

**Whither a Europe of the Regions?  
Minority nationalist parties and the challenges of European integration**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Minority nationalist parties across Western Europe were among the most vociferous advocates of a “Europe of the Regions” in the 1980s and early 1990s. The building of an internal market, the reform of the European Structural Funds in 1988, and several innovations contained in the Maastricht Treaty of European Union – the creation of a Committee of the Regions, access for regional representatives to the Council of Ministers and the principle of subsidiarity - were some of the developments hailed by these actors as evidence that a very different kind of European polity was being built, one which would see Europe’s small nations and regions assume a central role in the process of governing Europe (Keating, 1995). Academic observers may have been quick to appreciate the limitations for the emergence of such a regionalised Europe (Hooghe and Marks, 1996; Christiansen, 1996), but for minority nationalist parties, these developments were important for two reasons. Firstly, European integration seemed to be weakening the state - the traditional adversary of minority nationalism – by transferring many of its functional responsibilities to the supranational level, and by bringing sub-state actors into the European policy-making process. Secondly, European integration was creating a new political arena beyond the state onto which aspirations for national self-determination could be projected; national self-determination suddenly seemed to be far more achievable than it ever had been within the traditional confines of the centre-periphery relationship.

As a result of these dynamics, many minority nationalist parties re-framed their long-term constitutional goals to take this new European dimension into account. The exact expression given to this regionalist vision differed from party to party; the idea of a Europe of the Regions proved to be an extremely malleable concept in the hands of different minority nationalist parties. In the 1980s, the Volksunie in Belgium linked its demands for the federalisation of Belgium to a broader project for a regionalised Europe constructed upon national communities (Lynch, 1996: 121-129). By 1990, Plaid Cymru in Wales was calling for “full national status” for Wales within a Europe of the Regions (Elias, 2006), while the Scottish National Party adopted a more sovereigntist position that demanded “independence in Europe” (Lynch, 1996; Hepburn, 2006). In Catalonia, *Convergència i Unió* outlined a vision of Catalonia within a plurinational Spain and a regional Europe, within which member states would coexist with subnational authorities on an equal level (Giordano and Roller, 2002: 103-106). Indeed, this European regionalist thematic was the defining feature of growing levels of support for European integration among minority nationalist parties throughout the 1980s and 1990s. On the supranational level, a new shared interest in advocating this alternative vision of a future Europe led to the creation and consolidation of the European Free Alliance on the European level, a European party family created from scratch to represent a political agenda anchored in shared commitment to a Europe of the Regions (Lynch, 1996; De Winter and Gomez-Reino, 2002).

And yet, in recent years, minority nationalist parties have been forced to recognise that a Europe of the Regions has not materialised. In the Convention on the Future of Europe, many of the demands put forward by EFA on behalf of Europe's minority nations were rejected for inclusion in the final constitutional text; the resultant European Constitution was represented a "robustly statist" (MacCormick, 2004: 342) vision of the EU whose powers are conferred on it by sovereign Member States. Commenting on this failure, Jordi Pujol, long-serving President of the CiU and the architect of its European vision, recently observed with respect to the status of minority nations within the EU, that "the situation today is one where we have lost some of the gains made over the last few years...we have lost momentum" (Pujol, 2005). Hepburn (2007) also identifies a new wave of Euro-scepticism among parties that have traditionally articulated their territorial aspirations in European regionalist terms. These recent developments in European integration give rise to important questions with regard to minority nationalist party attitudes towards European integration. Does the failure to construct a Europe of the Regions, and the re-assertion of state authority within the EU, signal the end of minority nationalist party support for European integration? Are minority nationalist parties abandoning their regionalist visions of a future Europe, and looking elsewhere for ways of securing self-determination for their nations?

This paper argues that even though in the current climate of European integration, the prospects for a Europe of the Regions are dismal indeed, it is too soon to herald the end of minority nationalist support for European integration. The paper draws on evidence from two case studies – of Plaid Cymru in Wales, and the Bloque Nacionalista Galego in Galicia – to argue that minority nationalist party support for European integration is much more complex than a simple assessment of whether European integration is moving closer towards, or further away from, the Europe of the Regions ideal. The argument proceeds in two steps. Firstly, the basis of minority nationalist party support for a regionalist Europe in Wales and Galicia is examined; it is demonstrated that, even though both Plaid Cymru and the BNG had adopted the rhetoric of a regionalised Europe by the mid 1990s, they did so for very different reasons. As well as developments in European integration during the 1980s and early 1990s, minority nationalist party support for a Europe of the Regions was also driven by a basic ideological commitment to European co-operation (in the case of Plaid Cymru) and the specific dynamics of party competition at home at the time (Plaid Cymru and the BNG).

