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**DISTINCTION
AND
CONFLICT**

UNITY IN DIVERSITY
On layered identities in Europe

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Adaptation of *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, originally a painting by Eugène Delacroix symbolizing the French Revolution (and showing a French rather than European flag).

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Introduction

L'Europe est un Etat composé de plusieurs provinces.
Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu

There may not be an area on our planet that has seen a more intensely controlled and far-reaching integration than the European continent. In just fifty years, many European nations have witnessed rapidly decreasing differences with regard to economy, politics and perhaps even culture. In recent years, many journalists, politicians and scholars have raised the question of an emerging 'European identity'. However, it is interesting to see that many others stress that "one has to be careful when referring to the EU as an homogenous entity" or that the inhabitants of the EU are "twenty-seven peoples with very different cultures" (Bot, 2007). Enormous differences *within* Europe are stressed – even by people who articulate a pro-European stance – while in fact, these differences could also be communicated as being *marginal* when compared, for example, with many of Europe's important 'mirroring cultures', such as the 'Muslim World', Russia, China, or perhaps even the United States (as done by Rifkin, 2004, for example). Because of this increasing unity and perceived diversity, it should not come as a surprise that on 4th May, 2000, the European motto "unity in diversity" (*in varietate concordia*) was officially proclaimed in the European Parliament. For some, this motto stands for the unity and diversity between nation-states. For others, it symbolizes the right for 'minority-nations' to cherish and protect their local languages and cultures.

As the Dutch geographer Markusse states: "Since the 1960s, many European regions with ethnic minorities have had high levels of regional mobilization and their regional governments have correspondingly been granted a substantial degree of autonomy" (2004, pp. 649-650). I should note, however, that ethnicity essentially seems to be a social construct that is subject to (quite rapid) change and creation, despite its often historical and rather 'static' image (see Markusse, 2004; Paasi, 2001). Anssi Paasi (2001, p. 13) confirms this statement: "[T]erritories, their boundaries and the identity narratives that depict the features of these regions and/or the identification of people with them, are social, political and economic constructs". He continues: "Nowhere is this clearer than in discourses on the 'Europe of regions'" (ibid.). I will elaborate on this subject further on in this paper (among other things when discussing *Padania*). At this moment, the point is that if ethnicity is a social construct that is potentially 'created' as a political or economic instrument, and if there has been an increase of regional mobilization in Europe since the 1960s, it seems of great importance to unravel the complex relation between 'Europeanization' and 'regionalization'. More specifically, in this paper, I will focus on the degree to which regionalist movements and regional identities adhere to a European framework instead of, or perhaps in addition to a national one. I will limit my discussion to matters of identity and discourse, while, for the sake of the length of this paper, political and economic aspects are dealt with only marginally and if they are important for the role that identities play in the specific case. The question that is central to this paper is twofold. The first question concerns the relation between Europeanization and regionalization:

To what extent do regional(ist) movements in the European Union make use of a European component to assert their regional identities?

I have chosen not to use the term 'European identity' in my first central question. Although this choice could be contested, I am fully aware of the fact that whether or not such an identity exists is

heavily debated (see, for instance Borneman & Fowler, 1997; Paasi, 2001; Shore, 1997, 2000; Wilson, 1996). However, the existence of such an identity is not at stake in this paper. What I am specifically interested in, is the extent to which regional(ist) identities 'use' 'Europe' as a component in the discourse of their claim of a distinct identity and culture.

The first question actually serves as an introduction to the second question, which forms the body of this paper. What I will look into in this essay, is how the interaction between regional identities and Europe is best understood theoretically. I will take the theory of the *narcissism of minor differences* (on which I will elaborate further on), provided by Anton Blok (2000; 2005) as a point of departure. Along the way, I plan to employ various other theories concerning boundaries and identities to bridge the gaps found in Blok's theory in explaining this particular case. The second, and central question of this paper therefore reads:

To what extent can Anton Blok's theory of the narcissism of minor differences contribute to the understanding of the 'European component' in the assertion of regional identities, and which (components of) other theories can add to this insight in order to shed even more light on this phenomena?

