing, and public service jobs for German-speakers contributed to the growing dissatisfaction. In 1957, 35,000 South Tyroleans met at Sigmundskron Castle near Bozen/Bolzano to protest. After unsuccessful bilateral talks between Austria and Italy, Austrian Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky elaborated on the South Tyrol problem before the UN on September 21, 1959, and the issue was later placed on the agenda of the UN General Assembly. On October 31, 1960, the UN General Assembly unanimously passed Resolution 1497/XV, which called upon Italy and Austria to resume their negotiations discussing the extent of the autonomy outlined by the Paris Agreement. In subsequent bilateral meetings, it became clear that the Italian government was not willing to establish provincial autonomy for South Tyrol. In 1961, the difficult climate led to political violence, peaking in the so-called ‘Night of Fire’, with numerous bomb attacks against 37 high-tension pylons.² The South Tyrolean Liberation Committee (*Befreiungsausschuss Südtirol*, or BAS) aimed for self-determination for South Tyrol, and sought to achieve this through violent means. In the first phase, up to 1961, the watchword was to avoid endangering human life. The second phase, lasting up to 1969, no longer stuck to these rules, bringing deaths and injuries to the political conflict scene. In 1961, South Tyrol was turned into a high security zone, and within a few days many BAS members were arrested. Inhumane interrogation techniques and torture cases were covered by the international press, two South Tyroleans died, and the verdict in 1963 (none of the 10 accused Carabinieri served time in jail) caused outrage in South Tyrol and Italy. In the first South-Tyrolean bombing trial, the defendants

adopted their attorneys' strategy and testified that their objective had been autonomy, not self-determination – this way, they avoided being sentenced for offense against the unity of the state, a crime punishable by life imprisonment (Steininger, 2003: 113-127). The second, more radicalized phase of bombings followed, leading to a total of 14 deaths. In the second bombing trial in 1966, numerous defendants were sentenced to long prison terms in absentia. Italy accused Austria of safeguarding the terrorists, and in 1967 used its veto to block Austria's negotiations with the European Economic Community (EEC). Meanwhile, the *Commission of the 19*, a body made up of 11 Italians and eight South Tyroleans, had been trusted with finding a solution to the South Tyrol problem by the new Italian centre-left government led by Aldo Moro and Giuseppe Saragat, which was more open to minority issues than its predecessors. The results of the Commission's work came to be known as the *Package*. In 1969, the SVP debated whether it should be accepted; the *Package* was then approved by a narrow margin (52.8% to 44.6%). The most important part of the *Package* was the approval of a New Autonomy Statute, which took place with the passing of Constitutional Law No. 1 of November 10, 1971. It granted authority to the two provinces, Trento and Bozen/Bolzano, for most areas over which the region had power. This meant that many matters could now be governed at the provincial level, where the German-speaking population was in the majority.³ Also, the Ladin-speaking minority was finally acknowledged as well (Steininger, 2003: 128-134).

The *Package* was to be implemented through a number of measures, worked out by the *Commission of Twelve* (six representatives each from the state and the region, at least half of these six members had to be German-speaking). A sub-commission, the *Commission of Six* was formed to work on regulations having to do exclusively with the province of Bozen/Bolzano. Among the most important measures were schooling and the *Proporz* system for public service jobs. The province almost completely took over the administration of the school system, guaranteeing that students could receive first language instruction by native speakers, and introducing mandatory second language teaching for all pupils (both German- and Italian speaking) from the second grade onwards. The *Proporz* meant that public service jobs would now be assigned to members of all three linguistic groups proportionally to their numeric strength. Additionally, the certificate of bilingualism became a prerequisite for all public service jobs (Steininger, 2003: 136-138). *Package* implementation was slow and sometimes stagnant due to Italy's frequent changes in government and a certain reluctance to act, especially on the bigger provisions (e.g. making German an official language in court). In 1991, the SVP voted that the *Package* measures can be regarded as fulfilled,

the prerequisite for Austria officially settling the dispute before the UN and thus paving the way for Italy's agreement to Austrian EU-membership. The Austrian Parliament and the SVP agreed to deliver a declaration of conflict resolution in 1992, with Austria reaffirming its commitment as protector in the future, including appeal to the International Court if necessary. On June 19, 1992, the dispute before the UN was officially ended (Steininger, 2003: 139-144), which also paved the way for Austrian EU-accession.

