

## **Corsican Nationalist Movements** Autonomy of the French Island in Question

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to reveal the essence of the nationalist conflict at the heart of the European Union and its possible outcomes. The nationalist movements in Corsica are becoming more and more serious nowadays. All actions and news taking place in Corsica are regularly and thoroughly covered by the media. However, this conflict requires more precise consideration and in-depth study, beginning with the definition of the concept of nationalism, ending with the legitimacy of all these separatist movements. At the beginning of the work, the geography and history of the island will be covered, before concentrating on the history of the formation of the nationalist movements. We will identify the premises for the creation of nationalist movements and continue with description and analysis of the activities of nationalist groups nowadays. Also in the work we will present and describe the two sides of the Corsican conflict. We will conclude by questioning the possibility of obtaining the desired autonomy for Corsica from the French mainland and we will describe the possible outcomes of that conflict.

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### **Introduction**

Most people when thinking of France often imagine this country only on the one hand; namely, beautiful and peaceful landscapes, delicious food such as baguettes, croissants and various cheeses, delicious wine, elegant French fashion and the French themselves, open and sensual. However, France has another side which is usually not visible from the tourist's side. It is represented by various movements that often display aggression and discontent towards the French government, one of such movements at the moment is nationalism. Nowadays in the French "island of beauty", Corsica, nationalist movements and groups are actively developing, fighting for the autonomy and independence of their island from mainland France. In this article, we will examine in detail this conflict in Corsica and its possible consequences. This work argues that Corsica's chances of obtaining the independence are very insignificant in the next decade, and the separation of this island from France will create an unfavorable trend in the European Union. The work will be divided into three main parts to prove the argument. In the first part of the work we give a brief introduction to the geography and history of Corsica. In the second part, the author will identify the prerequisites for the creation of nationalist movements in Corsica and concentrate on their history. Also, the second part of the work will examine the position of the French government regarding the Corsican separatist movements. The final part will affect the future of Corsican nationalism and will analyze the chances of Corsica to gain autonomy or independence.

### **1. Corsica: Geography and history**

Corsica is the fourth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea and one of the 18 administrative regions of France. It is located southeast of the French mainland and west of the Italian Peninsula. The island stretched from the south to the north has a maximum of 183 km of length and 83 km of width, and the total area of the island is 8,680 km<sup>2</sup> (1.4% of total French territory). A single chain of mountains makes up two-thirds of the island. The population of Corsica is 314 486 (2011) people and most of them are Corsicans (1, 27% from the whole population of France). The capital of the island is located in Ajaccio. Corsican citizens speak both French and Corsican languages, however only French is recognized as the official language. When it comes to the Corsican economy, it relies heavily on tourism. As a result, the service sector is most important. The island has a low industrial rate, so there are three industrial sectors: energy, agro-food and the construction sectors. Corsica has a slightly higher unemployment rate than average. In 2008 the regional recession on the labor market has begun and soon in 2012 the unemployment rate rose by 0.5 percentage points and reached 9.9% in the end of 2012 (European Commission, 2015). The unemployment rate did not stop to grow and already by 2017 it grew up to 10.6% (European Commission, 2018). Such a high unemployment rate could be partially explained by the reliance of the economy on tourism, which induces seasonal jobs.

The history of Corsica has been influenced by its strategic position at the heart of the western Mediterranean and its maritime routes. Also island was largely influenced by Sardinia as the closest island, by the Isle of Elba, by Tuscany and eventually by the French port of Nice. Corsica was occupied continuously since the Mesolithic Era. After a brief occupation by the Carthaginians<sup>1</sup> it became a part of the Roman Republic at the end of the First Punic War (264-241 BC) and, with Sardinia, in 238 BC became a province of the Roman Republic. Corsica was perceived as one of the most backward regions of the Roman Republic. The western half of the Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th century and the island was invaded by the Vandals and the Ostrogoths. Soon the island became a part of the Kingdom of the Lombards, after that came under the influence of the republic of Pisa. In 1284 the Battle of Meloria against Genoa brought the end of the Pisan rule and the beginning of the Genoese influence in Corsica. In 1729 the Corsican Revolution for independence began and in 1755 under the leadership of Pasquale Paoli<sup>2</sup> the independent Corsican Republic was proclaimed. However, soon in 1768, the city-state of Genoa was forced to sell the island to the French, as it could not independently cope with uprisings and riots (Christophe Roux, 2002). After the sale of the island to France, uprisings were suppressed and Corsica officially became a full-fledged part of France in 1789. Straight after that gradual process of cultural, economic and political integration started. During rather a long period of time Corsicans were attracted to France (during most of the 19th and 20th centuries), reasons for that attraction were manifold. First of all the knowledge of the French language, the high prestige of French culture and the awareness of being part of a powerful state played a significant role. Moreover, being the part of France meant the possibility of well-paid jobs as civil servants, the prospect of serving the French army, the introduction of steamboats, which reduced the travel time drastically. Eventually Napoleon himself, who was born in Corsica in 1769 and by his existence alone created a strong link between France and Corsica.