If initial minority nationalist party support for a Europe of the Regions can be understood as the result of the combined influence of these three factors – developments in European integration, basic party ideology and domestic political dynamics – then the more recent attitudes of these actors towards Europe are also best understood as a product of these different influences. The second step of the argument, therefore, suggests that in recent years, minority nationalist party attitudes towards Europe in Wales and Galicia have changed in two distinct ways: they have become more critical of concrete developments on the supranational level, and they have downplayed the European regionalist dimension to nation-building that had framed party rhetoric since the mid 1990s. While the first trend can be explained as a result of the failure of European integration to move in a direction of a Europe of the Regions, understanding the second trend requires a consideration of the altered domestic political context within which Plaid Cymru and the BNG currently operate, a context which has made it increasingly difficult for both parties to flaunt their European regionalist credentials as confidently as they did ten years previously. The paper concludes, however, by suggesting

that a decline in issue salience does not necessarily lead to an abandonment of support in principle for a regionalised Europe. Minority nationalist parties who are ideologically committed to the principle of a regional Europe, such as Plaid Cymru, will find it very difficult to turn their back on Europe completely, as this would violate a core tenet of party identity. For other parties where the notion of a Europe of the Regions is less deeply rooted in the party's mindset, like the BNG, abandoning Europe in favour of alternative avenues for securing autonomy for the minority nation is potentially much easier.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF EUROPEAN REGIONALISM IN WALES AND GALICIA

By the mid 1990s, the positions adopted by Plaid Cymru and the BNG on the European issue were representative of those adopted by the majority of the minority nationalist party family: support for European integration expressed in European regionalist terms. Both Plaid Cymru and the BNG enthusiastically embraced the principle of a Europe of the Regions as an alternative framework within which Welsh and Galician self-determination could be achieved, albeit with different conceptualisations of the exact form such a regional Europe would assume in practice. At its annual Conference in 1990, Plaid Cymru held the first serious debate of its long-term constitutional aims since the 1950s, with the result that a commitment to greater Welsh autonomy within a Britannic confederation was replaced with “full national status for Wales in Europe” as the party's ultimate goal for the Welsh nation (Elias, 2006). Over the next few years, the party developed a detailed framework setting out the different stages for achieving this constitutional objective, anchored in the assumption that European integration would continue with the process already under way of re-distributing political authority upwards to the supranational level and downwards to the level of the regions and the minority nations themselves.<sup>1</sup> Whilst sovereign states would ultimately disappear in Plaid Cymru's vision of the future European polity, the BNG offered a less “post-sovereignist” (Keating, 2001) version of a regional Europe within which different “peoples” would assume equal status and rights along side existing states within the EU. From 1994 onwards, the BNG began calling for greater autonomy for Galicia within a plurinational Spain and a Europe of the Peoples, as an alternative to the neo-liberal Europe of States that had existed up to that point (Elias, 2006a: 151). For the most committed Europeanists within the party, a Europe of the Peoples meant “a European confederation of nations, a Europe without frontiers where nations have the right to self-determination”, within which Galicia would take up its place alongside Europe's other minority nations (Toro, 1991: 357). In 1998, the BNG established new links with the Catalan CiU and Basque PNV under the name Galeusca, one of the shared aims of the alliance being that of building a Europe of Peoples (De Blas Guerrero, 1998).

In recent years, however, the attitude of both Welsh and Galician minority nationalist parties towards European integration has been characterised by two distinct trends. Firstly, both Plaid Cymru and the BNG have proposed more critical evaluations of the nature and direction of the process of European integration. Plaid Cymru, for example, was quick to realise the limited potential of the Committee of the Regions as a platform for representing regionalist issues on the supranational level, but there were also many other disappointments in store for the party throughout the 1990s. These included the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Plaid Cymru (1995) *A Democratic Wales in a United Europe*. Cardiff: Plaid Cymru, p. 4.

limited increase in the European Parliament's powers in successive rounds of Treaty reform, and the failure of the principle of subsidiarity to translate into a meaningful redistribution of policy competences across different territorial layers within the EU (Elias, 2006: 106). Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe had brought several member states into the EU with populations smaller than that of Wales, but there was little prospect of a similar status being extended to other small nations already in the EU as part of larger Member States. Similarly, the European Constitution was perceived by the party as a confirmation of the fact that the European polity that existed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was very much a Europe of States, rather than a Europe of the Regions. For its part, the BNG had always maintained a more critical stance towards the concrete policy and institutional realities of European integration, especially the economic disadvantages for the Galician economy within the European free-market (Elias, 2006a: 152-253). The BNG also shared many of Plaid Cymru's frustrations at the lack of progress towards improving the institutional and legal recognition of Europe's small nations and regions. Most recently, however, the BNG's dissatisfaction with the general direction of European integration came to the fore in the campaign for the referendum on the European Constitution held in Spain in February 2005. The BNG campaigned in favour of rejecting the European constitution, since the proposed text did not give sufficient legal or political recognition of Europe's minority nations and their languages, and failed to ensure greater social cohesion and the protection of workers' rights.<sup>2</sup> For both Plaid Cymru and the BNG, therefore, enthusiasm for a Europe of the Regions has given way to a more pessimistic evaluation of the future prospects of securing regional autonomy within a European framework.

