

Political Discourses on Secession in the EU

*The Cases of Catalonia,
Scotland and Northern Ireland*

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Abstract

The EU may be facing a perfect storm as a result of recent crises, mounting Euroscepticism and rising nationalist sentiments, with the latter also playing a role in recent events in Catalonia and Scotland as well as in the Brexit referendum. This new political context provides an excellent opportunity to reassess the stance of the EU with regard to secessionist conflicts. This thesis uses this opportunity to build on the work of Bourne (2014) by analysing whether the political discourses of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession within the EU framework, changed between 2014 and 2017 – in the case of Catalonia, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The analysis shows that the only discourses that changed significantly *over time* were those of Sinn Féin in the Northern Irish case and of EU representatives with regard to Scotland. Besides change over time, it found change *between cases*; the discourse of EU representatives in the Northern Irish case represents a departure from the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine that was prominent in the Catalan and Scottish case. The findings also suggest that the EU's unwillingness to be involved in secessionist conflicts as well as the dismissal of post-secession EU membership has not necessarily discouraged regionalist parties from using the EU to underline the civic nature of minority nationalism; the parties under analysis continued to seek legitimacy for their cause at the European level through strong normative language, while professing adherence to the EU (values) and the democratic will of the people. Finally, the thesis shows that the EU may have started to adopt a more active stance in secessionist debates – undeniably so in the case of Northern Ireland.

Keywords: secession, Europeanisation, Catalonia, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Brexit.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CDC	<i>Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya</i>	['Democratic Convergence of Catalonia']
EP	<i>European Parliament</i>	
EPC	<i>European Policy Centre</i>	
ERC	<i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i>	['Republic Left of Catalonia']
EU	<i>European Union</i>	
JxSí	<i>Junts Pel Sí</i>	['Together for Yes']
MS(s)	<i>Member State(s)</i>	
NI	<i>Northern Ireland</i>	
SF	<i>Sinn Féin</i>	['We Ourselves']
SNP	<i>Scottish National Party</i>	
UK	<i>United Kingdom</i>	

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2004, European politics scholar Elisa Roller wrote: ‘One of the key themes of debates of regionalism, minority nationalism and European integration is how the [European Union] affects devolution settlements’ (p. 98). This question still proved very relevant when, in 2014, fellow scholar Angela Bourne examined how secessionist politics in Catalonia and Scotland are influenced by the European Union (EU). Through the assessment of political discourses, Bourne found that the EU represented ‘a complex web of opportunities and constraints for pro- and anti-independence movements’ (p. 115). In addition, Bourne argued that the EU authorities, faced by pro- and anti-independence discourses on secession, were reluctant to be involved. Since Bourne’s analysis, however, the context around the secessionist conflicts has evolved. First, a negotiated referendum on independence was held in Scotland in September 2014. Two months later, Catalonia followed with a non-binding consultation on independence, without the consent of the Spanish government. In June 2015, the population of the UK was summoned to the ballot box to vote on the future of EU membership. The decision to leave the EU, referred to as Brexit, sparked new questions regarding the UK’s own unity, with calls for a second referendum in Scotland and renewed debates regarding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (NI).

In addition to these electoral proceedings and their outcomes, the EU has been confronted with developments such as mounting Euroscepticism and the rise of populist parties throughout many of its Member States (MSs).¹ The EU might therefore now be facing a perfect storm, intensifying the fears of disintegration. This new political context represents a good opportunity to assess whether the stance of the EU has changed with regard to sensitive national issues such as secessionist conflicts and territorial questions. This thesis uses this opportunity to build on the work of Angela Bourne (2014) by looking at secessionist conflicts in the framework of the EU since 2014. Simultaneously, this thesis seeks to address several issues that have been raised in the literature. It takes into account the processes of bottom-up, top-down and horizontal Europeanisation, as widely discussed within the literature on Europeanisation (e.g. Börzel, 2002; Major, 2005; Hepburn, 2008; Vink & Graziano, 2007, 2013; Jovanovic, 2014). In addition, attention is devoted to the substate level, which has thus far not received sufficient attention in Europeanisation studies (Hepburn, 2008; Jovanovic, 2014; Swenden & Bolleyer, 2014). More specifically, it focuses on regionalist parties, a party family that merits further research in relation to European integration (Elias, 2008; Hepburn, 2008; Jolly, 2015). Finally, by focusing on contemporary secessionist conflicts that affect European politics and may eventually demand a response from the EU, it answers to a call for assessments of real-world problems within EU studies (Lynggaard, 2015).

As in Bourne’s study, the focus of the thesis is on the discourses of political actors at both the substate and supranational level. The thesis will be guided by the following research question: *did the*

¹ Many headlines focused on the defeat of populism after the Dutch and French elections in March and May 2017. Yet, it was soon acknowledged that this electoral blow may not have signalled the end of populism. Moreover, it is important to note that the ‘electoral blow’ should not be overstated, given that the populist parties in the Netherlands and France both came second and received large shares of the total vote, 13.06% and 34% respectively (Anon., 2017; Birnbaum & Faiola, 2017).

political discourses of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession within the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017? To answer this question, the thesis will focus on four case studies, three on substate regions and one on the EU, and will use a framing analysis to address the following two sub-questions: (a) how did regionalist parties frame the issue of secession within the EU framework in this period, and (b) how did EU representatives in turn frame their discourse on this issue. The substate regions chosen as cases here are Catalonia, Scotland and NI. Justifications for the selection of these cases will be offered in Chapter 3. In order to use the same terminology across all cases, the thesis will follow a broad definition of the term secession, namely: 'to withdraw from the control of the central government' (Coppeters, 2010). This entails that it can refer to the withdrawal from a state so as to become an independent country (e.g. Catalonia and Scotland) as well as to become part of another country (e.g. NI).

Chapter 2 will provide a brief literature review and point out gaps in the research on Europeanisation, substate regions and minority nationalism in order to underline the relevance of further research on secessionist conflicts in the EU framework. Chapter 3 will discuss the theory, research design, method and sources that are used for the analysis. The three following chapters will present the cases of Catalonia, Scotland and NI. In these case studies, the focus will be on the political discourse of the selected regionalist parties; Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) in the Catalan case, the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the Scottish case and Sinn Féin (SF) in the Northern Irish case. This will be followed by a chapter on the political discourse of EU representatives in relation to Catalonia, Scotland and NI with regard to secession. Finally, Chapter 8 will summarise the main findings of the thesis, offer concluding remarks and provide suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the following sections, the main bodies of literature that are relevant for this thesis will be examined. Attention will first be paid to a subset of Europeanisation literature on the dimensions of the process, followed by studies that discuss the process of Europeanisation in relation to substate regions. Lastly, a short section devotes to literature on minority nationalism and regionalist parties. This literature is not necessarily inspired by the agenda of Europeanisation research, yet many studies in these fields have analysed secessionism in the context of the EU, which allows for links between these fields and the Europeanisation literature and creates relevant avenues for further research.

2.1. Dimensions of Europeanisation

Over the last few decades, the study of Europeanisation has resulted in a large body of literature with substantive debates as a result (e.g. Radaelli, 2000, 2003; Börzel, 2002; Ladrech, 2002, 2010; Bulmer & Lequesne, 2005; Vink & Graziano, 2007, 2013). The scope of this study does, however, not allow for a comprehensive overview of the existing debates. Instead, the focus lies on the *dimensions* of Europeanisation, which have generally been conceptualised as: the vertical – consisting of bottom-up and top-down – and the horizontal dimension. The two vertical dimensions are generally seen as ‘the downloading dimension – domestic change caused by an EU-generated impact’ – and ‘the uploading dimension – projecting ideas from the national to the EU level and the emergence of new structures at the EU level’ (Major, 2005, p. 177). According to Börzel (2002), the latter dimension received most attention in early literature as scholars sought to conceptualise how MSs influenced European integration. Since the 1990s, however, many scholars turned to the top-down dimension by studying the influence of the EU on national politics, policy and polity (*Ibid.*). Although this did not necessarily lead to the conceptualisation of Europeanisation as a one-way process, it did result in studies focusing on only ‘one side of the equation’ (*Id.*, p. 194). Börzel therefore proposed a way to link both vertical dimensions conceptually, creating a two-way approach, which she operationalised in the study of policy-making and policy adaptation between the EU and its MSs. A similar path was followed by other scholars since then, but critique on the one-sidedness of Europeanisation studies has endured. Consequently, authors such as Vink & Graziano (2007; 2013) have pointed out that there is a need for studies devoting attention to the two vertical dimensions simultaneously, as this would help create a better understanding of the dynamics of Europeanisation overall.

Vink & Graziano, however, also strongly advocate for the inclusion of the third dimension; horizontal Europeanisation. They call for a ‘more than two-way process’ that includes both vertical as well as a horizontal dimension of Europeanisation, which entails that the impact of exchanges or linkages between actors in different MSs need to be considered (*Id.*, p. 47). Although the horizontal dimension has been present in Europeanisation studies, the focus has generally been on the vertical dimensions, with top-down approaches receiving most attention in recent literature.

Jovanovic (2014) also highlights the dominance of top-down approaches in recent studies and calls for more bottom-up perspectives. In Jovanovic's view, adopting a bottom-up perspective is valuable 'in order to understand what actors do and how they bring about change through their own uses of Europe', as evidenced by the studies of Bourne and Crepaz in the same volume (*Id.*, p. 10). Bourne, like Vink & Graziano (2013), considers the concepts of vertical *and* horizontal Europeanisation very relevant for the study of domestic and European politics. She outlines four key concepts, derived from Europeanisation literature, which are useful for analysing the EU's effects on secessionist politics in MSs; (1) opportunity structures, (2) usages of Europe, (3) vertical and (4) horizontal Europeanisation (2014, p. 98). Before going into more detail about Bourne's study and related works, it is important to discuss another shortcoming within the field.

In the literature on the dimensions of Europeanisation, the focus continues to be on MSs. Political actors in substate regions with devolved powers are often not included. For instance, Major defines 'Europeanisation [as] an ongoing, interactive and mutually constitutive process of change linking national and European levels, where the responses of the [MSs] to the integration process feed back into EU institutions and policy processes and vice versa' (2005, p. 177). Although this description acknowledges both directions of vertical Europeanisation, it merely considers the EU and MSs as actors in this process. Hepburn (2008) criticises both this continued focus on MSs as well as the lack of bottom-up approaches and argues that 'most analyses neglect the uses and perceptions of Europe by *sub-state* actors' (*Id.*, p.540). In other words, of the studies that do address the bottom-up dimension, relatively few have focused on substate actors. Likewise, Ladrech advocates for a more in-depth account of the links between top-down and bottom-up processes, as he believes that the two create a 'reflexive or interactive relation' between MSs and the EU (2010, p. 3). Such a reflexive relationship can also be explored from a subnational-supranational perspective, something that this thesis aims to examine.