Thanks to all these factors by around 1870 Corsica had landed in the French cultural world.

## **2. Corsican Nationalism, its premises and development**

In this part of the work the author will concentrate on the history of the birth of nationalism in Corsica and will analyze it step by step. Such features as nationalism and separatism were inherent in the Corsicans since the Mesolithic era, when the constant conquests of the island began. However, it was only in the 1920s that nationalism became more widespread and the first autonomous political party was created, called the Partitu Corsu d'Azione. In 1927, that party became the Partitu Corsu Autonomistu and lasted until 1939. This party did not exist for a long time as its main leaders supported Italian fascist irredentism<sup>3</sup> and therefore the idea of regional autonomy was illegal in France during and of course after the Second World War. This was the first wave of the official birth of nationalism in Corsica which served as the beginning of those nationalist movements that exist in Corsica and nowadays.

In the late 19th century, throughout Europe, cultural, and then political, regional protests began. The second wave of regionalism in Corsica occurred in the 1950s. At first, everything that was happening had the character of socio-economic protests and only later in the 1960s it grew into a nationalist movement. At the time, several nationalist groups began to develop in Corsica, aimed at obtaining autonomy from France and protecting the Corsican people, language and traditions. The Corsican conflict became known at the world level in 1975. This fame was the result of an armed police assault on a pieds-noirs<sup>4</sup>-owned wine cellar in Aleria<sup>5</sup>, occupied by Corsican nationalists on 23 August 1975. All these doings together as a result marked the beginning of the armed nationalist struggle against the French government. Ever since, Corsican nationalism has been a feature of the island's politics, with calls for greater autonomy and protection for Corsican culture and the Corsican language.

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<sup>1</sup> colonization by the ancient Greeks

<sup>2</sup> Corsican political and military leader, head of the government of the Corsican Republic in 1755-1769

<sup>3</sup> Irredentism - a kind of national policy of a state (political movement, party), aimed at unifying the scattered peoples, nations, ethnic groups. (Political Dictionary)

<sup>4</sup> 'Pieds-Noirs' - A person of European origin who lived in Algeria during French rule, especially one who returned to Europe after Algeria was granted independence. (Oxford Living Dictionary)

<sup>5</sup> Aleria - is a commune in the Haute-Corse department of France on the island of Corsica.

## **2.1. 'The National Liberation Front of Corsica'(FLNC) and French Government position in the Corsican issue**

A militant group called 'The National Liberation Front of Corsica' which was active since 1976 occupied the central position in the National Liberation Struggle against the French State. Typical militant acts by the FLNC were bombings aimed at public buildings, banks, tourist infrastructures, military buildings and other perceived French symbols, in addition to aggravated assault against individuals, armed bank robbery, and extortion against private enterprises. The attacks were usually performed against buildings and the island's infrastructures, but sometimes also against people. The overwhelming majority of their attacks on the French mainland took place in Nice, Marseille and Avignon. In 2014 and again in 2016, the militant organization announced the cease of its armed struggle. Nevertheless, a number of splinter groups have so far emerged and are still active.

However, today the nationalist movement takes an increasingly important and significant place in the politics of Corsica. The nationalists, who ran the island for the past two years, achieved their best result in the elections to the regional parliament in December 2017. The Pe a Corsica (For Corsica) alliance won two-thirds of the seats in a new regional assembly (¡Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.). Nationalists highlighted three core demands for French Government: equal recognition for the Corsican language, an amnesty for those in jail considered to be political prisoners, and recognition of a special residency status for Corsica to stop foreigners buying holiday homes on the island. Such election results give the nationalists more power and opportunities to demand autonomy from the French government. 'Pè a Corsica finished well ahead of Macron's La République En Marche<sup>6</sup>, which polled third with only 12.7% of votes; more than 47% of Corsicans did not vote' (The Guardian, 2017). It should be noted that the results of the survey showed that most of the Corsica's 330,000 residents want Corsica to remain part of France. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, did not show much interest and seriousness about the nationalist movements in Corsica, but after the election results he was forced to pay more attention to nationalist movements and to speak out about this conflict. And soon after the elections the Elysée<sup>7</sup> published a statement that the island would not gain independence in the nearest future.