Since the early 1990s, South Tyrolean politicians have been arguing in favour of a stronger *Europe of the Regions*, making use of the principle of subsidiarity to collaborate regionally, including across historic regions now separated by nation-state borders. The SVP therefore lobbied for the creation of a European Region with Tyrol and the Trentino, arguing that the region could 'become a wider homeland wherein every community could retain its specific cultural identity and simultaneously pursue common interests through appropriate institutional channels' (quoted in Grote, 2012: 130). Austria's EU accession in 1995 and the abolition of border controls between Italy and Austria in 1998 marked further important steps for increasing regional cooperation. The SVP began to aim for more powers to be transferred to the regional level, including important economic assets such as control over hydroelectric power. As Grote (2012: 136) argues, the acquisition of competences and the province's increase in wealth made it possible for its citizens to step away from a very ethnically defined towards a more regional-based identity, and South Tyrol can now 'stress its function as a link between North and South in a relaxed manner'.

2. South Tyrol today: consolidated regionalism with nationalist streaks

Although South Tyrol has become comfortable in its position as bridging north and south and the German- and Italian-speaking cultural areas, there are also countertendencies. A rapidly growing nationalism, visible all over Europe over the last few years, has also affected South Tyrol. This makes for a paradox: the autonomy is stronger and better equipped than ever before, and more Italian-speaking South Tyroleans also view it in a positive light – while they may not profit from minority protection measures, they do value the perks of living in an economically prosperous region with an efficient public administration. However, even though consensus on the autonomy is getting broader, nationalist, and separatist movements are also on the rise. The numbers of supporters remain low for the time being, but Italy's dire financial situation and the austerity

policies have fuelled separatist voices claiming that the wealthy South Tyrol would be better off outside of Italy.

Regarding the autonomy, Günther Pallaver (2014) detects a shift from a dissociative to an associative model of conflict resolution. He argues that the 1992 declaration that ended the conflict between Austria and Italy was the starting point of this process; the associative model is '[...] associated with cooperation, thus making sure that common interests take priority over ethnic considerations' (Pallaver, 2014: 378). According to Pallaver, the European integration process established a culture of cooperating and negotiating, which at least had an indirect impact upon ethnic conflicts. South Tyrol's model of consociational democracy also allows for all parties to be involved in political processes, e.g. through assuring the participation of all linguistic groups in the provincial government. However, it was also originally based on a separation between German-, Italian- and Ladin-speakers, fostered by the creation of separate leisure associations and cultural institutions, as well as a very ethnicized party system. Pallaver particularly stresses the importance of establishing security and trust as prerequisites for cooperation, established in the South Tyrolean case by the SVP's collaboration with Italian political actors and by national and international minority protection measures. He argues that this climate of trust has created a preference for cooperation among political, economic, and intellectual elites in the province, and that this shift is also visible in civil society organizations (Pallaver, 2014: 382-391). A 2014 survey on language use (*Sprachenbarometer*) also asked about South Tyroleans' national, territorial, and ethnic identity. Most of the respondents identified as *South Tyrolean* (using *Südtiroler/Sudtirolesi* or *Altoatesini*) with 61.5%, with 22.7% identifying as Italian and 17.2 % identifying as European. While there are relatively big differences between the linguistic groups (e.g. 80% of German-speakers primarily identify as South Tyrolean, while Italian-speakers primarily identify as Italian with 69%), the regional affiliation is also growing among the Italian-speaking group (18.9% identify as *Altoatesini*, 16.9% identify as Italian-speaking South Tyrolean, and 7.3% as South Tyrolean). This trend would support Pallaver's (2014: 393) claim of a 'territorialization' of the autonomy, namely a stronger regional affiliation weakening ethnic divisions. Interesting to note are also the relatively small numbers of German-speakers identifying as Tyrolean (9.6%) or as Austrian (2.2%) – the regional affiliation thus outnumbers ethnic affiliation and identification with Austria by a large margin (Astat, 2015: 169-170). When asked about what they value about South Tyrol, 49% of both German- and Italian-speakers mentioned the autonomy (Astat, 2015: 196). A majority of all linguistic groups (54.2% of German-, 44.6% of Italian- and 74.7% of Ladin-speakers)