2.2. Europeanisation and the Substate Level

One strand of research that *has* produced works involving substate actors has concentrated on 'the consequences of Europeanisation for regions and inter-governmental arrangements' (Colina, et al., 2014, p. 283). In this subfield, Europeanisation is commonly characterised as a process that creates new opportunities and constraints for substate regions. Scholars have sought to identify which substate actors do (not) benefit from the process and whether the opportunities outweigh the constraints for these actors (e.g. Brugue et al., 2000; Dardanelli, 2003; Duina and Bok, 2014; Colina et al., 2014). As mentioned above, Bourne (2014) also employs the concept of opportunity structures and finds that independence movements have been more constrained by European integration, whereas anti-independence groups have been provided with more opportunities to propagate their argument. Bourne, however, goes beyond a mere identification of winners and losers of European integration, through the employment of the three other concepts; horizontal and vertical Europeanisation, and the usages of Europe. The last concept is helpful in

analysing political deliberation of secession in the EU. Bourne argues that '[t]he EU is both an arena for articulating claims and a source of allies, while appeals to images, histories and experiences of the EU and other European states can be mobilized discursively in reasoning for or against secession' (*Id.*, p. 115).

Furthermore, Bourne usefully links the empirical work in her study to theoretical literature on Europeanisation. She argues that vertical and horizontal processes of Europeanisation can also exist in relation to substate regions. First, bottom-up Europeanisation can occur as substate actors, involved in secessionist conflicts, may seek to influence EU actors in order to shape the prospects of a newly independent state. Secondly, top-down Europeanisation has a role in secessionist debates as newly independent states require the recognition of the EU as well as the MSs. Besides the MSs, through the accession procedure, the institutions like the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP) have influence on the EU's enlargement procedures. They can therefore become 'authoritative arbiters in efforts to determine whether or not the EU will, in fact, facilitate independence [of a substate region]' (*Id.*, p. 100). Thirdly, horizontal Europeanisation may occur when 'communicative linkages' exists between independence movements in different regions, with one region referring to similar movements in other regions to gain legitimacy or mobilise support (*Id.*, p. 101). These communicative linkages can also 'take the form of domestic actors comparing their own situation with that in other countries as well as evaluating developments abroad' (*Ibid.*). Bourne's conceptualisation of the vertical and horizontal dimensions in relation to substate regions forms the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

By linking her work to theoretical concepts of Europeanisation, Bourne illustrates how studies on secessionism can be placed on the agenda of Europeanisation research. This is helpful, as many studies on secessionism and minority nationalism in the EU do relate to similar topics but do not always make this link explicit. Finally, Bourne highlights the 'importance of public deliberation for secession processes within the EU' (p. 96), which serves as a key argument for studying political discourses in relation to secessionist conflicts and justifies the use of discourse analysis in this thesis.

2.3. Minority Nationalism and Regionalist Parties

In the field of minority nationalism, one influential author is Michael Keating. His work focuses on what he calls the nationalities question: 'the issue of politically conscious nationalist movements [within an existing state that aspire the creation of] their own state' (2004, p. 367). Keating argues that European integration has influenced this issue by providing a discursive space through which minority nationalist can claim more powers or autonomy (2004, p. 383). Another key development that he discusses is minority nationalists' use of normative language to underline the civic nature of their cause in order to increase the legitimacy of their demands for statehood. Similarly, Hepburn and McLoughlin (2011) argue that the political voices of minority nationalist parties have been influenced by European integration as they now seek to portray themselves as more civic and credible players in 'the European ideological game' (*Id.*, p. 385). This idea relates to a more recent question raised by Anderson and Keil in their 2016 study of minority nationalism,

namely 'the extent to which the EU is used as a tool to highlight the civic nature of contemporary minority nationalism' (*Id.*, p. 56). Although Keating's work has addressed how minority nationalists have used normative language to gain legitimacy for their cause, Anderson and Keil's articulation of a similar question points towards a need for reassessment. Given the fact that the EU authorities have been reluctant towards secessionist debates and have dismissed the possibility of post-secession EU membership (Bourne, 2014), it may no longer be seen as (equally) useful by secessionist actors to underline their commitment to the EU as a way of emphasising the civic nature of their cause. Consequently, these actors may have focused on other arguments to legitimise their cause instead of appealing to shared European values and arguing that their defence of the peoples' democratic will makes them credible civic players. This thesis will reflect on whether such a change has indeed occurred.

Lastly, various scholars in the field of European political parties have called for further research on the regionalist party family in relation to Europeanisation – a party family also referred to with other, often interchangeable names, such as minority nationalist or stateless nationalist (e.g. Elias, 2008; Hepburn 2008; Jolly, 2015). This thesis will follow the definition provided by Jolly (2015) of regionalist parties as political parties with specific independence, autonomy or territorial goals. As these parties have remained underexplored in relation to European integration and substate governance (Jolly, 2015, p.3), the focus on regionalist parties in this thesis is justified.

This chapter has illustrated how literature on Europeanisation can be related to the fields of minority nationalism and the substate level by looking at the dimensions of Europeanisation. This is especially relevant considering that the bottom-up and horizontal dimension deserve more scholarly attention. Moreover, the underlying questions whether a reflexive relationship exists between sub-national and supranational levels and whether minority nationalist still use the EU instrumentally as a way of underlining the civic nature of minority nationalism can be investigated by these overlapping approaches. Finally, the need for studies that address the dimensions of Europeanisation in relation to substate regions along with an appeal to a focus on real-world problems within EU studies (Lynggaard, 2015) calls for further assessment of secessionist conflicts in the context of the EU. The next chapter will elaborate on how these questions will be examined in this thesis.

Chapter 3: Theory and Method

The previous chapter has highlighted gaps in earlier literature as well as the relevance of further research on Europeanisation in relation to substate regions and secessionist debates. Against this background, this chapter will elaborate on the theoretical foundations, research design, method and sources.

3.1. Theoretical Foundations

As mentioned above, this thesis builds on the work of Angela Bourne; *Europeanization and Secession: The Cases of Catalonia and Scotland*, in which Bourne argues that EU authorities have been unwilling to play a role in the secessionist debates of Catalonia and Scotland. This statement is taken as a point of departure in the present study, which sets out to analyse whether the situation remains the same since Bourne's analysis or whether the discourse on secession has experienced a shift. The present study thus firstly elaborates on Bourne's work, by focusing on the period from 2014 onwards. Secondly, it expands on Bourne's work by asking a different, if related research question.

The aim of Bourne's work is to develop a better understanding of the role of the EU in what is referred to as 'the politics of secession' in MSs (2014, p. 95). Although she does employ the concepts of vertical and horizontal Europeanisation, her main question is concerned with the influence of the EU on independence movements. Following this approach strictly would result in a more top-down perspective. Given that the literature review has highlighted the need for more comprehensive approaches, this thesis poses a question that allows for all dimensions to be addressed more actively: *did the political discourses of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession in the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017?* By asking this question, the thesis will assess whether vertical and horizontal processes of Europeanisation occurred in relation to secessionist debates. Furthermore, the thesis will analyse whether the subnational discourses on secession found more resonance at the EU level and whether, as a result, EU representatives became more willing, or felt the compulsion, to engage in these debates and play a role in secessionist conflicts.

In accordance with the literature, the definition of Europeanisation applied here makes room to consider the vertical and horizontal dimensions, in relation to secessionist debates. It combines the conceptualisations of Major (2005) and Bourne (2014), in that bottom-up Europeanisation may occur when secessionist actors seek to gain legitimacy and mobilise support for their secessionist cause by projecting (*uploading*) issue(s) to the EU level, while top-down Europeanisation may occur when the EU discourse induces changes at the (sub)national level or when EU representatives seek to influence the secessionist debate by projecting (*downloading*) EU views on secession onto this level. The attempt by both sets of actors to project an issue to or set the agenda at, respectively, the EU level or the (sub)national level can be referred to as a bottom-up or top-down strategy. Horizontal Europeanisation, then, may occur when

secessionist actors seek to influence the debate about secession in a wider context by referring to and creating linkages with other secessionist movements in Europe, again to gain legitimacy and mobilise support for their own cause.

Finally, it is appropriate to refer once more to the work of Vink & Graziano (2007). In their assessment of the state of the art of Europeanisation literature, they speak of an 'empirical turn' in the field (*Id.*, p. 7). The present study can be situated in this context; it does not aim to develop or test a theory on the dynamics of Europeanisation in the context of secessionist conflicts. Instead – as the next section will highlight – it examines the case studies in an empirical manner that connects with comparative politics and may lead to some generalisable findings, but does not have theory generation at heart.

3.2. Research Design and Method

A small-N comparative case study design is appropriate for this thesis given the complexity of secessionist conflicts and political developments such as Brexit, which ask for an in-depth analysis. In addition, the relevance of comparative research designs for the study of Europeanisation has been underlined by scholars such as Kennet Lynggaard (2012) as it allows for an examination of the relevance of the findings across cases. The three selected cases here are Catalonia, Scotland and NI. The former two regions were analysed in Bourne's study but remain appropriate cases to revisit due to the significant (and similar) political developments that have occurred since 2014, such as the Catalan independence consultation, the Scottish independence referendum and Brexit.

The third region has been selected for two reasons. First, due to its violent historical context, NI is often seen as a 'deviant case' that does generally not allow for most-similar research designs, resulting in fewer comparative studies involving the region (Hepburn & McLoughlin, 2011). Yet, comparative studies between NI and Scotland are appropriate, given their 'Celtic nationalism' and their 'shared experience of devolution in the UK context' (*Id.*, p. 386). Moreover, this comparison provides an opportunity to study how regionalist parties in divergent political settings respond to similar processes of European integration (*Ibid.*). This justifies the extension of the comparison to Catalan regionalist parties. Secondly, NI is included because of the developments around Brexit, as a result of which NI's status as a region within the EU and/or within the UK is likely to change. Due to the fact that the political situation in Scotland has also been affected, a comparison between these two regions within the UK proves interesting; it may provide a first indication on how an imminent withdrawal from the EU affects the political discourse of both EU and substate actors, on the status of devolved regions. Moreover, it could help uncover whether the reluctance of EU representatives to speak out on sensitive constitutional and territorial issues has changed differently for different regions. This may provide insights into intervening variables that affect the stance of the EU towards secessionist regions.