*"The project they have put forward for Corsica is ambitious but is not that of independence. A responsible and reasonable dialogue between the new (Corsican) authority and the state is imperative. Only a constructive dialogue will mobilize the means of economic, environmental and social emancipation necessary for Corsica and its inhabitants." (the Elysée, 2017)*

Corsican nationalists are demanding negotiations with the French government on gaining greater autonomy for their island after an impressive election results. Jean-Guy Talamoni, the Corsica assembly speaker and leader of Corsican nationalist movement for full independence of the Island, made a rather strong statement towards the French Government forcing it to open negotiations very rapidly over the Corsican issue. He also threatened that a wave of protests would be expected along the island, if negotiations were not started. Thousands of Corsican nationalists marched on Saturday demanding greater freedoms for the French island, three days ahead of a visit by President Emmanuel Macron. Officials said up to 6,000 people attended the demonstration (BBC News, 2018). The protest aimed to "convince" Macron to "open a dialogue". French president, Emmanuel Macron, claimed that he is open to dialogue but ruled out making any changes to the constitution, effectively rejecting the nationalists' demand for special status for the territory.

### **3. Future of the Corsican Nationalism**

On February 6, 2018 President Emmanuel Macron visited Corsica in order to open the dialogue with the leaders of the Corsican regional government. The ceremony took place in the city of Ajaccio and received

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<sup>6</sup> La République En Marche is a centrist and liberal political party in France, founded on 6 April 2016 by Emmanuel Macron.

<sup>7</sup> Elysée - the French government. "elysee". Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. 25 Mar. 2018. <Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/elysee>>.

great attention from both the Corsicans and the inhabitants of the mainland France, who fear that gaining more autonomy by Corsica can provoke the complete separation and independence of the island from France. However, the nationalists hastened to assure that they do not plan to completely separate the island from France, at least in the nearest future. President Macron stressed in his speech that Corsica is heavily dependent on the French economy, meaning that the separation of the island from the French Republic would be completely unreasonable. On the demands for greater autonomy for the island, Macron responded that he recognizes the distinct nature of the island and is ready to grant Corsica greater autonomy, namely "the future of it aspires to, without giving in to demands that would take it out of the Republican fold" (Emmanuel Macron, 2018). For their part, the leaders of Corsica assured the president that they would be satisfied with greater autonomy and special mention in the constitution. Thus, the visit of the French president clarified the conflict and most likely in the nearest future the conflict that has been harassing France for almost half a century will be settled. And in the end, the complete separation of the island and gaining independence from France is almost unbelievable. After all, apart from the fact that links between the politics and economics of France and Corsica are obviously interwoven, that would already create great difficulties for the island in secession, and subsequently, most likely, a crisis. Also, the European Union understands that the establishment of an island by a separate state will create an incorrect and destructive trend for regions that are in a similar situation as Corsica now. There have always been separatists and independence movements in Europe. However, nowadays the number of such movements is rapidly growing. There are a lot of pro-independence movements in Europe and regions seeking to gain autonomy or full independence from the central governments. On the picture 2 you can see all top pro-independence movements in Europe (picture 2). And if such small regions as Corsica (France) or for example Bornholm (Denmark) and Sicily (Italy) receive the desired autonomy or independence, this will provoke a destructive and harmful tendency for all other regions of the European Union. As the result the map of Europe will be cardinally redraw. Recently Theo Deutinger, Filip Cieloch and Lucia de Usera<sup>8</sup> created a map for Mark Magazine which shows what Europe would be like if every separatist movement succeeds in its struggle (**¡Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**). According to this map only a few countries will remain unchanged, with the rest split in two or more entities relating to linguistic or regional boundaries and as the result Europe will become an absolutely fragmented land even more than ever (The Guardian (2017).

### Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the geography and history of the French island, Corsica, analyzed the prerequisites for the emergence of nationalist movements and called into question the island's ability to obtain the desired autonomy. First of all, this conflict between nationalists in Corsica and the French government will pose a new challenge to President Emmanuel Macron who will have to decide whether to cede some control or leave the island fully under the France's influence. And when it comes to the obtaining of autonomy by Corsica it is rather possible in the nearest future, as the President Macron stated in his speech during the visit to Ajaccio on February 6, 2018. However, at the moment there can be no question of obtaining complete independence of the island from France, for the two most important reasons. As we argued earlier, Corsica is economically and politically closely tied to France and separation from France is likely to lead the island to a crisis. Also it is worth remembering that the separation from France will mean the exclusion of Corsica from the European Union, which will deprive the island of many benefits. And eventually, we came to the most significant conclusion: France will not allow Corsica to secede and get full independence, at least in the nearest future, as this will serve as an example and a negative trend for other similar regions where nationalism flourishes. Summing everything up, I would say that the only possible result of the Corsican nationalists struggle is getting more autonomy for the island from the mainland France; however the possibility of gaining independence is very insignificant.

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