In addition to anthropological and sociological theory, I will make use of theories developed in the discipline of human geography. This seems wise, since territories, maps, borders and boundaries are central in understanding the complex relations between various levels of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983) that are regional identities, nation-states and perhaps even Europe. As Fredrik Barth has noted: "The critical focus of investigation [...] becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts" (1969, p. 15, original italics). It is therefore the *social boundary* that will prove central in understanding the regional-European interaction in this paper.

A European component in regional identity

To support the validity of my first question, I have provided portions of manifests derived from the websites of four different regionalist movements below. The first quote is from the Breton Democratic Union (UDB), which, on the face of it, presents the mildest point of view of the four parties. In this case, only a concern for the solidarity with the regions is expressed, although a reference is made to a federal Europe as well.

Article 3: L'UDB agit pour la construction d'une Europe fédérale et solidaire des peuples et des régions

Article 3: The UDB acts for the construction of a federal Europe that shows solidarity with the people and regions.

Unvaniezh Demokratel Breizh / Union Démocratique Bretonne¹ (Breton Democratic Union, UDB)

The second quote that I would like to provide is from the Frisian National Party (FNP), which also to presents a relatively mild point of view. However, their political ambition seems to be formulated more concretely than their Breton counterparts, stating that Frisians should be directly represented in European institutions:

Europeeske ynstellings hearre streekrjocht de belangen fan de ynwenners fan Europa te fertsjintwurdigjen. ... Dat wurket no net goed omdat it altyd fia de polityk en de ministearjes yn Den Haach rint. Streekrjocht saken dwaan mei Brussel is better. [De FNP wol] omtinken foar it ferskaat yn Europa troch it 'Komitee foar de Regio's' om te foarmjen ta in keazen Senaat foar Europa.

European institutions should represent the interests of the inhabitants of Europe directly. This is currently not the case, since these matters are always taken care of through politics and ministries in The Hague. Dealing with Brussels directly is better. [The FNP wants] more consideration for the diversity in Europe by converting the 'Committee of the Regions' into a chosen senate for Europe.

Fryske Nasjonale Partijⁱⁱ (Frisian National Party, FNP)

Another well-known strong regional identity in Europe is South-Tyrol. Their claim is to protect their regional identity, but a reference is made to a future for South-Tyrol in a “federal unified Europe”:

La intenziun dla SVP resta n majer ampliamënt dl'autonomia te n'Europa federala unida a na manira che l'identité dla mendranza todëscia y de chëra ladina pois gnì conservada inçe tl dagnì.

The SVPs' aim still remains to further consolidate autonomy in a federal unified Europe in order to maintain the identity of the German and Ladin minorities in Italy and also in the future to come.

Südtiroler Volksparteiⁱⁱⁱ (South Tyrolean People's Party, SVP)

A final quote that I would like to present is derived from the website of *Plaid Cymru*, the Welsh nationalist party. This movement explicitly strives for an independent Wales *in Europe*:

Lle Cymru yw calon Ewrop a chefnogwn yn gryf gydweithrediad ymysg gwledydd Ewropeaidd. [...] [E]in nod cyfansoddiadol hir dymor ydi sicrhau annibyniaeth i Gymru yn Ewrop. [...] Ymgyrchu i gael aelodaeth lawn i Gymru fel aelod-wladwriaeth yn yr UE.

Wales' place is at the heart of Europe and as such we strongly believe in cooperation amongst European countries. [...] [O]ur ultimate constitutional aim is to secure independence for Wales in Europe. [...] Campaign for Wales to achieve full membership as a member-state of the EU.

Plaid Cymru^{iv} (The Party of Wales, PC)

Note that to find these quotes, I did not have to consult the manifests of even better-known regional identities in for example the Basque country or Scotland. The movements towards autonomy in these parts of Europe have sometimes even seen violent conflict between the region and the nation-state, and here too can similar tendencies be found (see also McNeill, 2004, pp. 68-88).