As mentioned in the literature review, studying discourses in relation to secessionist debates is appropriate because of the importance of public deliberation on secession. This thesis examines political discourses on secession through framing analysis. This is one of the four approaches of discourse analysis as outlined by Crespy (2015), the others being: content analysis, policy narratives and critical discourse analysis. Framing analysis is appropriate here as it ‘provides a flexible framework for analysing how discursive elements enable actors to construct meaning articulated around a broader idea’ (*Id.*, p. 107). In this study, the broader idea is secession. How are secession-related issues, such as independence referendums, framed? Which frames are used by actors when speaking of secession in the EU context, including about the consequence for EU membership? This study focuses on regionalist parties and EU representatives and whether their discourses have experienced a change between 2014 and 2017. Due to limited space, it focuses on regionalist parties with a government role in this period: ERC and CDC in Catalonia; the SNP in Scotland; and SF in NI. The fact that these parties have had a government role adds legitimacy to their discourse and is suggestive of a support base amongst the electorate. For the Catalan case, the pro-independence coalition Junts Pel Sí (JxSí), of which ERC and CDC form part, is also included.

In order to examine the first sub-question of the thesis – *how regionalist parties framed the issue of secession within the EU framework between 2014 and 2017* – the delineation of frames is necessary. Initially, frames were derived deductively from the literature. These frames were based on arguments for or against secession (e.g. economic (in)viability, historical legitimacy or constitutional, international or EU law). However, a preliminary analysis showed that an inductive approach is more appropriate, given the political context in each case study. Consequently, the frames for the analysis of the first as well as the second sub-question – *how EU representatives in turn framed their discourse on secession* – have been derived inductively from the analysis.

3.3. Sources

Similar to Bourne, this study looks at public statements in newspaper articles from The Guardian and El País – also consulted by Bourne – as well as the Irish Times. The sample of approximately 3000 articles is derived from special sections on the independent movements, e.g. ‘Scottish independence’ and ‘*El desafío secesionista de Cataluña*’,² and through the use of advanced search options, e.g. “Northern Ireland” + “Sinn Féin” + “reunification”. Given the special section on Scottish independence in The Guardian, no Scottish newspaper is included. The articles are scanned by means of keywords. Where possible, the articles are cross-referenced in order to account for editorial biases. Moreover, for Chapter 7, additional sources such as the EUobserver, Politico and BBC News are included to allow for an extensive EU news coverage. In terms of the discourses, the focus is on members of the respective political parties (Chapter 4, 5 and 6) and EU representatives (Chapter 7). The news coverage covers the period from October 2014 (the month following

² [‘The secessionist challenge of Catalonia’]

the Scottish referendum) up until June 2017 (the month of the UK general elections and the Catalan referendum proclamation).³ In addition to newspaper articles, the manifestos of the selected parties for elections between 2014 and 2017 are analysed to allow for a diverse, representative corpus (see Crespy, 2005, p. 111-112). For the Catalan parties, this includes the 2015 regional elections and the general elections of 2015 and 2016.⁴ In the case of Scotland and NI, this includes the general elections of 2015 and 2017 as well as the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections and the 2017 Northern Irish Assembly elections.

³ Sources used in the discourse analyses are listed separately from academic sources in the bibliography.

⁴ The manifestos for these elections are in Catalan. The author of the thesis has a good understanding of this language.

Chapter 4: Framing Catalan Secession in the EU: ERC and CDC

In order to answer the research question – did the political discourses of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession within the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017? – this chapter explores how regionalist parties Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya framed the issue of Catalan secession.⁵ The analysis is broken down in three sections, based on key events: the 2014 consultation; the regional and general elections in 2015 and 2016; and the start of the process towards an independence referendum in 2016. Before turning to the analysis, the following paragraph will provide a brief contextualisation.

Catalonia has a long history of demands for autonomy.⁶ After the end of the Franco dictatorship, the Spanish Constitution of 1978 marked the beginning of the democratic transition. Together with the Statute of Autonomy of 1979, it granted Catalonia the status of an autonomous region with devolved powers. Over time, this arrangement became seen as too limited and demands for more autonomy intensified (Guibernau, 2014). More recently, the efforts of minority nationalists turned towards independence; this shift is ascribed to general dissatisfaction with the central government and larger developments such as the Euro-crisis (*Ibid.*). One key trigger leading to the shift towards independence was a legal dispute over a new Statute of Autonomy, which resulted in large protests throughout Catalonia in 2010 (*Ibid.*). In 2012, after failed negotiations with the central government over more fiscal autonomy, snap regional elections were called. These elections led to a coalition between ERC and CDC, with the promise of holding an independence referendum (Martí, 2013). In the following years, no structural dialogue was established between the Spanish government and the *Generalitat*, Catalonia's regional government. Large scale protests continued and support for self-determination surged in the region. Consequently, ERC and CDC intensified their strategy towards Catalan secession.

The following sections explore how Catalan secession was framed in the discourse of the parties. It is expected that secession-related frames were used in a prominent matter throughout 2014-2017, as independence was high on the political agenda in this period. The discourse may, however, have been influenced by domestic political developments, such as the re-election of ERC and CDC under JxSí as well as external developments such as the Brexit vote and EU statements on secession.

4.1. The Independence Consultation

When analysing the parties' discourse between October 2014 and September 2015, three frames stand out. Most importantly, officials from both parties employed a normative frame, based on democratic values

⁵ CDC was renamed Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català in 2016, following a decision to rebrand the party after corruption allegations. For the sake of simplicity, the party will be referred to as CDC throughout the analysis.

⁶ For a more extensive historical background on Catalonia, see Guibernau (2006; 2014). An overview of the party system and the regional parties in Catalonia can be found in Dowling (2009).

and principles; Catalonia was framed as a very democratic nation, Spain as an undemocratic state, and the independence process as democratic and thus legitimate. Moreover, by underlining the Catalan commitment to normative values, officials sought to argue that Catalonia, unlike Spain, would be an exemplary EU MS. For instance, shortly before the consultation in November 2014, Oriol Junqueras framed the Spanish state as anti-democratic as it did not authorise a referendum and challenged the unofficial consultation (El País 'Junqueras').⁷

After the consultation, the frame was present in statements by Arthur Mas and other officials who sought to justify the consultation as a democratic exercise.⁸ For instance, Mas argued that 'mature states' respect the right to self-determination, implying that Spain is no such state (The Guardian 'Mas'). The normative frame continued to be used in early 2015, with Francesc Homs referring to democratic values, at two points in time, once when arguing that civic dialogue will be necessary to achieve international recognition and once when denouncing the lawsuit against Catalan officials who organised the consultation (El País 'Lawsuit').⁹ In denouncing this lawsuit, Homs framed Spain as unveiling 'a low democratic quality' and reaffirmed the necessity of the Generalitat to inform the EU about the recent political developments (*Ibid.*). Homs' and similar statements can be seen as part of a bottom-up strategy of the Generalitat to gain support at the European level, by criticising the central government's actions.

Among the other prominent frames is the "Europeanness" frame, which invoked a European identity and a strong commitment to the EU. One key example is Mas accentuating 'the EU vocation of the Catalan people' and arguing that the Catalan nation is firmly rooted in the EU (El País 'Figaro'). Mas also argued that Catalonia was not asking for more than other regions, referring not only to Scotland but also to Québec, Lithuania and Montenegro (*Ibid.*). This illustrates that horizontal linkages to other regions were still actively employed to legitimise the Catalan case, regardless of the outcome of the ballots in these regions. The Scottish case was used continuously throughout this period to legitimise the Catalan case (e.g. El País 'Mas', 'Unilateral'). The fact that the Scottish referendum did not result in Scottish independence did not change the use of references to Scotland.

Finally, another frame stands out in August 2015, close to the regional elections; the independence quest framed as supported by a democratic mandate. This mandate was already "achieved" after the 2012 snap elections, but officials like Raül Romeva argued that the 2015 elections could strengthen it.¹⁰ The use of this frame was important to the parties, as it was exploited to support the idea that Catalonia could remain in the EU after secession, as long as it draws on a democratic mandate (El País 'Romeva'). Interestingly, the fact that this idea was shunned by EU actors in the past, did not stop party officials from framing secession as possible within the EU framework. Given that this thesis explores whether discourses on secession are affected by top-down (and bottom-up) Europeanisation, this is of significance; if past

⁷ Oriol Junqueras is the leader of ERC and has been Vice-President of the Generalitat since January 2016.

⁸ Arthur Mas is the leader of CDC and was President of the Generalitat from 2010-2016.

⁹ Francesc Homs is a CDC member and has been a spokesperson for the Generalitat since 2015.

¹⁰ Raül Romeva is an independent member of JxSí coalition and has been the Foreign Affairs counsellor of the Generalitat since January 2016.

statements by EU representatives on the discontinuity of EU membership did not stop the parties from framing secession as conceivable within the EU framework, future statements may also have little effect – Chapter 7 will come back to this point.

4.2. A Regional and Two General Elections

The frames used between the regional and general elections were similar to those employed before, namely; the normative, democratic mandate and Europeanness frames (El País 'Vocation', 'Puigdemont', 'Madrid'). The frames were present in the manifestos, where Catalonia was framed as highly committed to the European project, while secession was framed as in accordance with democratic principles (the right to self-determination) and the actions of the Spanish state were framed as anti-democratic and as obstructing the parties' democratic mandate (JxSí Manifesto, 2015; ERC Manifesto, 2015, 2016; DiL Manifesto, 2015; CDC Manifesto, 2016). Between the manifestos, no large changes in terms of frames were found. The JxSí manifesto devoted more attention to the secessionist conflict than the manifestos for the general elections, but this is can be accounted for by the reason that the former is directed at the Catalan electorate only.

The frames were also explicitly employed by party officials, as evidenced by a letter to 'the Spanish people' by i.e. Mas, Junqueras and Romeva (El País 'Letter'). The letter stressed that Catalonia is and will remain a democratic nation, adhering to the wishes of its citizens. By constructing a narrative around the defence of democracy, officials sought to justify the actions of the Generalitat to an audience beyond Catalonia. Moreover, the use of these frames in an article by Mas in *Politico* suggests that, given the newspaper's target audience, the frames were also used in a bottom-up strategy to legitimise the Catalan referendum cause (*Politico* 'Mas'). This strategy was also evidenced, as earlier with Homs' statements, by the fact that the parties, both in their manifestos and in public statements, underlined the need to inform the EU about the political developments in Catalonia (e.g. El País 'Puigdemont', 'Salmond'). The parties thus attempted to "upload" the issue of Catalan secession to the European level.

