

Copyright © ECMI 2018
This article is located at:

http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2018/Hoch_pre.pdf

Preface

Tamara Hoch*

European Centre for Minority Issues

There could not be more suitable timing for a special issue dealing with separatist movements in Europe than today. Not only does Europe confront a multiplicity of external challenges relating to its foreign policy, external relations, or how to profile itself internationally, but it also faces many serious internal challenges. Over the last couple of years, tensions have grown between many European Union (EU) member states, occupying strong attention from European-level organizations. This point was very well illustrated through the refugee crisis, which put intra-European relations to a test, causing strong disagreements between many EU member states. Consensual agreement or ‘one’ Europe no longer holds the same strength, rather Europe is divided on many issues, not least on how to proceed or sustain the achieved European integration. Within such an environment, tensions within individual European countries, as well as between regions, are expected to also be affected.

Studies on separatist movements have existed for a long time, very often in parallel to minority studies. One recent example in which the study of separatism reconfirmed its significant ties to minority studies was through the recent Ukraine conflict which began in 2014. The conflict showed the close connection between separatism, nationalism, and minority

* Dr. Tamara Hoch is the editor of the Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe.
Mail: hoch@ecmi.de

politics, but also the dominance of security approaches. Although the Ukrainian conflict has been studied through diverse approaches, it was still dominated by security approaches, something that has held a dominant position in the general study of separatism. This dates back to some of the large scholarly waves in the study of independence movements that emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union or the more violent break-away movements in the vein of the Yugoslav Wars. Many pursuing studies were dominated by security approaches, i.e. where separatist movements were viewed and/or approached as security risks, posing a challenge to the nation state but also a general risk to peace.

The present special issue arrives at a time when secessionist terrorism seems to have been replaced by more peaceful forms of expression among separatist movements, such as referendums, but also more democratic negotiations and legal solutions. Bourne in this special issue illustrates this emerging trend through the case of the Basque country, showing how this particular case has moved from the discourse of securitization to actually imply desecuritization. This trend definitely deserves more scholar attention.

This special issue also returns relevant concepts, such as secession, nationalism, autonomy, and independence, however, in a novel context. It shows that these concepts are still loaded with controversies and that they are far from settled issues in several countries, even in places where it was long assumed that risk of separatism has long been settled. Such controversy is demonstrated through the well-known case, namely South Tyrol, by Crepez in this special issue. However, what is new is a constantly changing political and social context largely characterized by rapidly spreading trends across many European countries, namely the populist growth and the growing support for populist political parties. In such complex and challenging times, the ways in which separatism takes new expression deserve new attention. Patlis also discusses some well-known cases, namely Transnistria and Gagauzia, by also pointing to the relevance of the broader European-level political developments and how this may impact the devolution processes in the two regions.

It is time to reflect on the multitude of expressions that separatist movement embrace nowadays, by keeping in mind their diversified agendas, goals, and forms of organizing, as is demonstrated in the introductory article in this special issue by Anderson. The author's highly comprehensive article opens up the special issue by guiding us through the European landscape of separatist movements, leading up to the need to readdress certain questions. Important questions that deserve renewed attention are, among others, how do separatist movements adapt to new political and legal contexts? Do we need to rethink the tools for studying old concepts such as separatism, nationalism, autonomy, and independence? In what ways have today's

separatist movements diversified? How can we move away from viewing separatist movements as security threats to actually acknowledge their democratic potentials? For a research centre like ECMI, what can the study of separatist movements add to the highly interdisciplinary minority studies, or vice versa?