Now that I have shown that there seems to be a clear ‘European component’ in the discourse provided by contemporary regionalist movements, I will proceed by elaborating on the theory of the *narcissism of minor differences*, after which I will endeavor to provide a provisional theoretical model with which to evaluate the interaction between region, nation-state, and Europe. I will discuss just how well this theory fits the European-regional case. Then, the case of ‘Padanian’ identity and its relation to the concept of ‘Europe’ will be examined in the light of my theoretical framework. It will become evident that the *narcissism of minor differences* needs some adjustment, or rather *addition* from other theories on boundaries and identity, upon which I will reflect in my conclusion.

The narcissism of minor differences

Was sich liebt, das neckt sich
German proverb

In a nutshell, Blok's theory of the *narcissism of minor differences* states that "[s]ocial identity lies in difference, and difference is established, reinforced, and defended against what is closest – and what is closest [...] represents the greatest threat" (Blok, 2000, p. 51; Strating, 2000). In other words, the smaller the (perceived) differences between social identities, the more aggressive these differences are asserted. It might be stating the obvious that at the heart of this theory lies the principle that identity is forged by determining who we are *not*. If we know who the Other is, we know who we are ourselves. A central aspect of the *narcissism of minor differences* therefore is that these small distinctions become problematic, or sufficiently small to cause conflict, when social categories are unclear. It is the ambiguity of 'who's in and who's out' that leads to small differences and the need for distinction.

While formulating his theoretical framework, Blok predominantly borrows from Bourdieu and Freud, but also builds on Girard, Simmel and Elias. Blok supposes Freud to be the first to have mentioned the *narcissism of minor differences* in his scholarly work, but that he did not pursue the idea any further. The author states that "Freud fails to recognize the importance of his discovery" (Blok, 2000, p. 29). He then goes on to claim that Freud "even manages to reduce the heuristic value of the narcissism of minor differences" (ibid.), by saying that "greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured" (Freud, in Blok, 2000, p. 29).

Freud's statement that it is "greater differences" that lead to "repugnance" nicely illustrates an aspect of Blok's theory that might be a strong point and a weak one all at once. On the one hand, Blok's theory does not exclude differences at the scale that Freud mentions. It could well be argued that the dislike that Freud supposes is actually based on minor differences rather than greater ones. After all, when evaluating the exact same examples provided in Freud's statement on a more global scale, we should conclude that the differences between the Gallic and the German or the Aryan and the Semite are not that great. The Gallic, German, Aryan and Semite are all – at least to the greatest extent – 'European'/Western civilizations, they all adhere mainly to Judeo-Christian religions, and historically they all concentrate around the European peninsula. Minor differences indeed, as Freud too, later recognizes with regard to the Semites (in Blok, 2000, p. 30). As for the "white races" and "the coloured", suffice it to provide the example of the lynchings in the United States in the beginning of the previous century (Blok, 2000, pp. 37-38; Litwack, 2004, pp. 123-128).

However, this also points out a potential theoretical weakness in Blok's *narcissism of minor differences*. It shows that almost all examples can be made to fit the model, as long as we are willing to sketch the appropriate context. Conflicts between two neighborhoods (see Elias, 1976) can be understood by employing the town as the reference, but not the region (in which towns potentially show 'conflicts' as a result of minor differences). The theory can provide valuable insights into the lynchings in the South of the United States mentioned above, but does far less to explain the relations between "white races" and "the coloured" with regard to the considerable violence with which slaves were transported from Africa to the Americas. Within the contemporary context, one could imagine using the theory of the *narcissism of minor differences* to look at political relations between European nations, but also between 'Europe' and the United States. In both cases, differences could be regarded as being either 'minor' or 'great'. As Abram de Swaan points out,

Anton Blok himself seems to decide which differences are to be seen as ‘minor’ or ‘great’ in the examples that he provides, and the social groups involved might not always agree with these verdicts (de Swaan, 2000, p. 28). The extent to which Blok’s theory provides insight in tense relations between social groups therefore depends on which social categories are relevant given a particular context. It is the contextual, dynamic and ‘layered’ nature of identity that causes this theoretical problem. I will reflect upon these ‘layers’ extensively further down in this paper.

As I mentioned above, Blok assembles his theory on the foundations provided by earlier scholars. In addition to Freud, Blok mentions Simmel’s “‘ideal sphere’ that lies around every human being”, and the expression ‘coming too close’ (2000, p. 30), which both imply that a certain minimum of difference needs to exist between groups and even individuals to assert an autonomous identity and honor. This need for social differentiation is supported by Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, as they show that even “all parts of the natural world are differentiated in terms of their relationship to the main social groups” (Durkheim and Mauss, in Blok, 2000, p. 31) and that groups “which share many features and are closely interconnected [...] articulate their differences by associating themselves with differences they find in the natural world” (Lévi-Strauss, in Blok, 2000, p. 31).

Interestingly, the quote that Blok presents from Durkheim and Mauss might provide a hint regarding the European case that I will elaborate on in this paper: “It is because human groups fit into another – the sub-clan into the clan, the clan into the moiety, the moiety into the tribe – that groups of things are ordered in the same way” (Durkheim & Mauss, in Blok, 2000, p. 31). Although Blok’s point in referring to this passage was to show how the societal categorization even provides a model for people to classify nature, it also implies that various social groups can exist ‘on top of’ each other, and that differences can be asserted at every level of societal organization when the boundaries between the groups at a given level have become too ambiguous and thus contested. I will elaborate on this point extensively when discussing my theoretical model for the European case, as it will prove to be highly relevant to distinguish between various levels of identification. My argument will be that not only the boundaries between social groups *within* a given level need to be maintained, but that also the boundaries *between* levels are highly relevant.

Before proceeding to my theoretical vantage point, however, two final important remarks concerning the *narcissism of minor differences* should be made. Firstly, as Bourdieu states: “Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, *which represents the greatest threat*” (in Blok, 2000, p. 34, my emphasis). To give an example¹, for the Tutsi in Rwanda there is no point in asserting difference between themselves and the Sami or Roma in Europe, to name just two random ethnic groups. There *is*, however a great economic, social and/or cultural threat for them from the Hutu, with whom they live side by side. Even if there would be an ethnic group ‘A’ that is culturally and economically almost identical to group ‘B’, and to a lesser extent to group ‘C’, and ‘A’ lives close to ‘C’, but continents away from ‘B’, then difference need not be asserted between ‘A’ and ‘B’ because the categories are clear; there is no ambiguity as to where boundaries lie². Of course this example may be overly simplistic, especially in a globalizing world, but one could substitute distance with any other aspect that is a potential marker of difference between

¹ Anton Blok also mentions the Hutu and the Tutsi as an example of the *narcissism of minor differences* (Blok, 2000, pp. 42-46).

² Abram de Swaan makes a similar point, by stating that most conflicts arise between people who do not live that far apart (and thus literally ‘live together’). He compares the Serbian-Croatian relation with the Northern-Irish case, mentioning that, for example, the Catholic Irish do not fight the Protestant Norwegian, because they simply live too far away (de Swaan, 2000, p. 29).

groups. The point is that groups need to be 'relevant Others' for difference to be asserted between them.

Secondly, as Girard and others (cf. de Swaan, 2000) have argued, it is "the *loss* of differences between groups [that] is the main source of extreme violence" (Girard, in Blok, 2000, p. 34, my emphasis). Although Blok mentions this dynamic aspect of the *narcissism of minor differences* in passing, Abram de Swaan later stresses that it is important to recognize that it is the *decreasing differences* rather than 'fixed' minor differences that lead to ambiguity and thus to conflict (de Swaan, 2000, p. 31). De Swaan argues that differences are not 'given', but need to be processed and changed in a process of identification and 'disidentification' in which people imagine others to be 'similar' or 'dissimilar', thereby determining 'who is in and who is out' (ibid.). The process that De Swaan calls 'disidentification' seems to closely resemble what others have referred to with the concept of 'counter-identity' (cf. P. Sahlins, 1989, pp. 112, 267-278).

A small theoretical model of Europeanization and regional identity

Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.

(Mercer, 1990, p. 43)

The central question that I have posed in my introduction, *to what extent can the theory of the narcissism of minor differences contribute to the understanding of the 'European component' in the assertion of regional identities*, requires a systematic evaluation of the case at hand. However, it is beyond the scope and length of this paper to provide an overview of the whole of Europe and its regions. Therefore, as I have indicated in the first few paragraphs of this paper, I will use examples of specific regional identities in Europe to illustrate my point. I have also given away part of the punch line by saying that, to apply Anton Blok's theory to Europe and its regions, it needs other theories of identity to complement it³. In the coming paragraphs, I will outline a small, provisional theoretical model with which I intend to evaluate the interaction between region, nation-state, and Europe in the subsequent section of this paper. I refer to my effort to formulate such a model as 'small' and 'provisional', since I am fully aware of the limits of the scope of this paper. By no means do I intend to formulate a general theory of identity or even regional-European relations. This paper should be regarded as an exploration of how the *narcissism of minor differences* can serve as 'sensitizing concept'⁴ or as a potential basis for understanding these political/social relations.

Defining the actors

To start off with, we should define the relevant actors in the model. I argue that, whereas many studies of relations between social groups focus on two groups that need to (re)define their mutual boundary, in this case we should focus our attention to (at least) three groups. In my view, relevant to this particular case are the *regional identities* in Europe, the *nation-states* of Europe, and the *European Union* (or the idea/concept 'Europe'). To clarify what is meant exactly by 'regional identities', I have provided a map of Europe showing various 'strong' regional identities in appendix I, and a list of European 'minority-nations' in appendix II. The fact that I have chosen to include three

³ This is, by the way, the reason why I added the phrase '*... and which (components of) other theories can add to this insight in order to shed even more light on this phenomena*' to my central question.

⁴ Anton Blok, personal communication, 9 May 2007.

(rather than two) relevant social categories (Europe, nation-state and region) as the absolute minimum number to be included in my approach of the interplay between regionalism and 'Europeanism', deviates from the examples that Blok (2000; 2005) provides to get his message across. In all of the cases that he presents to support his theory, there are only two social groups that are in conflict and share a 'contested' boundary that calls for the assertion of minor differences through conflict⁵. As I will argue in the next paragraph, there seems to be an intricate interaction between various 'levels' of identity when considering the European case. However, a short introduction of the three 'levels' of identity seems appropriate.

Europe

Europe may have one of the bloodiest histories on earth (Rifkin, 2004). Although borders of territories and nation-states are in fact *imagined* (Anderson, 1983; van Houtum, Kramsch, & Zierhofer, 2005), they are very real in their consequences. Not very long after the Second World War, Europe started a period of unprecedented peace and cooperation. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was established in 1951, which is commonly seen as the first step towards a united Europe. The French foreign minister Robert Schuman presented the famous words: "The solidarity [...] established [by a joint production of coal and steel] will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible". Several European countries decided that economic and political cooperation would be the most fruitful approach to establish and maintain peace on the European continent. With regard to the actual members of the European cooperation organizations⁶, this goal has been achieved so far. These European nations have never before witnessed such a long period of peace and cooperation. This year, the 50th birthday of the Treaty of Rome (founding the EEC) is celebrated, and the Maastricht Treaty (which established the EU) turns 15.

It seems that European Union member states have grown together politically, economically, and perhaps even culturally in the past half century. However, when applying Anton Blok's theory of the narcissism of minor differences, an interesting puzzle seems to present itself. According to this theory, we should expect increasingly antagonistic attitudes *between* nationals of various member states. However, as I mentioned above, there has never been such a long period of peace in the 'cooperational zone' of Europe. Antagonism *between* (inhabitants of) member states seems to limit itself to somewhat 'institutionalized' forms, symbols, practices and spaces such as football, car brands, national food (see Bell & Valentine, 1997), stereotypes and the "televisual space" (Edensor, 2002; McNeill, 2004). This categorization of nation-states based on national stereotypes, also referred to as 'political branding' (see Castells, 1997) has "emerged as an important aspect of contemporary [European] politics" (McNeill, 2004, p. 50). Van Ham nicely illustrates what is meant by 'branding the nation':

Territorial entities such as cities, regions and countries are now also being branded like companies and products. The corporate brand has become an essential part of business identity, helping audiences identify with the company and – lest we forget – encouraging them to buy its products and services. In a similar way, territorial branding is seen as creating value in the relationship between territorial entities and individuals
(van Ham, 2002, p. 250)

⁵ Perhaps with the exception of the Balkans, I will get back to this further in this essay.

⁶ Such as the ECSC, European Economic Community (EEC), European Union (EU), etc.

However, this 'rebranding' of the nation seems to be primarily rooted in a need to assert national identity vis-à-vis a 'European super-state', not only (perhaps not even in the first place) against other nations *within* the EU, although this is what we would expect based on Blok's theory of minor differences to account for group interaction. After all, the differences *between* the nation-states have diminished. 'Branding the nation/region' may well provide a more peaceful way to assert (minor) differences than violent conflict.

Nation-states

Nation-states obviously take up their place between the European and the regional level, and correspondingly act as a kind of 'mediator' between the two (which I will come back to later). "[M]any groups of people among the member nations perceive the EU as a political organization which diminishes national state sovereignty, and [these groups] resist the EU's efforts at the creation of a 'European identity' as directly at odds with their own, superordinate national identities" (Wilson, 1996, p. 208). I suggest that that a 'European identity' is not *at odds* with national identities. Rather, the European political and perhaps even cultural integration ensures the continued (or sometimes even (re)invented) *existence* of these identities. It is the '*illusion*' or *perceived* threat of a homogenizing political or cultural influence that *strengthens* the national consciousness rather than weakens it, whether this perceived threat is real or not. After all, as W.I. Thomas once stated: "if men define things as real, they are real in their consequences" (1970). "European integration is [therefore] enhancing, not dissipating, the symbolic identity of the nation-state" (McNeill, 2004, p. 66). Although a perceived cultural homogenizing influence can be based on many concepts, the most important of which may arguably be 'globalization' (Robertson, 1992) and 'Americanization' (or 'McDonaldization', as Ritzer, 1983; 1996 has suggested), for the European nation-states, there is another perceived political/cultural threat from 'above' (see also Harrison, 2006, pp. 107-119) that may even seem to be a greater and more direct threat: 'Europeanization'. "The suggestion that we are witnessing the death of the nation-state, as it loses its sovereignty [...] is persuasive" (McNeill, 2004, p. 36), and thus national identities would need reassertion according to Bourdieu and Blok, as their boundaries become increasingly ambiguous (see also 'glocalization', Ritzer, 2003; and M. Sahlins, 1999). It may not be a coincidence that nationalistic tendencies within nation-states often contain an anti-European aspect.

In addition, many European nations have very strong regional identities within their national borders⁷, in which political groups often strive for a certain degree of autonomy or even independence for their region. This kind of devolutionary movements often may appear as a threat from 'below' for nation-states. Many have drawn attention to the resurgence of these regionalist identities and political parties in recent years (Jones & MacLeod, 2004; McNeill, 2004, pp. 68-88). An important part of the explanation of these regionalist tendencies may be that the European Community actively stimulates regional languages, cultures and identities (McNeill, 2004, p. 74; Shore, 1997, 2000, pp. 231-232). For example, it seems no coincidence that with the opening of the European single internal market on January 1st, 1993, both the establishment of the *Committee of the Regions* and the completion of the Schengen Treaty took place. As Anke Strüver (2005, p. 17) puts it: "[This economic and political change] established internal and external EU-borders and opened the internal ones for EU-citizens". She continues: "Europeanization is therefore a process in

⁷ For an extensive, but non-exhaustive list of European 'minority-nations' that strive for varying degrees of autonomy, see appendix II.

which state-borders are transformed into administrative boundaries, accompanied by an active promotion of cross-border regions” (ibid., see also Meinhof, 2002).

Regions

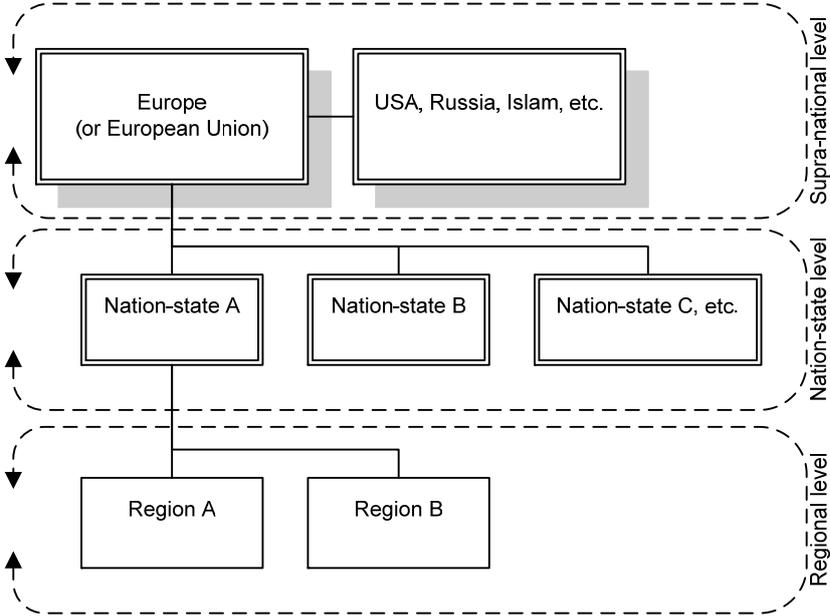
To provide a brief typology of ‘regions’, Donald McNeill (2004, pp. 69-71) distinguishes four main types of regions in his book *New Europe: Imagined Spaces*. Firstly, he mentions the *historic nationalities*⁸: “places which have centuries of existence as polities in some form or other” (McNeill, 2004, pp. 69-70). Some examples of such regions are Catalonia, the Basque country, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Corsica, Flanders and Bavaria. The author states that these regions typically have a strong regional identity, and that they have “electorally popular political parties that lobby for more autonomy or [...] independence from the nation” (p. 70). Secondly, McNeill recognizes *city regions or city-states*, such as Madrid, Paris, Brussels, Berlin and London (2004, p. 70). “These conurbations of millions of people often dominate the economic and cultural lives of their nation-states”, and “they are likely to be very ethnically diverse” (ibid.). He continues: “Being essentially *urban* in nature, they are a fundamental part of the Europe of the Regions/Europe of the Cities debate, but are poised in-between the two” (2004, p. 71). Thirdly, McNeill mentions the *administrative inventions*, among which the Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg and Rhône-Alpes. He states that although many of these regions have become very successful, they have “very little historic identity as cultural or political ‘units’” (ibid.). The fourth kind of region that McNeill distinguishes are the *micro-states* such as Andorra, Channel Islands, Monaco. The fifth and final category that he mentions are the *islands* of Europe, among which the Balearics, Canaries, Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica and the Azores (ibid.).

Dimensions of identity

Before finally proceeding to the assessment of Padanian identity, I would like to present my theoretical model with which I propose to evaluate Europeanization and regional identity. As I have mentioned in previous paragraphs, I distinguish between three different ‘levels’ or ‘layers’ of identity, namely regional, national and European. Figure 1 shows these three levels schematically. Note that an individual can identify with a social category at *every* level. For example, given the appropriate context, I could identify with Maastricht (the city in which I was born), Limburg (its province), The Netherlands, or Europe. These levels are not *necessarily* mutually exclusive. However, categories *within* a given level generally *are*. The most appropriate terms to refer to this exclusionism between same-level categories may be *disidentification* (cf. de Swaan, 2000, 2003) or *counter-identities* (cf. P. Sahlins, 1989, p. 112). With reference to figure 1, the social group with which people in ‘region A’ *disidentify* (in other words: their regional counter-identity or significant Other), is ‘region B’. Similarly, ‘nation-state A’ is an existing social category only because other nation-states, such as ‘B’ and ‘C’, exist. At the supra-national level, ‘Europe’ is a category of relevance because there seem to be significant Others, counter-identities to be found in, for example, the United States or Russia. A person can – more or less simultaneously – experience a degree of identification with ‘region A’, ‘nation-state A’ *as well as* ‘Europe’. However, to maintain social boundaries between groups, it is not possible for a group of persons to identify with both ‘region A’ *and* ‘region B’ in the same manner, because if no difference is preserved between both categories, they would lose their relevance and cease to exist altogether. Along these lines, it is interesting to see that different ‘levels’ or ‘layers’ of identity do not seem to interfere, while the identification with groups on the same level is not possible.

⁸ The map in appendix I almost exclusively shows this type of regional identities.

Figure 1 - