

# Europe's Rising Regionalism

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## The Nation States of Europe

The nation-state is too big to run everyday life, and too small to manage international affairs. So say many of Europe's regional and big-city leaders, who are themselves gaining influence and authority. European cities and regional governments are acquiring bigger budgets and developing more professional bureaucracies. National cultures are being squeezed between a broader popular culture and briskly reviving regional cultures.

*Two parallel and related processes have emerged. One is regionalism, the other globalization; instead of working through national capitals, European regions are linking themselves directly to the global economy. Regionalism, whether within or across national borders, is Europe's current and future dynamic, particularly for those who see themselves belonging more to "Europe" than to a nation state of clouded origins or dubious boundaries.*

Officials in some provincial cities see *growing regional sentiment* as a reaction to burdensome regulations descending from the European Union headquarters in Brussels. The deeply controversial Treaty on European Union concluded at Maastricht in December 1991, took account of the trend by creating a Committee of the Regions, although that body's mandate is still not clear.

Regionalism is more than a return to cultural roots or a distancing from national capitals. It has as much to do with wealth creation as anything else. Many and probably most of the wealthiest provinces of Western Europe are interacting with one another and together creating super-regions—large economic zones that transcend national boundaries.

Various banking and business circles believe that *Europe's industrial and financial heartland* is dividing into banana-shaped configurations. The first zone stretches from southeastern England through northern France and the Benelux countries and down the Rhine Valley into Switzerland. The second forms an arc from the Veneto in Italy, west

through Lombardy and the Piedmont into the Rhone-Alpes, across France's Mediterranean coast and hinterland, and into Catalonia. This area is much like America's "Sunbelt," another site of recent dynamic economic growth.

The European Union headquartered at Brussels perceives that a *single European market* could help the regions of Europe by blurring national frontiers. As borders lose their meaning, deeply rooted patterns of commercial and cultural interaction are reappearing in regions where people have more in common, culturally or economically, with neighbors across the border than with their fellow countrymen. High-speed rail transport will become increasingly important in building the potential strength of regionalism. Not surprisingly, cities, rather than nation states, are the strongest advocates of a continental rail system.

A large and unexamined question is the effect of regionalism on *European security*. Europeans for the most part have lost the habit of thinking about providing for their security at the level of the nation-state. Instead they have a feeling of security from membership in NATO and to the European Union. More open borders and weaker national governments also complicate efforts to combat illegal drugs, organized crime, and hot money.

If regions acquire separate identities, will some of them tilt against one another, as in the past? The revival of ethnicity brought on by regional resurgence is a concern. Could regions work to neutralize potentially violent separatist groups and perhaps relieve pressure on national governments?

One way of thinking about regionalism is to recognize that, in Western Europe, the Cold War was accompanied by vastly successful modernization which blurred regional cultures. The current revival of those cultures is in part a protest against the process.

## The Länder of Germany

Among the member nations of the European Union, Germany is better prepared than many to

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adapt to a regional orientation, due to a well-established federal structure. *German regionalism also has the strongest roots*: tradition and Germany's brief but tumultuous *history as a nation-state* have strengthened the regional instincts of its people. Germans today exist comfortably within their federal structure. People can say "I am a Saxon" as easily as they can say, "I am a German."

The founders of the Federal Republic in 1948–1949 believed that the political life in West Germany should be built around reconstituted Länder. When the Berlin Wall came down and unification became a reality, East Germans instantly reclaimed their regional identities. Länder flags, not the national flag, were flown.

*Economic growth in Germany* has been concentrated in several rival cities—Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, and Düsseldorf. Regions like Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg rely on their business communities for leverage against Bonn. It is politically correct to be involved with the east, but investors in Munich are far less interested in the new Länder of eastern Germany than in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and other East and Central European countries. Among the Länder of eastern Germany, Saxony is the pacesetter and Dresden the most influential capital city.

Many Germans feel the larger interests of both Germany and Europe require *further decentralization*. Their concern is that a dominant, centralized republic with 80 million citizens and Berlin as its capital will intimidate its neighbors and foster anti-German coalitions.

The question many Europeans are asking is whether regions are gradually supplanting nation states as sources of political authority and custodians of public policy. While the answer remains unclear, it is likely that cities and regions can and will probably assume responsibilities that have belonged to central governments. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the EU would be built only of numerous regions, large and small. So far the significance of the regions is a good deal more economic than political. The nation-state is not going

anywhere anytime soon. It remains the only proven instrument for protecting justice, tolerance, and other human values. That said, the signs point to regionalism, not the EU, as constituting the latest threat to the authority of the nation-state.

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