A frame that became prominent at this stage is that of political pragmatism. This frame was already employed during an international meeting in October 2014, when a CDC counsellor used the example of German reunification to argue that the EU would be able to accommodate other unforeseen situations, including Catalan secession. However, it came more to the foreground from the regional election campaign onwards as the key election pledge of JxSí, a binding referendum (JxSí Manifesto, 2015), led to an intensified strategy to increase legitimacy and to debunk arguments against secession. Thus, use of this frame should be seen as the outcome of a perceived need to counter the notion of Catalan exclusion from the EU more strongly; the frame was therefore frequently employed in statements to national and international press, including in a BBC interview by Romeva (El País 'BBC', 'Pragmatic'). This suggests that the frame was directed both at increasing legitimacy at home as well as at the European level – which again evidences an attempt at bottom-up Europeanisation.

The pragmatism frame was also employed prior to the general elections, for instance in the manifesto of CDC (DiL Manifesto, 2015). Notably, the Scottish case was also used abundantly in relation to the EU's pragmatism (El País 'Salmond', 'Solution'). Likewise, the new Catalan President, Carles Puigdemont, challenged the possibility of a forced EU-exit through a reference to the – at that time imminent – Brexit referendum.¹¹ Brexit, in his words, would result in 'an extraordinary display of political realism [by the EU], and an admirable, Darwinian ability to adapt' (El País 'Madrid'; The Guardian 'Brexit'). In addition, the parties adopted a more critical attitude towards the EU around the time of the Brexit referendum, for instance by alluding to the EU's democratic deficit (The Guardian 'Separatist'). This was exemplified by a direct message to Martin Schulz,¹² in which Romeva remarked that 'the EU bases itself not only in legality, but also in democracy' (El País 'Schulz'). The emphasis on democratic values was used by Romeva as a type of rhetorical action, which could lead to rhetorical entrapment (see Schimmelfenning, 2001). Rhetorical entrapment would force the EU to act favourably towards an independent Catalonia as it would be compelled to uphold the normative commitments at the basis of the Union's founding principles. In this way, Romeva was trying to hold Schulz and other representatives hostage to the EU's own principles, to influence Catalonia's prospect of EU membership.

4.3. The Intensified Referendum Quest

In the months following the general elections, the bottom-up strategy received less attention, as the parties were concerned with domestic debates about the organisation of a referendum. After a resolution about the organisation of the referendum was passed by the Catalan parliament in October 2016, however, frames similar to those in previous periods arose. Most importantly, the normative frame was again very prominent. For instance, in an interview with The Guardian in December 2016, Romeva made an indirect plea for support, arguing that 'the perversion of the Spanish constitution should concern all supporters of free speech and constitutional law throughout Europe' ('Romeva'). He not only framed the Spanish state as undemocratic – hiding behind the constitution rather than engaging in dialogue – but also appealed to free speech, implying that Catalonia acts in line with this principle. This combination of condemning Spain and underlining Catalonia's democratic values was also present in statements by Puigdemont in the context of his visit to Brussels in January 2017 (El País 'Brussels', 'Promise', 'Failure'). This shows that the parties' discourse remained similar over time. The use of rhetorical action – for instance by framing Catalonia as an excellent would-be MS, with a stronger commitment to EU values than Spain – also continued in this period (El País 'Harvard'). Besides that, Puigdemont's visit to Brussels, undertaken to gain support, again exemplifies the existence of a bottom-up strategy.

Similarly, party officials continued to frame Catalonia as inherently European and the independence process as rooted in democratic values (El País 'Demands', 'Forcadell'). Communicating this message to

¹¹ Carles Puigdemont is a member of CDC and has been President of the Generalitat since January 2016.

¹² Martin Schulz was the President of the EP from January 2014 until January 2017.

the EU was seen as highly important as, in the parties' view, this message should ultimately bring about a pragmatic response by the EU to Catalan secession. In an article in March 2017, Puigdemont and Junqueras employed a similar narrative, highlighting the importance of dialogue and juxtaposed Spain's approach in dealing with independence debates to that of the UK (El País 'Dialogue'). Once more, the rejection of independence in the Scottish referendum did not stop party officials from referring to this case. Although not a "secessionist success story", the fact that the referendum came about through an agreement between the Scottish and UK government was used to condemn Spain's obstinate stance. Likewise, even though Brexit was not seen as desirable by party officials, the fact that it represented a democratic exercise, where people were asked to decide about their future, was used in support of the Catalan cause (The Guardian 'Panel'). Brexit was often used in the narrative on pragmatism, for instance by Puigdemont, who argued that the EU changed its discourse on Scotland since the EU referendum (El País 'Al Jazeera'). Whether or not this is the case, however, will be subject to analysis in Chapter 7. First, a different set of conclusions is appropriate.

4.4. Case Study Conclusions

The analysis has highlighted the expected prominence of secession-related frames in the discourse of ERC and CDC. Although there was variation between the three periods, the findings suggest that the frames used to legitimise the independence cause remained similar between 2014 and 2017, except for the pragmatism frame. This frame was used more prominently after the binding referendum pledge of JxSí, due to the perceived need to counter the notion of post-secession exclusion from the EU more strongly, as well as after the UK's EU referendum, which was used as a new argument for pragmatism. Besides this small change, party officials continually framed the Catalan nation as pro-European, with a strong commitment to democratic values, while condemning "undemocratic" Spanish state. Secession was repeatedly framed not only as legitimate, due to a democratic mandate, but also as conceivable within the EU framework, due to the EU's anticipated pragmatism. Together, the frames and the mediums through which they were conveyed – most notably a Politico article and a BBC interview – point towards a bottom-up strategy, actively seeking to upload the Catalan issue to the European level. The emphasis on keeping the EU informed and Puigdemont's Brussels visit further support the existence of such a strategy, while the emphasis on Catalonia's commitment to EU principles illustrates the use of rhetorical action.

In terms of horizontal linkages, the analysis found that ERC and CDC continued to reference the Scottish case to demand a referendum of their own, as, despite the rejection of independence, the Scottish referendum remained an exemplary event of self-determination. Similarly, the fact that secession within the EU was deemed as inconceivable by EU representatives (in the past) did not stop the parties' attempts to Europeanise their cause. Quite the reverse, events such as Brexit further increased the belief in the EU's pragmatism, as emphasised by the increased prominence of this frame. Moreover, officials actively

defended continued EU membership by framing secession as supported by a democratic mandate and by Catalonia's commitment to the EU. The following chapter will explore whether the Scottish Nationalist Party used similar frames when arguing in favour of secession.

Chapter 5: Scottish Secession from the Union(s): *the SNP*

In line with the previous chapter, this case study examines the framing of secession in the discourse of a regionalist party, the Scottish National Party, to explore whether the party's discourse on this issue changed between 2014 and 2017. The analysis is broken down into three periods, delineated by: the 2014 independence referendum; the general and regional elections in 2015 and 2016; and the EU referendum in 2016. In this case, it is also appropriate to start with a short contextualisation.

In 1707, Scotland joined England to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain.¹³ There was strong Scottish opposition to this unification, due to a long history of conflict, dating back to early Middle Ages (Shaw, 2017). After the unification, the reestablishment of a Scottish parliament became a key political goal for some groups, while others sought to reclaim independence. Rivalry and animosity has persisted to this date, with historic battles still playing a role in contemporary Scotland and England. Ultimately, a devolved Scottish parliament was reinstated in 1999. Hereafter, Scottish politics were often concerned with further devolution. The SNP took ownership of this issue, while maintaining a secessionist stance. After growing calls for an independence referendum, spurred on by the electoral pledges of the 2007 minority and 2011 majority SNP government, the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement made way for such a referendum (Keating, 2015). This ballot, referred to as *Indyref*, was held in September 2014 and led to a rejection of independence by 55% of the voters (*Ibid.*). Yet, the issue of independence was soon revived as a consequence of the Conservative Party's decision to hold the EU referendum in 2016. The revived debate now revolved increasingly around Scotland's relationship with the EU.

Consequently, in the analysis in the following sections, the discourse of the SNP on Scottish secession is expected to become more prominent in the face of the Brexit vote, as this event will have provided the party with a new context in which to situate secessionist arguments. Nonetheless, the party's discourse is expected to exhibit less prominent and less frequent framing than the discourse of ERC and CDC, given that the SNP already celebrated an independence referendum with approval of the UK government and would thus have less leverage for its cause.

5.1. In *Indyref*'s Aftermath

In the months following *Indyref*, the frame that was most prominent in the SNP's discourse is the normative one. At the SNP's annual party conference in November 2014, Nicola Sturgeon used the words 'democratically indefensible' to describe a situation in which Scotland would not be given an opportunity for a second referendum if the UK voted to leave the EU in 2017 and underlined the importance of 'the wishes and the will of the Scottish people', who should have the right to decide on Scotland's future (The Guardian

¹³ For a more elaborate historical and political background on Scotland and Scottish devolution, see Keating (2009; 2015).

'Conference').¹⁴ By emphasising the people's right to determine the political direction, Sturgeon constructed the discourse around a normative narrative, aimed at legitimising the SNP's stance towards another referendum in the (near) future.

This normative frame was applied in different contexts. For instance, Sturgeon stated the Scottish people should be 'masters of [their] own destiny' and maintained that 'the ultimate verdict [on the failure of the Smith Commission proposals would] be delivered by the Scottish people [in the next elections]' (The Guardian 'Resources', 'Smith').¹⁵ Sturgeon also repeatedly refused to rule out a second referendum in the case of a changing context, whilst referring to the right of the Scottish people to have a say on this question as a 'fundamental democratic point' (The Guardian 'Video', 'Debate', 'Vote'). Moreover, she argued that it would be undemocratic to rule out a second referendum (The Guardian 'Undemocratic'). In framing the issue of Scottish secession as conditional on the will of the Scottish people, and, thus, as a democratic matter, secession was placed under the normative frame. This was further emphasized by arguing that secession was "on hold", no second referendum would be forced on the Scottish people unless the context changed (The Guardian 'Vote').

Besides the normative frame, few other frames stand in this period. The SNP did often portray the UK government in a negative light, for instance by stating that the administration was not working appropriately for Scotland and that Scotland's voice was not being heard in Westminster (The Guardian 'Vote'). Although similar to the normative frame – democratic values are used to decrease the legitimacy of Westminster's authority – this should be seen as a separate frame; it deliberately creates a juxtaposition between Scotland and Westminster, building on a historical rivalry. By juxtaposing Westminster to Scotland, the SNP sought to appeal to those who view Westminster as an enemy or hindrance to Scottish democracy. This "antagonistic" frame was also present in the 2015 manifesto; Westminster impedes the Scottish government from delivering on the region's needs (SNP Manifesto, 2015). In this way, the party sought to defend its secessionist position and the proposition of a future referendum.