Alongside this growing disillusionment with European integration, a second trend that can be identified in the European positions adopted by Plaid Cymru and the BNG is, paradoxically, the playing down of the European dimension to these parties' nation-building rhetoric. As European integration has become more problematic for these parties, the issue of Europe has also become a less salient feature of minority nationalist politics in Wales and in Galicia. The dumbing down of the European dimension has been most striking in the case of Plaid Cymru; since the late 1990s, the party has ceased to flaunt its European credentials at every opportunity, both as the marker of Plaid's difference vis-à-vis its political competitors, and as the starting point from whence all its policy concerns depart. Any mention of Europe was deliberately eschewed during a re-branding exercise undertaken by in 2006, which saw the party change its name and adopt a new logo.<sup>3</sup> European integration was also not on the agenda for discussion when a six-month policy consultation process with the people of Wales was launched at the same time.<sup>4</sup> A similar turning away from Europe is apparent when one considers the salience of the European issue for the BNG. Strikingly, the 2004 European Parliament election and European Constitution referendum aside, the issue of Europe has ceased to feature in the BNG's approach to the day-to-day business of politics. It is not an issue that has been discussed at any of the party's Annual Conferences since the end of the 1990s, and was not a broader theme for the party's campaign for the 2005 Autonomous Elections in Galicia. This is in stark contrast to the party's campaign in the Autonomous Elections

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<sup>2</sup> BNG Press release, 'O BNG recomenda o non ao Tratado Europeo dende o seu inequívoco si a Europe', 18<sup>th</sup> December 2004. Found at: <http://www.bng-galiza.org/> (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Since 1933, Plaid Cymru's logo was three green peaks, representing Plaid Cymru's key values, self-government, cultural prosperity and economic prosperity. More recently, a red dragon was added onto the three peaks. The new logo adopted by the party in 2006 was a yellow poppy, and the party will no longer use the word "Cymru" - Welsh for Wales - in the party's name, referring to itself simply as "Plaid" (although its full name remains "Plaid Cymru - The Party of Wales").

<sup>4</sup> See the campaign's specific web-site, <http://www.www2007.info> (accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006).

four years previously, where the Europe of the People's theme provided the rhetorical packaging for the BNG's detailed policy programme for Galicia. Thus, not only have minority nationalist parties in Wales and Galicia become more critical of European integration, but it is also the case that these parties seem to have become less interested in European integration.

It should be noted, however, that despite a growing dissatisfaction with the current reality of European integration and the declining salience of the European dimension in these parties' nation-building discourses, that neither Plaid Cymru nor the BNG have abandoned their commitment in principle to a regional Europe. Plaid Cymru remains formally committed to a constitutional future that inextricably links Welsh self-determination to European integration. Thus, for example, the party's 2005 General Election manifesto stated that "Plaid Cymru's...ambition for Wales is independence in Europe. This would involve full national status for Wales within international organisations such as the UN and the EU".<sup>5</sup> The party also noted its committed to further integration in areas of foreign policy, agricultural and food regulation, environmental protection and waste management, social policy and linguistic rights.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, throughout its campaign in the referendum on the European Constitution, the BNG was keen to hammer home that its criticism of the constitutional text was advanced from a basic position of supporting European integration in principle – a "Europeanist No", to quite the party's own articulation of its position.

In order to understand these recent trends in the attitudes of Plaid Cymru and the BNG towards the EU, it is necessary to begin by understanding the different reasons for which minority nationalist parties supported European integration in the first place. Understanding the origins of each party's support for European integration provides the necessary background for examining the changing nature of party attitudes towards European integration in more recent years. The following section, therefore, examines the basis of minority nationalist party support for a Europe of the Regions in Wales and in Galicia. As suggested in the Introduction, most explanations of these actors' pro-European attitudes highlight the importance of developments on the supranational level from 1980s onwards in convincing minority nationalist parties of the potential for building an alternative regional Europe. The case studies of Plaid Cymru and the BNG suggest, however, that two other factors must also be taken into account in order to explain the growing enthusiasm of minority nationalist parties for a Europe of the Regions: basic party ideology and domestic political dynamics. It is to examine the interaction between these three factors – developments in European integration, basic party ideology and domestic political dynamics – as the drivers of minority nationalist party support for Europe, that this paper now turns.