also said that the South Tyrolean situation with different linguistic groups is a cultural asset that should be valued and kept (Astat, 2015: 181). The importance assigned to being able to speak the second language (Italian or German, respectively) grows with higher education: 55% of people with primary education and over 70% of people with a university education declared that speaking Italian/German was important (Astat, 2015: 184). The developments outlined by Pallaver and the recent survey data therefore both seem to indicate a growing regional affiliation, along with a shared view of cultural diversity as an asset for both the region and its inhabitants and a strong pro-autonomy stance also among the Italian-speaking population. However, there have also been developments countering the shift to an associative model, on both the German- and the Italian-speaking side of the spectrum.

On the German-speaking side, these developments can at least partly be attributed to the erosion of SVP hegemony, and to the subsequent loss of power over the definition of what the future of South Tyrol should be like. Unlike the SVP, aiming for a *Vollautonomie* (full autonomy) with as many powers as possible transferred to the provincial level but not for a separation from Italy, newer German-speaking parties openly propose separatism. The *Süd-Tiroler Freiheit* (South Tyrolean Freedom Party, or STF) and *Die Freiheitlichen* (Freedom Party, or DF – established in close connection with the Freedom Party of Austria, or FPÖ) are the main proponents of a future outside of Italy. Scantamburlo (2016: 25) argues that the SVP's new territorially focused discourse made the party a viable option for Italian voters (7% in the 2013 provincial elections), while also opening up space for the STF and DF to occupy ethno-cultural topics. The separatist German-speaking parties could thus frame themselves as keepers of the goal of self-determination, something that was still in the SVP's party programme, but no longer on its daily political agenda. In the 2013 provincial elections, the STF reached three seats and DF reached six, making the separatist parties a strong opposition to the SVP's 17 seats (Autonome Provinz Bozen, 2013). Poll data from May 2018 predicted that the SVP would only reach 40% (compared to 45.7% in 2013), while STF and DF would remain at their 2013 levels. The Italian government parties, the *Lega* and the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (or M5S), would reach two and three seats, respectively (Die Neue Südtiroler Tageszeitung, 2018). The outcome of the 2018 provincial election will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the paper; the SVP, STF and DF suffered losses, while the *Lega* and the *Team Köllensperger* (a new party founded by a former M5S member of the provincial assembly) were the winners.

In 2013, the STF initiated an unofficial referendum on self-determination for South Tyrol, which resulted in 92.17% of votes being in favour of self-determination (Süd-Tiroler Freiheit, 2014). Fuelled by the success of separatist movements in Scotland and Catalonia, the STF had begun to campaign for a referendum in South Tyrol – a possibility not foreseen by the constitution. Similar to the Catalan case, it is very unlikely that the Italian government would ever agree to such a proposition. Also, even if an official vote was allowed, a pro-separatist ‘yes’ remains unlikely. The STF sent out invitations to vote in its unofficial referendum to all approximately 401,000 South Tyroleans of legal voting age, but only 61,189 votes were cast, indicating disinterest of large parts of the population. Compared to the Catalan referendum in October 2017, in which 42.3% of the population voted with a similar outcome (90% voted pro-independence) (BBC, 2017), pro-separatist tendencies in South Tyrol appear to be considerably weaker. In 2016, Heinz-Christian Strache, head of the FPÖ and now also Vice-Chancellor of Austria, declared his support for self-determination and for a South Tyrolean referendum (Der Standard, 2016). Matteo Salvini, now Italian Minister of the Interior, then agreed with Strache, saying that he was ‘always in favour of citizens deciding their future per referendum’ and that ‘to convince South Tyroleans to stay with Italy, Italy must become competitive’ (quoted in Die Presse, 2016, author’s translation). Recently, other *Lega* politicians have also expressed support for the possibility for German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans to acquire dual citizenship (the so-called *Doppelpass* discussion, which will be outlined in more detail in the next part of the paper). However, they stressed that the issue should be discussed in close coordination between Italy and Austria, and the M5S as their coalition partner has not yet taken a clear stance (Der Standard, 2018).