5.2. Between the Westminster and Holyrood Elections

In the period between the UK and the Scottish elections, the emphasis on democratic values continued. For instance, the normative frame was employed by Sturgeon in May 2015 to underline the fact that, after the SNP's electoral landslide, the Scottish voice could no longer be ignored and, in October 2015, when stating that a second vote would be necessary if Scotland was to be taken out of the EU against the wishes of its people (The Guardian 'Pride', 'Unstoppable'). Similarly, the SNP continued to frame Westminster in a negative light; this antagonistic frame became more prominent due to the Conservative Party's re-election

¹⁴ Nicola Sturgeon was elected as party leader in November 2014 and subsequently became the First Minister of Scotland.

¹⁵ The Smith Commission was established after the 2014 independence referendum in order to assess how measures for further devolution, promised to Scotland by the leaders of the anti-independence campaign, could be best delivered to the region.

and the prospect of the EU referendum. For instance, in June 2015, Angus Robertson argued that ‘Scots feel Westminster is ignoring their wishes’ (The Guardian ‘Warns’).¹⁶ Similarly, Westminster was framed as unresponsive to Scottish needs and as having ‘no legitimacy whatsoever’ in Scotland (The Guardian ‘Cameron’). Likewise, the EU gained more prominence in the SNP’s discourse after the general elections and the now prospective EU referendum. This consisted of critical remarks towards the EU, but also the framing of EU membership as beneficial for Scotland, e.g. Scottish future lies in the EU (The Guardian ‘Harm’). Although this frame does not necessarily provide evidence for a bottom-up strategy, an event in this period does point towards the existence of such a strategy. Namely, during a visit to the European Policy Centre (EPC) in June 2015, Sturgeon argued that it would be undemocratic if no final Scottish vote on Brexit would be held and paused to highlight the openness of Scotland towards EU citizens (The Guardian ‘EPC’). The fact that she framed Scotland as an open and welcoming, in front of this particular – EU-oriented – audience, suggests that the SNP sought to upload the Scottish issue to the European level.

The framing of Scotland as an open and welcoming country also occurred in the manifesto for the Holyrood elections in May 2016. Interestingly, this manifesto contained a new frame; Scotland as inherently part of the EU. It stated that EU membership ‘means being part of a family of nations founded on the principles of peace, democracy and human rights, promoting and fostering co-operation to tackle complex international problems’ and implied that Scotland is part of this family of nations (SNP Manifesto, 2016, p.41). Such a narrative, akin to rhetorical entrapment, was frequently used by the Catalan parties, but had so far not been used by the SNP. Besides this new frame, which illustrates another attempt at uploading the Scottish issue, the same frames as before were employed in the manifesto; the normative frame and the conditionality of the second referendum (on a changing context and on the will of people). This illustrates the consistent use of these frames throughout this period.

5.3. The EU Referendum and the 2017 General Elections

After the EU referendum in June 2016, the SNP again employed a strong normative narrative, highlighting the democratic will of Scottish people (The Guardian ‘Unacceptable’, ‘Plea’). In the following months, the party also continued to frame Westminster as an antagonist (The Guardian ‘Challenges’). What stands out more, however, is a frame that only arose in a prominent matter after the Brexit vote: the SNP’s democratic mandate for another independence referendum. Sturgeon had already used this frame after the 2015 general elections. However, while on a visit in Brussels in late June 2016, Sturgeon argued that the SNP now had the mandate to negotiate directly with EU institutions on behalf of Scotland (The Guardian ‘Brussels’). Moreover, in a piece in The Guardian in March 2017, Sturgeon labelled it a ‘cast-iron mandate’ (‘Self-determination’). Similarly, Alex Salmond used the frame to boost the legitimacy of a second

¹⁶ Angus Robertson has been Deputy leader of SNP since October 2016 and he was the leader of the SNP in the House of Commons at Westminster Parliament from May 2007 until June 2017.

independence referendum, stating that the mandate was already gained in the Scottish elections and that the 2017 general election would serve as a confirmation (The Guardian 'Salmond').¹⁷

This democratic mandate frame was employed as part of the party's bottom-up strategy, at which the EPC speech and the 2016 manifesto had already hinted. The strategy became increasingly apparent around Sturgeon's Brussels visit in June 2016, where she held meetings with high-ranking officials to express her concerns about the Scottish position. The strategy gained more prominence in fall 2016, as the SNP strived to be in the EU's good books, in case of a second referendum. This tactic is clearly illustrated by the use of "we" in the following statement by Sturgeon in Dublin in November 2016: 'we should be open-minded about solutions that can help, whether it is Scotland or individuals, who want to retain their citizenship, their relationship with the EU (...)' (The Guardian 'Dublin'). By implying that the EU, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland and other actors – the "we" – all have a pragmatic position to fulfil, Sturgeon sought to upload the Scottish issue to the European level.

Another example of the party's bottom-up strategy is the frequent reference to European friends or partners. For instance, in a speech in October 2016, Sturgeon spoke of 'our European friends' (The Guardian 'Vows'). Likewise, *Scotland's Place in Europe*, a Scottish government document published in December 2016, also persistently referred to European partners. Given that document was not only directed at a domestic audience but also at an audience in Brussels, this provides further evidence of an intensified bottom-up strategy.¹⁸ Sturgeon's opening remark in the document also show this: '[Scotland] embrace[s] the values of solidarity, co-operation and democracy which underpin the [EU]' (Scottish Government, 2016). This explicit appreciation of EU values underpins the idea that the SNP was actively seeking EU support. The 2017 manifesto also included references to Scotland's 'EU neighbours, colleagues and friends' while it sought to frame Westminster's lack of guarantees of these peoples' rights as unfair (p.14). In doing so, the SNP sought to underline its strong stance on this issue. Besides an electoral tactic to attract pro-European voters or European nationals, this should again be seen as an attempt to underline the differences between the Scottish and the UK government. This frame was also visible in October 2016, when Sturgeon compared Scotland's openness to the UK's reticence towards the EU (The Guardian 'Keynote'). In this way, she sought to inform the EU about Scotland's determination to protect EU citizens after Brexit – further intensifying the quest for support for the Scottish case.

Towards the 2017 general elections, the analysis shows that the issue of secession was clearly back on the table. Yet, as the SNP lost a number of key seats in the elections, the party withdrew its plans for a second independence referendum prior to Brexit (The Guardian 'Shelves'). The discourse was therefore geared more towards the protection of Scottish interests in Brexit than the possibility of future secession. Besides that, it is important to note that in terms of horizontal linkages with other regions, no clear evidence of such linkages was found in this nor the previous periods. Interestingly, however, two developments in early 2017 indicate that the horizontal dimension cannot be dismissed altogether; an All-Party

¹⁷ Alex Salmond was the leader of the SNP from 2004 to 2014. He remains a prominent figure within the party and he held a seat in Westminster Parliament until the 2017 general elections.

¹⁸ The document was also published on the website of the European Commission.

Parliamentary Group on Catalonia was set up in Westminster Parliament in March 2017, and in May, a motion was signed by 23 members of Westminster Parliament to the Spanish government to stop the persecution of the speaker of the Catalan parliament, who was being condemned for allowing a parliamentary debate on Catalan secession (El País 'Persecution'). Both initiatives were driven by SNP MP George Kerevan.¹⁹ The fact that a SNP politician considered it important to react to this persecution and advocated for the monitoring of the Catalan case suggests that the members of the SNP recognised the relevance of recent developments in Catalonia. This provides scope for further research on the question whether the SNP perceived the need to monitor other secessionist conflicts within the EU, possibly resulting in horizontal linkages.

5.4. Case Study Conclusions

This case study has shown that the frames used by the SNP in relation to Scottish secession did not change significantly between 2014 and 2017, although most frames only became prominent towards the latter two periods – at the same time as the SNP's bottom-up strategy. The fact that the bottom-up strategy intensified and the use of frames became more prominent towards the latter two periods is a consequence of the EU referendum – as explained in the introduction of the case study – and the SNP's subsequent campaign to secure another independence and/or EU membership vote.

When comparing the Scottish to the Catalan case, it is evident that the parties in both cases sought to appeal to the EU by framing secession as in line with normative principles as well as a democratic mandate and sought to justify their cause by discrediting the central government. Both cases exhibited similar frames, yet, as expected, the SNP used a smaller number of frames overall, which were also employed less prominently than those in the discourse of ERC and CDC. Likewise, the SNP's bottom-up strategy was less prominent than that of ERC and CDC, especially in the first two periods. Sturgeon did pay a visit to Brussels, but appeals to the EU were less frequent and less pronounced in her statements. This difference between the Scottish and Catalan case was anticipated given that Scotland, in contrast to Catalonia, already celebrated a recent independence referendum. This explains why ERC and CDC actively sought to secure EU support for a referendum throughout 2014-2017, while the SNP only actively did so after the EU referendum, as this allowed the party to use the changed context in support of a second referendum. Moreover, this difference also explains the fact that the SNP did not actively refer to the Catalan case or other secessionist conflicts, as this would not add to the legitimacy of the Scottish case, already having gained recognition through the negotiated referendum. The next chapter will explore the discourse of Sinn Féin with regard to secession and Irish reunification, which is expected to differ from the previous two cases due to its divergent historical context.

¹⁹ George Kerevan was member of Westminster Parliament for the SNP from May 2015 until June 2017.

Chapter 6: The Northern Irish Question and EU Membership: SF

Like the previous two chapters, this case study examines the framing of secession in the discourse of a regionalist party, Sinn Féin, in order to answer the research question: did the political discourse of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession within the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017? The analysis is divided into three sections, corresponding to key events: power-sharing negotiations in fall 2014; the 2015 general elections; the 2016 EU referendum and the regional and the general elections in 2017. First, a brief discussion of the historical context of the case.

When the Republic of Ireland gained independence from the UK in 1921, NI remained part of the UK but received a level of autonomy (Dixon, 2008).²⁰ From that point up to the 1960s, tensions sporadically emerged between the Catholic (nationalist) and Protestant (unionist) factions, around the region's self-government. The former, who felt underprivileged and alienated by the latter, started pressing for a more equal treatment and opportunities. Meanwhile, the idea that home rule was aggravating the situation gained support in Westminster and, eventually, Northern Irish self-government was suspended – contributing to a violent conflict that lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s, referred to as the Troubles. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought an end to the conflict and reintroduced a devolved government, consisting of the Northern Irish Executive and Assembly. However, the agreement left many issues unresolved and, in some opinions, merely froze the conflict (Birrell & Heenan, 2017). Nationalist (republican) groups, including SF, have continued to press for the unification of Ireland, while unionists seek to remain part of the UK. In recent years, Northern Irish politics have experienced tumultuous times and the region's self-government has again appeared to be close to suspension (*Ibid*). Moreover, the prospect of Brexit has marked Northern Irish politics, most importantly because of the possibility of a hard border between NI and the Republic of Ireland.