## EXPLAINING MINORITY NATIONALIST SUPPORT FOR A EUROPE OF THE REGIONS IN WALES AND GALICIA

Plaid Cymru was established in 1925, and from the outset was a party that defined Wales as a European nation. Saunders Lewis, one of Plaid Cymru's first Presidents and most influential intellectuals, once stated that "Wales can understand Europe, for she is one of the family", based on Wales having been a part of the Holy Roman Empire in the Middle

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<sup>5</sup> Plaid Cymru (2005) *We Can Build a Better Wales*. Cardiff: Plaid Cymru, pg. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Plaid Cymru (2004) *Fighting Hard for Wales*. Cardiff: Plaid Cymru.

Ages.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, based on this historical experience, Lewis argued that Plaid Cymru's long-term aim for Welsh self-determination could only be achieved within some kind of overarching European framework. This basic constitutional principle rested on a specific understanding of autonomy that rejected independence as the ultimate goal of Welsh nationalism, in favour of a non-sovereign status which would provide Wales with the "freedom" to organise its own political and cultural affairs (Wyn Jones, 1999: 176). These two principles – Wales as a European nation and a rejection of sovereign independence – have underpinned Plaid Cymru's constitutional policies ever since.

Despite this commitment to European co-operation in principle, however, Plaid Cymru was initially extremely hostile to the predominantly economic nature of the EEC as it had developed until the 1970s. The party even voted against continued British membership of the EEC in a referendum held in 1975, on the grounds that Welsh interests would be poorly represented within the European institutions, and that the common market risked exacerbating the under-performance of a traditional Welsh economy on the periphery of the European continent (Turner, 1998: 75; Elias, 2006a: 87-88).

The party's change of heart on the issue of European integration by the end of the 1980s happened as a result of two factors. Firstly, developments in European integration convinced Plaid Cymru that the fundamental nature of the European project was changing; a EEC defined by market-driven initiatives appeared to be giving way to new concerns not just to ensure better representation of Europe's cultural and linguistic groups, but also with issues such as environmental sustainability that resonated with Plaid Cymru's own policy priorities. Secondly, these supranational developments acquired a particular significance because they offered a way out of the political crisis that Plaid Cymru was experiencing at the beginning of the 1980s. In a referendum held on the 1<sup>st</sup> March 1979, the Welsh electorate had rejected proposals for devolution for Wales, a policy closely associated with Plaid Cymru's political agenda. In a General Election a few months later, a Conservative government was elected to power that had little time for the demands of Welsh nationalism. At the end of 1979, it seemed that Welsh nationalism was in full retreat (Morgan, 1998: 407). However, throughout the 1980s, Plaid Cymru successfully used the European regionalist theme to carve out a new political space beyond the state. Linking issues of Welsh identity with European integration served to distinguish Plaid Cymru from increasingly unpopular Conservative government intent on re-asserting a strong sense of Britishness and defending British sovereignty, both themes that were anathema to the large swathes of voters on the Scottish and Welsh peripheries (Leydier, 1994: 1050). Moreover, the abstract notion of a Europe of the Regions constituted a rhetorical empty vessel into which other policy commitments – nuclear disarmament, sexual equality and environmental sustainability – could be poured. The result, as Wyn Jones (1996: 49) argues, was to make Welsh nationalism appear "not only relevant, but also progressive". Plaid Cymru's turn towards Europe, therefore, was rooted within the political crisis suffered by the party at the beginning of the 1980s; the notion of a Europe of the Regions provided an attractive discursive resource for the re-branding of Welsh nationalism as an alternative political force within Welsh and British politics. By the end of the 1980s, Plaid Cymru's ideological Europeanism had been translated into a concrete political project that made sense in the context of European and domestic politics at that particular point in time.

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, Saunders (1926) *Egnyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb*. Machynlleth: Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru.