On the Italian side of the party spectrum, erosion processes are also visible. While in earlier decades the *Democrazia Cristiana* (or DC, Christian Democracy) and the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (or PSI, Italian Socialist Party) represented a majority of the voters, the Italian Party present in the provincial government today, the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, or PD), only represents less than a third of Italian-speaking voters. Günther Pallaver argues that the SVP needs a coalition partner that is pro-autonomy and largely compatible with its own political values, and that the PD fulfilled these requirements; however, a shift towards the *Lega* or the M5S would also be possible after the next election (Interview with Salto, 2018); due to the *Lega*’s strong election results, a coalition SVP-Lega is currently being discussed, but the *Lega*’s anti-European stance appears to be incompatible with the SVP’s ideals aiming for a European, regionalist focus. With the current weak position of the Italian left, it is mainly right-wing actors that are gaining

votes also in South Tyrol, and among them are many parties with at least very critical or even negative and abolitionist views on the autonomy. In 2011, the SVP and then-Minister of Cultural Goods Sandro Bondi reached an agreement on the fascist monuments, e.g. the *Victory Monument* and the *Mussolini Relief* in Bozen/Bolzano. Bondi declared deciding on the future of these monuments to be a South Tyrolean competence, causing outrage from right-wing parties. Politicians spoke about the ‘Italian people’s soul’ being hurt (ORF, 2011), and the neo-fascist *Casa Pound*, who nowadays holds three seats in the Bozen/Bolzano City Council, held a convention in the South Tyrolean capital. They claimed that transforming monuments into museums would equal ‘cancelling the Italian identity’ of the region (Gianluca Iannone, 2011), and brought signs reading ‘our marble against your swamp’ (referring to the *Victory Monument*) and ‘let’s take back Bolzano’ (author’s translation).

Despite such attempts from nationalist German- and Italian-speaking actors, the South Tyrolean autonomy and the idea of cultural diversity as an asset are nowadays backed by a majority of all three linguistic groups. Establishing competences on the provincial level may have started out as a measure of minority protection, but it has benefited the whole population of the region, as the SVP has not failed to stress. Its efforts in securing an efficient administration of the autonomy have also made it popular among Italian-speaking voters, where at around 10% of the Italian vote it can now be considered one of the bigger parties. However, a true opening of the party – including Italian-speaking candidates – has not yet taken place,⁴ and attempts to do so have been very contested by those claiming that the SVP could keep its role as main representative of the German- and Ladin-speaking population. The erosion of SVP allegiance among the German- and Ladin-speaking groups continues and is exemplified by the strength of STF and DF. The success story of DF is not mainly defined by separatism, but by a general anti-establishment and – in recent years – also a strong anti-migration approach, underlined by a meeting with the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*)’s Alice Weidel in Bozen/Bolzano in July 2018. In contrast, STF focuses on ethno-cultural issues and self-determination as its main agenda. The referenda in Scotland and Catalonia have prompted STF to hold its own plebiscite, but it failed to raise interest among the general population, and most citizens did not even partake in the unofficial vote. Unlike other European countries with strong separatist movements, South Tyrolean separatists at least for now lack the needed support among the population, and this goes for all three linguistic groups. Only 2.2% of German-speakers still identify as Austrian, a marginal number especially compared to the 80% declaring a regional identity. While the majority of the South Tyrolean society thus seems to be

moving closer together, with shared support for linguistic pluralism and for the autonomy, there are also growing radical tendencies at the German- and Italian-speaking fringes. Like in many European countries, right-wing or even neo-fascist populism is on the rise in South Tyrol as well. The *Lega* was one of the winners of the provincial elections in October 2018; it will now be interesting to see which role it can play on the provincial level, if the SVP agrees to a coalition with the *Lega* who is now the strongest Italian-speaking party, and whether the *Lega*'s electorate would agree with a pro-referendum stance as outlined by Salvini in 2016. The *Lega* has also already opened up a possibility for dialogue on the so-called *Doppelpass*, the granting of double citizenship to German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans on behalf of Austria. While separatist referenda have no legal basis and were only really acknowledged by STF supporters, double citizenship could have a much broader impact on the consolidated autonomy and ethnic peace in South Tyrol.

3. The *Doppelpass* discussion: adding fuel to the fire of separatism and nationalism?

In 2017, 19 out of the 35 members of the South Tyrolean Regional Assembly signed a letter to the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz asking his new *ÖVP-Liste Kurz/FPÖ* coalition government to mention dual citizenship for South Tyroleans in the coalition agreement. With the new government and especially Vice-Chancellor Strache's past pro-referendum stance, the pro-*Doppelpass* forces saw a new opportunity to achieve their goal. All provincial assembly members from both STF and DF signed the letter, while only seven SVP members did, and no representative of the provincial government was among them. The letter mentioned the strengthened ties with Austria that dual citizenship would entail, and that it would further secure minority rights. It would also be an 'act of redemption' for South Tyroleans, who had lost their citizenship when Italy annexed the province (ORF, 2017, author's translation). The South Tyrolean *Landeshauptmann* (Prime Minister), Arno Kompatscher, supported the notion, along with his Tyrolean colleague Günther Platter. The *Doppelpass* indeed made it into the coalition agreement, presented in December 2017. It expresses that the government will take into consideration granting the possibility to acquire Austrian on top of Italian citizenship to South Tyroleans belonging to the German and Ladin groups, for whom Austria has a protective function according to the Treaty of Paris (quoted in Stol, 2017, author's translation). However, the passage remains vague (e.g. 'take into consideration', not 'aim for'). It also mentions dual citizenship for South Tyroleans and *Alt-Österreicher*, i.e. also for other groups who were part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The *Südtiroler Heimatbund*, which also holds close

ties with the STF, proceeded to thank the government for including the passage in the coalition agreement by putting up signs around Vienna that read ‘South Tyrol thanks Austria for the possibility to obtain the passport of our Fatherland again soon’ (quoted in ARD, 2018, author’s translation). The *Südtiroler HochschülerInnenschaft* (or SH, South Tyrolean Student Organization) protested against the signs (‘not in our name!’), arguing that the *Doppelpass* discussion would only serve certain groups aiming for discord while being of no use to most South Tyroleans. They also included an alternative sign by the South Tyrolean Artist Franz Pichler, which read ‘neither state nor passport but freedom, humanity and dignity are identity’ (Südtiroler Hochschülerschaft Wien, 2018, author’s translation). While dual citizenship therefore represents a possibility of redemption and reconnection with their “homeland” for some South Tyroleans, many also view it as a possible danger to peaceful cohabitation in South Tyrol.

However, even if most South Tyroleans proved to be in favour, *Doppelpass* implementation would not be that easy. Law scholar Walter Obwexer sees various pitfalls, e.g. that the dual citizenship provisions would also extend to other *Altösterreicher*, such as the inhabitants of Trentino. To avoid this, it could be restricted to those citizens who are German- or Ladin-speaking and for which Austria exerts a protective function according to the Treaty of Paris. However, Italian officials might argue that the special bond between South Tyrol and Austria that constitutes the basis for this function is no longer visible, if only few South Tyroleans then applied for dual citizenship. He also sees difficulties regarding mandatory military service (which Austria in contrast to Italy still upholds) and voting rights. Günther Pallaver criticizes that it would be very difficult to establish salient criteria on who can apply for dual citizenship, noting that historical criteria may be reminiscent of Nazi ancestry passes. Using the linguistic group declaration would also not be a viable option, as it can easily be changed, and non-South Tyrolean Italians, EU-citizens and recognized refugees are also legally capable of declaring to belong to the German linguistic group, which would then render them eligible for dual citizenship (Stol, 2017).

In July 2018, media reports spoke of a draft law on dual citizenship to be presented as early as September 2018. The Italian government reacted with outrage, and the Foreign Ministry called the draft law an ‘inappropriate and fundamentally hostile initiative’, in contrast to the *Lega*’s earlier declared openness for discussion. Sergio Battelli from the MS5 pledged the Austrian government to renounce its plans, and to ‘stick to the principles of loyalty and collaboration’. The Italian Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Riccardo Fraccaro, declared Austria’s plans to be ‘alarming’ (all quoted in OÖ Nachrichten, 2018, author’s translation). The South Tyrolean *Landeshauptmann*

Kompatscher stated that the draft law was likely to use the criterium of the protective function to determine eligibility for dual citizenship, rendering German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans eligible while excluding Italian-speakers. However, he also mentioned that no final decision has been made. Kompatscher warned not to ‘politically instrumentalize the topic in one or the other direction’ (Stol, 2018, author’s translation), especially regarding the provincial elections in October 2018. Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl stressed that there is an ongoing dialogue with both Rome and Bozen/Bolzano (Stol, 2018) – a notion that contrasts the reactions of Italian politicians outlined above.