The following sections will analyse how SF constructed its discourse on secession from the UK and the underlying proposition of Irish reunification. The discourse of SF is expected to exhibit significant differences from the other case studies, given the historic sensitivities of the case and the fact that secession is pursued by SF as merely a means to an end. Due to the violent history of the case, few or no references to other “peaceful” European secessionist conflicts are expected. Furthermore, under the Good Friday Agreement, the UK government is legally obligated to allow a referendum on Irish reunification if public opinion shows support for this. Thus, as a consequence of the EU referendum, SF's discourse is expected to have changed; the prospect of Brexit will have produced new arguments for the party to employ in favour of such a referendum.

²⁰ For an extensive historical background, see Dixon's *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace* (2008), and for an outline of more recent political developments in Northern Ireland see Birrell & Heenan (2017).

6.1. From the Power-Sharing Talks to the General Elections

In fall 2014, SF was involved in negotiations to reach a financial deal with the UK government and to save the power-sharing agreement (Birrell & Heenan, 2017). The analysis of SF's discourse shows that few statements were made in this period related to secession or reunification, arguably due to the party's preoccupation with the ongoing negotiations. Nevertheless, in a few instances, remarks were made regarding the ambition for a united Ireland. These remarks exemplify the emphasis on equality in relation to Irish unity. For instance, in November 2014, Gerry Adams spoke 'moving forward with our campaign for a new, independent Ireland of equals' (Irish Times 'Threats').²¹ Earlier in November, Adams was criticised for referring to unionists as 'bastards' as he stated that the way to 'break [these] bastards' was to employ the republican strategy; 'to reach out to people on the basis of equality' (Irish Times 'Bastards'). Thus, both times Adams sought to frame SF's proposition for Irish unity as principled, based on equality between the Irish people. This type of narrative can be placed under the normative frame – also present in the previous case studies. Here, the normative frame was used to appeal to a segment of the (Northern) Irish public as well as to portray SF as a respectable, civic party.

In the run-up to the general elections, again, only a small number of statements were found. Adams, in March 2015, employed the democratic mandate frame to gain legitimacy for his party, while also calling for 'a national conversation' about reunification, which he framed as conceivable due to a shared history and common values (Irish Times 'Government'). Besides the democratic mandate frame, he thus used a frame in which Irish history and values were employed to legitimise the ambition for a referendum. In April, Adams again employed the democratic mandate frame as he condemned opponents' attacks on SF by stating that '[t]here are 500,000 reasons for [denouncing such attacks] – that is the half million people who voted for SF in the last election' (Irish Times 'EU').

In the manifesto for the general elections, the use of the normative frame was again very prominent. The manifesto underlined 'the right to a referendum on Irish unity'; it should be for the people to determine the constitutional process on the Irish island (SF Manifesto, 2015, p.6). Thus, the manifesto appealed to a sense of democratic virtue, constructing a narrative around the normative frame. This is also evident in the proclamation that '[t]he question of Irish Unity is a fundamental democratic choice for all the people of Ireland (...) it is about (...) our priorities as a nation' (*Ibid.*). By appealing to democratic principles and the notion of the Irish nation, SF again sought to gain legitimacy for its referendum ambition. A strong emphasis was placed on democratic values throughout the document, further evidencing the use of the normative frame; e.g. '[t]he real democratic value of Irish Unity will be that the people (...) are in charge' (*Ibid.*). Despite the scarce occurrence of framing in general, the consistent use of the normative frame in this period illustrates a consistency in the discourse of SF when arguing in favour of (a referendum on) Irish unity.

²¹ Gerry Adams has been the leader of Sinn Féin since 1983.

6.2. Cameron's Re-Election and the Referendum Pledge

Besides the normative frame, the manifesto for the general elections did use another discursive tactic, which became more prominent following the elections. Like the SNP, SF used normative language to question the legitimacy of the UK government over NI, especially with regard to the then prospective EU referendum. SF's manifesto firmly stated that an UK-wide referendum would not safeguard NI's needs; NI should have its own referendum so as to make the people 'masters of [their] own destiny' (SF Manifesto, 2015, p.9). By questioning the UK government's safeguarding of NI's needs, SF sought to make a stronger case for secession from the UK. Following the re-election of the Conservative Party in May 2015, and the now imminent EU referendum, the Irish unity agenda of SF became more prominent in the discourse. This is evidenced by the increased use of the normative frame in combination with the framing of the new Conservative government as damaging Northern Irish interests. For instance, in March 2016, Martin McGuinness argued that 'the democratic wishes of the Irish people' need to be respected in the event of Brexit (Irish Times 'Urges').²²

Moreover, much like the Conservative government, Brexit was branded as inherently bad for NI. Michelle O'Neill for instance referred to the EU referendum as 'a Frankenstein created by David Cameron' and Declan Kearney highlighted the negative far-reaching consequences of Brexit such as 'the prospect of reinforced partition' (Irish Times 'Brexit', 'Minister').²³ Likewise, Gerry Adams argued that the situation in which NI could be taken out of the EU against its will could 'have very profound implications' and thereby strongly condemned the Conservative government's approach (Irish Times 'Implications'). Thus, the "antagonistic" frame, which was also present in the Scottish case, was explicitly used here to delegitimise the actions of the Conservative government in relation to Brexit. Another example of the frame can be found in a statement by McGuinness: 'the narrow interests of a section of the [Conservative] party' should not be allowed to take NI out of the EU (The Iris Times 'Impact'). Through such statements SF sought to frame Brexit as well as the Conservative government as damaging Northern Irish interests, and thus – by implying to have Northern Irish interests strongly at heart – gain legitimacy for its own propositions.

6.3. Brexit and Two Springtime Elections

From the Brexit vote in June 2016 throughout spring 2017, SF's discourse was marked by an intensified use of normative language, emphasising the democratic wish of the Northern Irish to remain in the EU (e.g. Irish Times 'McGuinness', 'Republic', 'Border', 'Destroy', 'Status'). Similarly, the antagonistic frame was again employed in relation to the Conservative government; for instance, by referring to its intention to take

²² Martin McGuinness was the leader of SF in Northern Ireland and Deputy First Minister from 2007-2017.

²³ Michelle O'Neill took over from McGuinness in March 2017. Prior to this point she was the Minister of Agriculture and later the Minister of Health. Declan Kearney was a chairperson for SF in Northern Ireland prior to his election for the Northern Irish Assembly in 2016.

NI out of the EU as ‘a hostile action’ (Irish Times ‘Destroy’). The use of the antagonistic frame in this period can be seen as a response to the Brexit vote, but this type of language by SF is not new. The frame has a clear historical connotation; it draws on differences between the Irish and the “imperialist” English and lays bare the historic tensions between the regions. Moreover, the wording of the UK government’s action as “hostile” is an echo of the past, it illustrates that the wounds of the Troubles remain open.

In the 2017 UK manifesto, SF constructed a narrative around the idea of a pragmatic EU to support its proposition for a special status for NI. For instance, the manifesto read that the ‘goodwill and flexibility at the European level means [that special status] is achievable’ and that ‘the EU has shown itself to be flexible’ (SF UK Manifesto, 2017, p.4). In addition, the manifesto again illustrates the use of the normative and the democratic mandate frames to justify a reunification referendum. Similarly, the manifesto for the 2017 regional elections shows how Brexit was framed as ‘a game changer’, to legitimise the proposition of a reunification referendum within the next political term (SF NI Manifesto, 2017, p.11). In this way, Brexit was again used as a frame, not only to defend NI’s interests, but also to make a direct argument for the end of Irish partition. Besides this frame, however, what stands out most is SF’s attempt to upload the Northern Irish issue to the European level, a bottom-up strategy aimed at gaining attention for concerns around Brexit and to simultaneously promote the idea of a reunification referendum. The next chapter will analyse whether this attempt by SF was successful.

A statement by O’Neill in Belfast in February 2017 illustrates this strategy. O’Neill disclosed that she had ‘written to all the European leaders setting out [SF’s] case’ (The Iris Times ‘Diplomatic’). O’Neill justified this action by stating that it is up to leaders in the EU and other MSs – not the UK – to decide the terms of Brexit and referred to SF’s strategy as a ‘diplomatic offensive’ (*Ibid.*). This “offensive” was also aimed at increasing support for a special EU status for NI and/or to obtain a veto on the final Brexit agreement. A meeting between SF’s leader and the EU’s Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier in May 2017, in which the former pressed for special EU status, again evidences the bottom-up strategy. Besides pledging for special EU status, Adams also maintained that the complexities of NI’s constitutional status would only be solved with a referendum (Irish Times ‘Barnier’).

Lastly, only one instance was found in which a clear reference to the Scottish case was made. In October 2016, Adams referred to Scotland when criticising the failure of the Conservative government to recognise the positions of the regions which voted in favour of EU membership (Irish Times ‘Scotland’). The lack of strong horizontal linkages can – as discussed at the beginning of the chapter – be attributed to the violent past of the Northern Irish case. SF has often paid attention to other violent conflicts marked with suffering, such as the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (see Adams, 2017). Many non-violent secessionist conflicts, including the Scottish, are, however, not seen as comparable to the Northern Irish case. Moreover, Scotland’s voluntary union with England is juxtaposed against the imperialist conquest of Ireland. This explains why (despite the fact that a majority in both regions voted against Brexit) few references were made to this similarity.

6.4. Case Study Conclusions

The analysis of SF's discourse has shown that as the EU referendum drew closer, the use of the normative language to justify a reunification referendum and to defend the right to decide on NI's EU status intensified. In addition, SF adopted a narrative in which both Brexit and the Conservative Government were framed as damaging Northern Irish interests – a tactic also used by the SNP with regard to Scottish interests. Moreover, Brexit in itself became a new argument in favour of Irish reunification. Furthermore, the analysis has illustrated that, like the SNP, SF pursued a bottom-up strategy as the prospect of Brexit became more likely. This entails that the only case in which a bottom-up strategy was present throughout 2014 and 2017 was that of ERC and CDC in Catalonia. Similarly, the Catalan case was the only case with strong evidence for horizontal Europeanisation; only one instance was found where SF compared the position of NI to that of Scotland, while the Scottish case only showed some preliminary evidence for a horizontal linkage with the Catalan case. In all three cases, the parties actively adopted frames to discredit or condemn the central government and in doing so tried to gain support at the EU level.

Finally, all three case studies have illustrated the importance of the normative and the democratic mandate frame in the discourse on secession. These frames, which were used to increase support for secession as well as post-secession EU membership, appealed to shared EU principles. The fact that the regionalist parties – especially in the Catalan case – repeatedly professed adherence to these principles shows how the parties followed the logic of rhetorical entrapment to influence the prospects of continued EU membership. Furthermore, this finding indicates that, despite (past) EU statements against post-secession EU membership, the parties continued to seek legitimacy at the European level through their professed adherence to EU principles. By continuously stressing their defence of the peoples' democratic will as well as their adherence to the EU's principles, the parties sought to present themselves as credible and democratic actors. In other words, the regionalist parties continued to use the EU as a means of demonstrating minority nationalism's civic nature, thus providing an answer to the question raised by Anderson and Keil (2016): to what extent the EU is still used as a tool to highlight the civic nature of contemporary minority nationalism. Whether EU representatives were reluctant to be involved in secessionist debates – a question explored in the next chapter – has thus not had a major influence on regionalist parties in this study, as ERC, CDC, the SNP and SF continued their use normative language to gain legitimacy and support for their case.

Chapter 7: EU Representatives on (Post-) Secession (EU Membership)

This chapter explores the second sub-question of the thesis – how EU representatives framed their discourse on secession, in response to regionalist parties' discourses. By assessing EU representatives' discourse in relation to secession, this chapter contributes to answering the research question: did the political discourses of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession within the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017? As aforementioned, EU representatives have in the past shown a reluctance to be involved in secessionist conflicts. When these representatives did comment on such conflicts, this was generally to dismiss the possibility of continued EU membership in the event of secession. In 2004, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, argued that a region or territory, which opts to secede from a MS, will automatically cease to be part of the EU (Guirao, 2016). His successor, Jose Manuel Barroso, continued a similar narrative throughout his Presidency; he stated that a seceding region would become third country and would thus have to reapply for EU membership, while he also maintained that secession was an internal matter of MSs (Bourne, 2014). This stance on secession, and the consequences of secession for EU membership, is often referred to as the Prodi or the Barroso Doctrine (Guirao, 2016).

The following sections of this chapter will focus on the Catalan, the Scottish and the Northern Irish case, respectively, and will explore whether EU representatives, in particular those of the Juncker Commission, continued a similar discourse throughout 2014 and 2017.²⁴ Due to the different contexts of the three cases, the findings of the framing analysis are expected differ. The variables that may affect the EU's stance towards a secessionist conflicts include: the relation of the EU to the host MS; the attitude of the host MS in the conflict; the (economic) importance of the secessionist region to the host MS; the political and legal context of the conflict; and (historical) sensitivities related to the conflict.

7.1. Catalonia

The analysis of statements made in relation to the Catalan case between 2014 and 2017 shows that EU representatives continued a discourse in line with the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine. For instance, in November 2014, shortly after the Catalan independence consultation, a spokesperson stated that the Commission has no opinion on constitutional matters in MSs; these should be dealt with internally (El País 'Internal'). This internal-issues frame, portraying secession as an internal issue of a MS, was used to justify the inertia of the EU with regard to the Catalan debate and followed the same reasoning as the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine. A second example can be found in a statement directed at the Catalan independence movement in September 2015, in which the Commission reiterated that secession leads to third country status (El País 'Schinas'). This third-country frame was used to underline the notion that an independent Catalonia would

²⁴ The Juncker Commission, under President Jean-Claude Juncker, took office in November 2014, following two terms by the Barroso Commission.

have to reapply for EU membership. The frame was, however, not used again until a statement by Juncker in July 2017. Although this statement falls outside the period under analysis in this thesis, it is included here as it is very telling. Namely, Juncker repeated what *El País* calls, 'the two [EU] mantras' on Catalan secession; 1) this is an internal issue for Spain to deal with and 2) it will inevitably lead to loss of EU membership (*El País* 'Automatically'). This statement thus exemplifies the continuation of the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine by the Juncker Commission.

The internal-issue frame was used repeatedly by the Commission throughout 2014-2017. Juncker used it in a response to a question about a Catalan unilateral declaration of independence, published in September 2015. Interestingly, here it was used alongside another frame; where the English version of Juncker's response only used the internal-issue frame, the Spanish version contained an extra paragraph underlining the role of the state in protecting territorial integrity and the authority of the national constitution over decisions by regional parliaments (EUobserver 'Translation'; *El País* 'Translation'). In other words, the Spanish version framed Catalan secessionism as a threat to Spain's territorial integrity and constitution. This frame thus drew on legal principles such as the role of states and the constitution, to justify the Commission's objection to a unilateral independence declaration. Later that week, Juncker again used the internal-issue frame, when seeking to retract an earlier statement – in which he had boldly argued that a Catalan unilateral declaration of independence would not be accepted by the EU – but unlike before he abstained from framing his response around defence of Spanish territorial integrity (*El País* 'Juncker').

Similarly, the internal-issue frame was used by Martin Schulz in January 2016 when asked by a Catalan politician about the position of the EU: 'the Catalan question should be debated within the framework of the Spanish constitution' (*El País* 'Puigdemont'). Two senior officials of the Generalitat responded to this statement by Schulz, affirming that the Catalan government considers 'dialogue and negotiation' with the EU institutions as a key priority (*El País* 'Puigdemont'). Likewise, in March 2017, Frans Timmermans argued, in response to a question by an ERC official, that the Catalan conflict should be resolved within the Spanish constitutional framework, again to legitimise the Commission's abstention from the debate (*El País* 'Timmermans').²⁵ However, neither Schulz' reaction nor Timmermans' response to the question by a ERC official provide sufficient evidence for a reflexive relationship between these two governance levels.

Another striking finding is a statement of a senior EU representative overly rejecting Catalan secession, without framing it as an internal issue or as an issue leading to the third country status. Namely, in March 2017, Schulz's successor, Antonio Tajani, boldly declared that '[t]hose who act against the Spanish Constitution are also acting against the European order' (EUobserver 'Tajani').²⁶ This frame, which rejects Catalan secession by portraying it as a hostile act against not only Spain but also the EU, was observed only on this occasion. This may be explained by Tajani's personal views on secession – being from a country that has its own secessionist movements – and/or the fact that the EP maps more clearly onto MSs,

²⁵ Frans Timmermans became Commissioner and Commission Vice-President in November 2014.

²⁶ Antonio Tajani, Italian politician and former Vice-President of the Commission, succeeded Schulz as President of the EP in January 2017.

in contrast to the more “European” Commission. However, except for the somewhat hostile avowal by Tajani, Juncker’s bold but retracted statement and the incident with the extra paragraph, the discourse of EU representatives on Catalan secession was very consistently framed around the “two mantras” of the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine.

Finally, this section provides an answer to a question raised in Chapter 4: whether recent statements by EU representatives on the discontinuity of EU membership had, like earlier statements, little effect on the discourse of ERC and CDC. This section has shown that as the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine endured, continued EU membership was still deemed unfeasible. Thus, it is now possible to conclude that recent statements did also not affect the parties’ discourse in a significant way; secession was still framed as legitimate as well as conceivable within the EU framework, regardless of whether EU representatives stated otherwise. In other words, this suggests that the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine was not successfully downloaded to the substate level. Rather than acknowledging the possible adverse consequences of secession on EU membership, ERC and CDC continued their efforts to counter the notion of post-secession exclusion from the EU. The following section will examine whether the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine was also applied in relation to Scotland.

7.2. Scotland

In the Scottish case, no statements were made by EU representatives in relation to secession between October 2014 and June 2016; a finding that may be attributed to the fact that the Indyref result made Scottish independence unlikely at that time. It was not until the Brexit vote – which allowed the Scottish independence movement to resume its efforts – that EU representatives were again confronted with this debate. Yet, the findings show that this did not result in a substantial difference in terms of frames; the internal-issue frame is also prominent in this case. It was explicitly used in June 2016 by Schulz prior to his meeting on Brexit with Sturgeon, where he stated he would welcome Sturgeon and would listen to her case, but that he remained convinced that: “[Scottish secessionism] is absolutely a domestic issue for the UK (...) the internal debate has to happen within the framework of institutions within the UK’ (The Guardian ‘Schulz’). Thus, as with the Catalan case, Scottish secession was framed as an issue with which the EU would not interfere.

Similarly, Juncker stated that ‘Scotland won the right to be heard in Brussels’ (The Guardian ‘Juncker’). Yet, like Schulz, Juncker underlined that he would ‘listen carefully’ to Sturgeon’s case but that neither he nor Donald Tusk had the intention ‘to interfere in the British process (...) [because that] is not our job (*ibid.*).²⁷ In so doing, Juncker employed the internal-issue frame to justify the Commission’s abstention from the debate, in the same way as he did for the Catalan case. Interestingly, however, both Schulz and Juncker sought to underline the fact that they would listen to the SNP’s case – something that

²⁷ Donald Tusk has been the President of the European Council since December 2014.

did not occur in the Catalan case, despite the Generalitat's active bottom-up strategy. This willingness to listen to the Scottish case was also exposed during a meeting between Salmond and Juncker in December 2016, where the latter stated that 'Scotland had earned the right to be heard and listened to' (The National 'Juncker'). Notably, the fact that EU representatives now expressed a willingness to listen to the Scottish case marks a clear difference with the Catalan case, where representatives did not signal any disposition to listen to the cause, at least not in an open or explicit manner. This may be attributed to variables highlighted in this chapter's introduction: the different attitudes of Spain and the UK towards secessionist conflicts – where the UK made way for Indyref, Spain avoided any dialogue or negotiation; and the relation between the EU and the MS – Spain's sensitivities continue to be important to the EU, while the UK's looming departure allows the EU to reposition itself, knowing that the UK has to keep Scottish interest in mind to avoid a Scottish vote to leave the UK.

Notably, third-country frame was only used once in this case. At a press event in Scotland in February 2017 Jacqueline Minor, a Commission spokesperson, affirmed that an independent Scotland would have to join the other candidate countries in the queue (The Guardian 'Reapply'; The Independent 'Candidate'). Shortly after this event, however, Minor stated that '[Scotland] would need to formally apply after leaving the UK, although it could be fast-tracked because it already complies with EU rules and regulation' (The Independent 'Candidate'). She also mentioned Scotland's familiarity with the *acquis communautaire* and added that this could mean that Scotland would not have to go through the entire accession process (*ibid.*). Although this statement is in line with the third-country frame, as Scotland would initially still be outside the EU, it does show an opening in the discourse, suggesting some flexibility on part of the Commission.

After Minor's statement, no other references to Scotland were found. One explanation that may account for this is the fact that, after the official notification of the UK's withdrawal in March 2017, EU representatives were concerned with the forthcoming Brexit negotiations and Scotland's situation was not explicitly addressed to avoid difficulties. The next section will show that the same was not true in the Northern Irish case, due to the importance of border issues and the Good Friday Agreement for the EU. In any case, the analysis here has shown that both the internal-issue and the third-country frame were employed, demonstrating the application of the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine in the Scottish case. However, the fact that representatives expressed a willingness to listen to the Scottish cause, together with Minor's statement on possible fast-tracked accession, show a small departure from the discourse in the Catalan case, which can again be attributed to the changing relation of the UK and the EU as a result of Brexit. The following section will devote attention to the effects of Brexit in the Northern Irish case.

7.3. Northern Ireland

Like the Scottish case, where no explicit statements were found until mid-2016, EU representatives only actively started paying attention to the issues around Irish reunification once the Brexit vote drew attention

to this situation. Once they did, however, the discourse deviated significantly from the other two cases. This is evidenced by three findings. First, the Northern Irish situation was not framed as an internal issue but rather as an issue that the EU would need to work on with the UK as a result of Brexit. For instance, Brexit negotiator Barnier stated, in December 2016, that 'the EU will do its "utmost" to tackle the issues Brexit raises in NI' and, in March 2017, that the 'Commission will be attentive to anything that could "weaken dialogue and peace" in Northern Ireland' (BBC News 'Barnier', 'Negotiator'). This statement contrasts with his narrative vis-à-vis Scotland, where he argued that the Commission would 'not speculate on what may or may not be possible for [this region]' (*Ibid.*). The framing of the Northern Irish situation as an issue concerning the EU exemplifies the stance of the Commission as well as the other EU bodies towards NI from this point onwards.

The second finding is the use of the political pragmatism frame, which – as previous chapters have shown – was often employed by regionalist parties to argue that the EU would accommodate unexpected secessionist events. Instead, the frame was now used by EU representatives to downplay concerns around the Northern Irish situation. The frame was also explicit in the EU's Brexit guidelines, published in March 2017, which stated that 'in view of the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, flexible and imaginative solutions will be required' (The Guardian 'Guidelines'). Hereafter, the frame was also used by two prominent EU representatives; Tusk argued that '[the EU] will seek flexible and creative solutions aimed at avoiding a hard border between NI and Ireland', as this is key to the Northern Irish peace progress (Irish Times 'Tusk'), while Barnier made use of it in a speech to the EP in May 2017, where he stated that unique solutions would be required for NI (Irish Times 'Priorities'). This demonstrates a completely different discourse in comparison to the other two cases, where no flexibility was discussed.

Third, the framing of NI as an EU issue and the appearance of the pragmatism frame not only exemplify a different discourse but also point towards a top-down strategy, further evidenced by the repeated emphasis on the need to avoid a hard border and the special situation of NI (e.g. BBC News 'Juncker'). Through this strategy, the Commission sought to influence the Brexit debate on a domestic level. This is further exemplified by the declaration on Irish unity that the European Council adopted during the first Brexit summit in May 2017. This declaration is striking as it stipulated that the entire territory of a united Ireland would be part of the EU in the event of a successful reunification referendum and that such a change would be in accordance with EU law' (Irish Times 'Business'). The provision of such a guarantee – hitherto unprecedented – is especially remarkable when compared to the Catalan and Scottish case, where no guarantees were given in the event of secession; on the contrary, the possibility of providing any EU membership guarantees was rejected. Conversely, in the Northern Irish case, EU representatives continually asked for special treatment for the region, to avoid a hard border and safeguard the peace agreement. Note that the Republic of Ireland will have played an important role here, lobbying the EU and its fellow MSs for recognition of its concerns (see Irish Times 'Coup'). The Council declaration should therefore be seen as the successful uploading of Irish issues by the Irish government rather than SF's NI campaign.

Although few explicit frames were used in relation to NI, remarks on the region's situation illustrate a departure from the discourse in the other cases, where the representatives sought to maintain a distance from sensitive constitutional and territorial issues. The Council declaration clearly illustrates this departure; it effectively allows NI to consider regaining EU membership through secession from the UK. This is very salient; it would previously have been unthinkable for the EU to provide a region with an incentive to secede from one state so as to join another (EU member) state. Moreover, the declaration shows a divergence from the third-country frame, which was employed in the other cases but absent here: secession from the UK would not result in third-country status as the EU would facilitate Irish reunification and thus NI's EU membership. Again, this has arguably more to do with Irish government's strong lobby and the privileging of this MS' interests than with a special treatment of NI in itself.

7.4. Case Study Conclusions

In terms of the second sub-question, this chapter has illustrated that the discourse of EU representatives only changed *over time* in the case of Scotland. Although symbolic, EU representatives expressed a willingness to listen to the SNP's case, which did not occur prior to the Brexit referendum. In addition, one representative highlighted the possibility of fast-tracked accession for Scotland. Besides this change, the only variation in discourse was *between* cases. As expected due to the divergent context, the discourse used in relation to NI marked a departure from the discourse in the other cases, where representatives refrained from making any remarks about secession outside of the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine. Notably, while Sturgeon was told that Scottish independence was an internal matter for the UK, the Northern Irish question was framed as an issue that the EU should be involved in. The Scottish case only witnessed a small shift (e.g. willingness to listen to the case and the possibility of fast-tracked accession), even after Brexit altered the context in which the SNP demanded recognition of Scottish interests. Moreover, the consequences of Brexit for Scotland were still treated as an internal UK matter even though the Scottish population, like the Northern Irish, showed an appreciation for the EU by voting against Brexit. This different attitude towards NI can be attributed to intervening variables as set out in the introductory section; the historical sensitivities of the NI conflict weigh in here, as well as by the successful lobbying of the Irish government.

This also explains why the Northern Irish case saw the adoption of the Council declaration, effectively encouraging secession from the UK to regain EU membership, while the other two cases saw little or no attempt at dialogue by the EU. In addition, only the Northern Irish case saw a "positive" top-down strategy by the EU, while the internal-issues frame was repeatedly employed in the other two cases to avoid a role in the secessionist debates. Interestingly, in the Catalan case, the EU had a "negative" role in the debate; the hostile statements by some representatives, including Tajani's bold avowal, can be seen as a top-down strategy, aimed at influencing the Catalan debate *against* secession. The relation between Catalonia and Spain may have played a role here; EU representatives may have been more inclined to adopt an "adverse" strategy due to the importance of the Catalan economy to Spain, and thus, to the health

of the Eurozone as a whole. Altogether, even while professing to sit outside the debate, the EU has gradually been adopting a more active stance in the debates, undeniably so in the NI case.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the following question: did political discourse of regionalist parties and EU representatives, on secession in the EU framework, change between 2014 and 2017? In the case of Catalonia and Scotland, Chapter 4 and 5 have shown that the discourse of the respective regionalist parties did not change significantly in this period, although the prominence of a number of frames did increase over time. In the Northern Irish case, Chapter 6 has shown a more substantial change over time as the Brexit vote led to the adoption of frames that were not employed in the period prior to the referendum. In turn, Chapter 7 has demonstrated two significant changes. First, while the Catalan case saw a strong reliance on the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine, EU representatives spoke of a willingness to listen to the Scottish case, illustrating an opening in the discourse as a result of Brexit. Secondly, in the Northern Irish case, the discourse of EU representatives diverged significantly from the other two cases, as the EU showed a strong disposition to be involved in the debate around post-Brexit future of NI. Thus, the findings have shown that the only discourses that changed significantly over time were those of SF in the Northern Irish case and of EU representatives with regard to Scotland, while that of EU representatives on the Northern Irish case marked a departure from the other two cases.

The analysis has also provided answers to underlying questions of the thesis. First, it has shown that statements dismissing post-secession EU membership did not discourage regionalist parties from constructing a narrative around the EU, professing adherence to EU principles and the democratic will of the people, to underline the civic nature of their minority nationalist cause. Especially in the Catalan case, the parties continued to use this strategy – akin to the logic of rhetorical entrapment – which suggests that the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine was not successfully downloaded onto the substate level. Secondly, taking Bourne's analysis (2014) as a point of departure, the thesis has examined whether the EU remained unwilling to play a role in secessionist conflicts. Although at first glance the findings suggested an enduring reluctance, a small opening was evident in the Scottish case, suggesting some flexibility on part of the Commission. Similarly, hostile statements regarding Catalan secession – interpreted here as attempts at downloading the Prodi/Barroso Doctrine – demonstrate a more active stance on part of a number of EU representatives. Together with the activist attitude of the Commission and the Council with regard to the Brexit debate in NI, these findings suggest that the EU may have started to adopt a more active role in secessionist debates.

This argument relates to the third point, the dimensions of Europeanisation. The three substate cases have supported the existence of bottom-up strategies, while Chapter 7 has demonstrated the attempts at top-down Europeanisation. Yet, only the Catalan case has provided evidence for horizontal linkages, showing a need to continue research on this dimension. Nonetheless, the thesis has shown that the dynamics of Europeanisation were certainly at play between the substate and supranational level in relation to secessionist conflicts. Little evidence was, however, found to support the idea a reflexive relationship between these governance levels. This notion could therefore be examined more extensively,

using different case studies or methods. In addition, this thesis has focused on empirical analysis rather than theory generation, leaving the latter open as an avenue for further research. Similarly, due to limitations of scope, only four regionalist parties were included, leaving room for future studies to analyse a different set of parties or cases. A final suggestion for further research is to (re)introduce the national level into the analysis, as national actors were not included in this study.

Altogether, the thesis has made a relevant contribution to the field by addressing four “gaps” in the research: the need to devote more attention to the substate level; the need for more research on regionalist parties; the need to address all dimensions of Europeanisation simultaneously; and the need for more studies on real-world problems. With regard to the latter, the thesis has carried out an in-depth analysis of political discourses on a contemporary issue in the EU; that of minority nationalists embracing secessionism. By examining whether the issue of secession has found more resonance on the European level and EU representatives have become more willing to play a role in secessionist conflicts, the thesis has engaged in a broader debate about the EU: should the EU have a more outspoken position and take a firmer stance on politically sensitive issues that may affect the legitimacy and stability of the Union, now that a perfect storm may be on its way? The findings here have shown that the EU adopted a more active stance in the debates studied – undeniably so in the Brexit debate in Northern Ireland. The idea that the EU may have started altering its position on sensitive political issues is further supported by the Commission’s firmer stance on non-compliance issues with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in summer 2017. However, given the continued emphasis on the internal nature of secessionist conflicts, it remains unlikely that the EU will become an active player, or mediator, in any of these conflicts but in the Northern Irish. Arguably, such a passive stance will not blow the storm clouds away anytime soon.

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