In contrast to Plaid Cymru's long ideological attachment to the idea of European co-operation, the BNG has a history of deep ideological opposition to European integration. The BNG was created in 1982, as a political front that brought together different Marxist-Leninist and social-democratic political groups that had emerged during the latter years of the Franco dictatorship to demand greater autonomy for Galicia (Beramendi and Núñez Seixas, 1996; Barreiro Rivas, 2003). For the next fifteen years, the party's attitude towards Europe was an extension of the radical left-wing rhetoric of the majority of its membership. The EEC was interpreted as a project designed and run by capitalist imperialists, and membership of the European club would only further exacerbate the economic and political neglect that Galicia had suffered during decades of centralised rule within the Spanish state. Spanish accession to the EEC in 1986 did not alter the basic tenets of the BNG's antipathy to the European project. The highly damaging impact of the CAP and European fishing policies on a peripheral and under-developed Galician economy provided the substance of the BNG's anti-Europeanism until the early 1990s. Interestingly, developments that were viewed by other minority nationalist parties as heralding the dawn of a Europe the Regions – reform of the structural funds, the innovations of the Maastricht Treaty – were rejected by the BNG as nothing more than empty steps designed by state elites to placate peripheral nationalist demands. The TEU, for example, was denounced in typically forceful language as a “return to the third Napoleonic Empire, or a revival of the Romano-Germanic Empire or the fourth Reich”.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, the BNG's “discovery” of a Europe of the Regions by the mid 1990s was rooted, first and foremost, in the changing electoral fortunes of the BNG from the mid 1980s onwards. The party's steadily increasing share of the vote in regional elections (in contrast to the failure of other smaller nationalist groups to command a similar electoral share) led to a consolidation of the nationalist political spectrum between 1991 and 1994, with the BNG incorporating several different communist and social-democratic groups into its organisation (Maíz, 2003; Barreiro Rivas, 2003). The fact that some of these groups – Unidade Galega in particular - espoused distinctly more Europeanist values than the BNG's leadership had done hitherto, would ultimately have far-reaching consequences for the BNG's own attitudes towards European integration. The emergence of a new pro-European elite within the BNG provided the substance for a distinctive European discourse rooted in the notion, as noted above, of Galician autonomy within a plurinational Spain and a Europe of the Peoples. That the BNG as a whole was receptive to these ideas from the mid 1990s onwards was the result of the party's new aspirations to establish itself as the main party of opposition to the hegemonic party within the Galician Parliament throughout the 1990s, namely the Partido Popular de Galicia. As a part of the party's new strategy, the BNG moderated not only its radical Marxist-leninist ideology, but also its conceptualisation of the centre-periphery tension and how best to resolve it (Maíz, 2003). With regard to the latter, the radical language of “rupture” from an imperialist Spanish state was replaced by demands for greater Galician autonomy within an overarching state framework (Elias, 2006a: 1622-3). This was complemented by the pursuit of new alliances with like minded parties, both within Spain (with the CiU in Catalonia and the PNV in the Basque Country) and on the supranational level, where the BNG became a member of EFA. While the BNG, by the mid 1990s, remained highly critical of many of the economic, political and social aspects of the EU, the party now framed these objections in a more constructive political discourse which made the link between Galician self-determination and a future

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<sup>8</sup> BNG (1992) *O Tratado da Unión Europea (TUE) Asinado en Maástricht. Análise e Posición Política do Bloque Nacionalista Galego*. Santiago de Compostela: BNG, p. 5.

European Union organised around cultural and linguistic communities. Ideological opposition to European integration was replaced by a formal commitment to a Europe of the Peoples, even if the EU as a concrete reality was a far cry from this normative ideal.

However, it is important to note that this formal embrace of a regional Europe did not mean that fundamental attitudes towards European integration within the BNG had changed (Elias, 2006: 151). For many among the BNG's rank and file, and even important figures among the party's leadership, Europe was still a project viewed with deep-rooted scepticism, an indicator of the enduring influence of basic ideological values on the party's general world-view. This observation highlights the strategic pragmatism of the BNG's turn towards Europe, as a function of the requirements of domestic political competition. The impact of this limited internalisation of the BNG's new European discourse on the party's changing attitudes towards the EU in recent years is considered later on in this paper.

## RETHINKING SUPPORT FOR A EUROPE OF THE REGIONS

Thus far, the paper has argued that the adoption of the rhetoric of a Europe of the Regions by Plaid Cymru and the BNG was more complex than simply being a response to developments on the supranational level, as is often asserted in existing academic accounts of minority nationalist party enthusiasm for a regional Europe. A consideration of party ideology and the domestic political context of the time provides a more complete explanation of these parties' changing attitudes towards the European project. If this is the case, then it is reasonable to expect that more recent changes in the positions adopted by minority nationalist parties may also be a function of changes along these three dimensions of influence. The changing nature of European integration, and the repeated failure of supranational initiatives to move the EU towards a Europe of the Regions, have already been alluded to as a basis for increasing minority nationalist party cynicism about the concrete reality of European polity-building. But have changes in the ideological values and domestic political context of Plaid Cymru and the BNG further contributed to these parties' rethinking of their position on European integration?

Let us begin with the latter. If recent developments in European integration can explain the rise in minority nationalist party dissatisfaction with the current nature and direction of European integration, it is arguable that the declining salience of the European issue in the political discourses of Plaid Cymru and the BNG is the result of a very different set of pressures, arising from the domestic political arena within which these parties have mobilised and continue to operate. More specifically, the fact that the status of Plaid Cymru and the BNG within Welsh and Galician politics has changed in important ways during the last decade, has forced these two parties to reconsider the prominence given to the European dimension in the definition and articulation of their respective territorial projects. As noted above, both Plaid Cymru and the BNG "turned" to Europe when they were small parties in British and Galician politics respectively, and when they were both attempting to carve out a new political space within which to articulate their territorial demands. The Europe of the Regions/Peoples rhetoric provided a valuable resource in achieving this aim, since the coupling of nationalist demands with a new political arena beyond the state served to redefine the terms of centre-periphery debate, ultimately bringing new legitimacy to minority nationalist demands for territorial autonomy. Ten years later, however, both Plaid Cymru and the BNG have established

themselves as key political players within Welsh and Galician politics. In Wales, the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 created a new regional political space within which Plaid Cymru has become the main party of opposition and an aspiring party of regional government. In Galicia, the BNG's improving electoral fortunes throughout the 1990s saw it replace the Galician Socialist Party as the second political force within the Galician Parliament in 1997, behind the right-wing Partido Popular de Galicia. After the 2005 Autonomous Elections, the BNG entered into coalition with the Socialists for the first time in its history.