Although it is not a matter to be directly determined by either South Tyrolean or Italian officials, the *Doppelpass* became one of the most widely discussed topics during the electoral campaign. The German-speaking right-wing parties (mainly DF and STF) made the *Doppelpass* a core element of their electoral campaigns. However, both lost seats in the *Landtag*, with DF suffering the most remarkable loss and going from six to two seats (Autonome Provinz Bozen, 2018). DF leader Ulli Mair attributed her party’s losses to internal disputes and also to its strong *Doppelpass*-focus during the campaign. She denotes that the party ‘spent too much time on the *Doppelpass*’ and that the issue ‘was not accepted as a campaign topic by the majority of voters’ (quoted in Gasser, 2018, author’s translation). Post-election analyses support the theory that the *Doppelpass* is not an issue supported by a majority of the population, or at least not an issue that the South Tyroleans assign priority to. The Austrian social-democratic (SPÖ) South Tyrol spokesperson, Hermann Krist, asked foreign minister Karin Kneissl in written form whether or not she still intended to pursue the *Doppelpass* and potentially threaten the good relations with Italy, now that the parties most strongly advocating the *Doppelpass* have suffered significant electoral losses. Kneissl answered that she could not anticipate future changes, but that the *Doppelpass* was part of the coalition agreement, and that the bilateral relations with Italy had not been negatively impacted by it (Gasser 2018, author’s translation).

As of October 29, 2018, no draft proposal addressing citizenship has yet been presented, and the election outcome makes quick progress on the topic relatively unlikely. The question of eligibility could become a highly contested issue, as all possible solutions present considerable potential for conflict, and endanger the slowly building shared regional identity. To what extent those eligible for Austrian citizenship would then actually apply is difficult to predict. With EU citizenship in place and special provisions for South Tyrolean students in Austrian universities (e.g. inclusion in the quote reserved for Austrians in studying medicine), there is not much to be “gained”

from Austrian citizenship that South Tyroleans do not already have access to. Becoming Austrian citizens would open the way to Austrian public service jobs restricted by nationality (e.g. police, diplomatic service) – although it is likely that those interested in living and working in Austria already do so and have access through citizenship through the standard procedures for EU-citizens if desired, but they had to give up their Italian citizenship until now. The *Doppelpass* might thus also serve as a possibility for South Tyroleans living in Austria to keep both affiliations. However, its main aim is symbolical, welcoming South Tyroleans into the community of Austrian citizens again and underlining the region's strong connection with Austria. But, with only 2.2% of German-speakers still identifying as Austrian, and with the right-wing *Doppelpass* advocates suffering significant losses in the provincial elections, such symbolism might not be of interest to large parts of the South Tyrolean population.

Conclusion

The present paper has aimed to shed light on both present and past developments in South Tyrol by adopting a European perspective on both the genesis and the consolidation process of the autonomy, as well as on the rise of newer separatist and nationalist ideas. It tried to show that even in areas with consolidated autonomy models the ideas of separatism can become influential under certain circumstances, and that nationalist and separatist rhetoric sometimes still falls on fertile ground, even though the majority of the population objects to its goals. Following a history of ethnic conflict and political violence, South Tyrol nowadays enjoys a consolidated autonomy, viewed as an asset by all three linguistic groups (German-, Italian- and Ladin-speaking) living on the territory. Furthermore, the region's prosperity, its successful minority protection measures, and the context of European integration have created an environment in which collaborating for the common good of the whole population has become easier, despite past struggles. Nowadays, and as seen above, most of the people living in South Tyrol also have a regional identity and think that living in an area with multiple cultures and languages represent an asset. The autonomy has allowed for safeguarding of the German- and Ladin-speaking minorities and is also increasingly viewed in a positive light by the Italian-speaking population. The article therefore argues that the autonomy can be regarded as consolidated, as a majority of the population stands behind this solution for cohabitation.

However, this does not mean that separatist and nationalist movements cannot gain momentum in South Tyrol. On the German-speaking side, more newly established parties such as STF or DF lobby for separatism and self-determination, stepping into the ethno-cultural void that the SVP moving into the middle of the political spectrum and also becoming a viable alternative for Italian voters has created. Although lobbying for self-determination has been increased by the developments in Scotland and more recently in Catalonia, separatist actors are not backed by a majority of the population, and the STF's unofficial referendum was far from reaching Catalan turnout rates. The financial crisis and austerity measures may have helped to argue that South Tyrol is better off without Italy, but most South Tyroleans still prefer the autonomy as the best-case scenario for the future of the region and its minority population. On the Italian-speaking side of the spectrum, nationalist actors refuse to deal with fascist crimes and the historical monuments representing them, framing both as vital parts of the Italian identity in South Tyrol. While it may have been Fascist 'majorisation' policies that first brought their ancestors to the region, monuments cannot constitute a fertile ground for the identity of the Italian-speaking population. A regional-based identity set in the European context could replace the symbolism of the past.

Another act of symbolism has recently surfaced again and caused heated debates, namely the *Doppelpass*, granting Austrian citizenship to (at least parts of) the South Tyrolean population. While its proponents argue that it would entail a further measure of minority protection and bring German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans closer to their kin-state Austria, it also has its pitfalls. These include the yet to be defined circle of possible recipients – will eligibility be based on ancestry, on belonging to the German- or Ladin-speaking minority population, or on linguistic group declaration? What does excluding the population of the Trentino, formerly also Austrians, and the Italian-speaking population of South Tyrol imply for cohabitation and ethnic peace? And finally, what would the process of obtaining citizenship look like, and what would it cost in relation to possible benefits? A draft proposal was expected for early September, or at the latest after the provincial elections on October 21; a 'gentlemen's agreement' in order to avoid the electoral campaign being dominated by this topic. This step alone shows that Italy, South Tyrol, and Austria all acknowledge the strong influence the *Doppelpass* could have on ethnic cohabitation and the situation in the province. However, the parties most strongly advocating the *Doppelpass* all suffered significant losses, proving that dual citizenship is not a central issue for the majority of the South Tyrolean population. The future of the *Doppelpass* is therefore uncertain; underlined also by the fact that the draft proposal has still not been published as of October 29, 2018. Austrian

Foreign Minister Kneissl claims that as part of the coalition agreement, the *Doppelpass* will still be pursued, but it could become increasingly difficult to lobby for the issue in bilateral talks with Italy when there is no strong preference for dual citizenship among the German- and Ladin-speaking minority population.

The South Tyrolean case could set an example for minority protection measures and solutions involving citizenship, which may have already been deemed outdated in the context of European integration. On the other hand, it may also serve as a case in point for the proponents of autonomy solutions for conflict resolution, as a majority of the population prefers regional autonomy over dual citizenship and the potential re-fuelling of ethnic tensions. In any event, the outcome of the *Doppelpass* discussion and its impact on regional cohesion will continue to provide a valuable framework for future research, with implications for many other minority contexts in Europe.

Notes

¹ Alto Adige is the official Italian name for South Tyrol to this day. Due to its connections to Tolomei and the fascist era, its use is contested among the German-speaking group and also among some of the Italian speakers, who would prefer 'Sudtirolo' to be the official Italian denomination.

² The 'Night of Fire' was the largest attack against infrastructure carried out by the *Befreiungsausschuss Südtirol* (or BAS). The aim was to disrupt the energy supply for the industrial area in Bozen/Bolzano, perceived by the BAS-members as a symbol of Italianization. Although this goal was not reached, the 'Night of Fire' was covered by the international press and attracted attention to the South Tyrol issue.

³ According to the declaration of belonging to a linguistic group to be submitted by all adult citizens, 64% of South Tyroleans belong to the German-speaking, 24% to the Italian-speaking and 4% to the Ladin-speaking group (Autonome Provinz Bozen, 2018).

⁴ The SVP has collaborated with or supported Italian-speaking candidates in the Bolzano/Bozen district in Parliamentary elections before, but no Italian-speaking SVP candidates have run in provincial elections.

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