In short, the context within which Plaid Cymru and the BNG now view developments in European integration has changed fundamentally. More importantly, this change of status at home has brought its own challenges for the Europeanist commitments of these parties. Firstly, the unprecedented political visibility of these two parties has brought new pressure to defend a European vision that is increasingly out of sync with the concrete reality of European integration. This problem has been most acute for Plaid Cymru, since the party's ideological commitment to a future Europe within which sovereignty is increasingly irrelevant is clearly at odds with the reassertion of state sovereignty within the EU in recent years. Plaid Cymru's attempts to overcome this tension by replacing the demand for "full national status" within Europe with the call for "independence in Europe" has been undermined by the party's persistent insistence that even "independence" would not ultimately mean Wales becoming as sovereign state as a precondition for membership of the EU (Elias, 2006b). For both Plaid Cymru and the BNG, hiding behind the loose rhetoric of a regional Europe is no longer an easy option when attempting to convince voters of the relevance and credibility of the territorial political project that defines the purpose of these parties.

Secondly, it is no longer clear that the European dimension serves its purpose as a demarcator of political space for Plaid Cymru and the BNG in contemporary Welsh and Galician political arenas. Plaid Cymru's championing of the European cause from the late 1980s onwards was closely linked to the claim that it was the only true "party of Wales", able to defend Welsh interests within British and European politics. Within post-devolution Wales, however, one of the major problems that Plaid Cymru has faced has been that of maintaining a distinctive policy agenda in the face of the gradual realignment of partisan politics within Wales post-1999. The establishment of the National Assembly of Wales created a new centre of gravity for all political parties in Wales. State-wide parties were forced to discuss regional issues, produce regional solutions, and give their programmes a 'Welsh face' (Osmond, 2000; Wyn Jones and Scully, 2004). Moreover, all major political parties in Wales have become champions of better representation of Welsh interests within the EU. Plaid Cymru's failure to define a clear political agenda in post-devolution Wales was a factor accounting for the party's electoral decline in the second round of elections to the devolved body in 2003 (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2004). In short, it is no longer the case that a political programme anchored in the notion of "Wales in Europe" is an effective platform for presenting Plaid Cymru as a real political alternative for Wales.

A similar dilemma is faced by the BNG in Galicia. Just as with Plaid Cymru, the BNG's embrace of the discourse of European regionalism was intrinsically linked with the party's attempt to define a new politics of alternatives in Galician. However, if this European dimension contributed to the BNG's carving out of a new nationalist political space by the late 1990s, other political parties in Galicia – the state wide Partido Popular and Socialist Party - have also sought to compete with Galician minority nationalism on

key issues of policy, although this process of adjustment has taken place over a longer period of time than in Wales (Máiz, 2003: 22-24; Jiménez Sánchez, 2003; Lagares Díez, 2003). State-wide parties have taken on the political threat posed by the BNG by adopting offering their own version of a distinctly Galician political agenda. At the same time, the BNG's adoption of a position of principled support for European integration has meant that it is no longer easy to distinguish between the pro-Europeanism of the BNG and that of other state-wide parties. The political and electoral advantages reaped by the party during the 1980s and early 1990s, as a result of being able to claim that it was the only critical Galician voice vis-à-vis European integration (Beramendi and Núñez-Seixas, 1996: 295; Elias, 2006a: 181-182), no longer holds. The BNG's struggle in recent years to define anew a distinctly "nationalist" political space has contributed to the party's electoral decline since 2001, with new tensions emerging within the party over its policy priorities and political strategy. Just as for Plaid Cymru, Europe no longer provides an easy answer to the fundamental questions about party identity and purpose that the BNG has been struggling to answer in recent years.

Thirdly, both Plaid Cymru and the BNG face a growing problem of espousing positions on European integration that are increasingly at odds with the attitudes of their voters on the European issue. This dilemma has assumed different forms in each of the two cases. In Wales, Plaid Cymru is faced with an increasingly Eurosceptic electorate, reflecting the increasing decline of support for European integration within the British public as a whole.<sup>9</sup> This makes things very difficult for any party seeking to gain public approval for closer integration into the EU. This lack of popular support for European integration may well become an even more problematic issue for Plaid Cymru in the future, as the party has to face up to the possibility that not only must it deal with a general popular disenchantment with European affairs, but that this opposition is particularly strong among some members of its traditional support base. Recent public opinion surveys, for example, asked respondents about Wales's place within the UK and Europe (Welsh Assembly Election Studies, 1999; 2003). In 1999, 8.2% supported Plaid Cymru's constitutional option, that is for Wales to become independent from the UK but remain a part of the UK, declining slightly to 7.8% by 2003. In contrast, support for Welsh independence both from the UK and the EU – the most radical option – more than doubled over the same period of time, from 2.9% in 1999 to 6.3% in 2003. Growing support among Plaid Cymru's hard-line supporters for these two radical options in the future – independence from the UK and the EU – would represent a further challenge to a moderate nationalist agenda firmly rooted in a post-sovereignist Europeanist vision of Wales's future as an autonomous nation.

For the BNG, the problem lies in the tension between the overwhelmingly pro-European attitudes of the Galician electorate as a whole, in contrast to the deeply sceptical position of the BNG's traditional support base. Sangrador Garcia (1996) noted that Galicia was slightly more pro-European than the Spanish average, a trend that is supported by more recent survey data. A question in the 2003 survey conducted by the Observatorio Político Autonómico asked respondents in Galicia whether they considered European integration to be beneficial or prejudicial for their respective nation's interests (OPA, 2003). Of the responses, 65.1% declared European integration to be beneficial for Galicia, with only around 10% expressing an opinion that European integration is prejudicial to Galicia; this was more supportive than respondents in either Catalonia, the Basque Country or Andalusia. When asked to evaluate Spain's membership of the EU,

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<sup>9</sup> For an account of public attitudes towards European integration in Britain as a whole, see Spiering (2004).

81.2% of Galician respondents saw this as something beneficial, in comparison to 70.4% in Catalonia and 74.2% in the Basque Country. The fact that the BNG's campaign for a no vote in the referendum on the European Constitution elicited such little support among Galician voters – 81.3% of voters in Galicia were in favour of adopting the European Constitution, compared to 12.2% against – is indicative of the difficulties of selling a critical stance on European integration to an instinctively pro-European electorate. However, for the BNG's membership, the ideological antipathy to European co-operation which shaped the party's opposition to European integration for the first fifteen years of its existence, continues to translate into deep-rooted scepticism about the European project. The substantial drop in the BNG's vote in the 2004 European Parliament elections – from 22% in 1999 to 13% - was explained by some party leaders as a rejection by the BNG's voters of the party's abandonment of its radical opposition to European integration, in favour of a more constructive pro-Europeanism (Elias, 2006a: 180). This rejection of the party's policies on Europe reflects a more general unease growing within the BNG at the apparent abandonment of core party values in pursuit of a bigger vote share and government office.

For all of these reasons, the declining salience of the European issue for minority nationalist parties in Wales and Galicia can be understood as a tactic for diverting attention away from an issue that is increasingly difficult to defend in domestic political and electoral competitions. Instead, both Plaid Cymru and the BNG have preferred to focused on the bread and butter issues of policy-making within their respective territories. This is, in one sense, a natural reaction for parties that are, or are aspiring, participants in regional government. After all, European integration, for all the symbolic and concrete opportunities it seemed to offer minority nations, could never be a substitute to exercising political authority within the minority nation itself. In the words of one Plaid Cymru member, "Plaid Cymru is never going to be in power in Westminster or in Europe...We're the main opposition party in the Assembly, and only Assembly elections will bring us self-determination".<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, the new preoccupation with developing comprehensive policy packages at home offers a convenient way of isolating the potentially damaging effects of a European discourse that has changed, over the course of ten years, from being an electoral vote-winner to being an electoral liability. The decreasing salience of the rhetoric of a regional Europe in minority nationalist party politics in Wales and Galicia is thus the result of calculated attempts by Plaid Cymru and the BNG to manage an abstract programmatic theme that is no longer appropriate for the supranational and domestic political contexts within which these parties strive to achieve national self-determination.

Can one conclude from this that minority nationalist parties have turned their backs, once and for all, on the prospect of a Europe of the Regions? Answering this question requires one to consider the third factor that, as argued above, impacts upon minority nationalist party attitudes towards European integration, namely party ideology. Ideology is an enduring component of party identity that provides a prism through which real-world developments are perceived and understood (Freeden, 1998; Volkens and Klingemann, 2002). With specific regard to European integration, there is growing empirical evidence that basic ideology constitutes the broad parameters of a political party's attitude towards Europe, and that this influence is enduring over time (Marks, Wilson and Ray, 2002; Marks and Wilson, 2000; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Hix, 1999; Hix and Lord, 1997; Gabel and Hix, 2002; Ladrech, 2000). Given that minority

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, PC-03.

nationalist parties mobilised historically around the centre-periphery cleavage, one would expect attitudes towards European integration to be determined, first and foremost, by their understanding of the centre-periphery cleavage, their relationship with the central state, and their proposals for modifying this constitutional set-up (Giordano and Roller, 2002: 99). Minority nationalist parties who make an ideological link between European integration and the resolution of the centre-periphery dilemma are thus likely to be supportive of further European integration in principle, regardless of whether or not concrete developments in European integration meet the party's normative aspirations for a future European polity. Where such an ideological basis for principled Europeanism is absent, then minority nationalist party support for European integration is more likely to be contingent upon other, shorter-term factors, such as developments on the supranational level and pressures emanating from the domestic political context. Given that neither of these latter factors would seem (at least from the Welsh and Galician cases) to be propitious for continued minority nationalist support for the rhetoric of a Europe of the Regions, then continued minority nationalist party support for European integration is likely to depend, in future, on the ideological rootedness of these parties' professed Europeanism.

These different propositions about the impact of party ideology on the future attitudes of minority nationalist party attitudes towards European integration suggest a very different prognosis about Plaid Cymru and the BNG's positions on Europe in the medium term. Plaid Cymru's support for European integration draws on a very long ideological tradition of conceptualising Welsh self-determination within a European framework. As such, continued support for European integration in principle is guaranteed; abandoning this commitment would be to violate one of the core determinants of the party's identity. The EU as a concrete reality may be far from creating the kind of Europe aspired to by Plaid Cymru, creating a tension between this unsatisfactory reality and the party's normative Europeanism. However, Plaid Cymru is likely to continue to package its long-term constitutional demands in Europeanist terms for the foreseeable future, even if this aspect of the party's programme is not given prominence in the day-to-day politics of nation-building within Wales. With regard to the BNG, the party's continued adherence to a regionalist vision of Europe is less guaranteed. In contrast, the strategic pragmatism of the BNG's Europeanism, and the lack of rootedness of this ideal in the mindset of many of the party's leaders and members, suggests that the party's future attitude towards European integration may be open to contestation. In particular, as internal tensions within the BNG over the party's ideological orientation and strategic priorities have increased over recent years, the BNG's attitudes towards Europe may well depend on the outcome of an ongoing internal power struggle, between party traditionalists favouring a return to the more radical oppositional politics of the 1980s, and moderates who have overseen the BNG's transformation into a party of the centre and a party of government over the recent decade. Whilst the latter's ideological Europeanism defined the BNG's turn towards Europe since the mid 1990s, the alternative is a re-emergence of the BNG's principled opposition, not only to the EU as a concrete reality, but also to European integration in principle.

## CONCLUSION

If developments in European integration from the mid 1980s onwards convinced many minority nationalist parties that a very different kind of Europe was being built – one that held the promise of new solutions for the centre-periphery dilemma within a Europe

of the Regions – then more recent events on the supranational level have forced these parties to re-evaluate the degree to which European integration can satisfy minority nationalist demands for greater autonomy. However, this paper has argued that, despite evidence of a growing Euroscepticism among minority nationalist parties, it is not necessarily the case that minority nationalist parties will abandon their European regionalist aspirations completely. In the cases of Plaid Cymru and the BNG, for example, the re-assertion of state authority over the process and direction of European integration has not, to date, led minority nationalist parties to abandon their formal support for the European project. Rather, these two minority nationalist parties have sought to deal with the growing tension between support in principle for a Europe of the Regions and a EU which has failed to recognise the political and legal rights on small nations and historical regions, in a specific way, namely by playing down the European dimension to their nation-building rhetoric.

It has been the contention of this paper that these recent changes in minority nationalist party attitudes towards European integration cannot be explained by the changing nature of European integration alone; minority nationalist party positions on Europe is not simply dependent on the degree to which European integration has created a Europe of the Regions. Rather, minority nationalist party support for European integration also depends on the party's ideological orientation, and changes in the party's domestic political context. An analysis of the different ways in which these three factors have interacted at different points in time provides a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which minority nationalist parties perceive and respond to developments on the supranational level. The result is that, even though the shared discourse of a regionalist Europe adopted by many minority nationalist parties suggested a remarkable convergence of party attitudes around a single supranational theme, minority nationalist party attitudes towards European integration are also shaped by ideological and contextual factors that are specific to each party. This observation has important implications for the analysis of more recent changes in minority nationalist party attitudes towards Europe. Based on the case studies of Plaid Cymru and the BNG presented in this paper, it is arguable that the apparent decline in minority nationalist party support for European integration belies a more complex process by which these actors are attempting to reconcile developments on the supranational level with other ideological and contextual constraints that differ from party to party. To the extent that supranational and domestic conditions make it difficult to articulate a political programme anchored in the long-term aspiration for a regional Europe, the continued support of minority nationalist parties for European integration is likely to depend on the ideational commitment of these parties to such a project. Even where such a principled support for European integration exists, however, the fact remains that Europe no longer offers the easy route to self-determination it once promised. If...

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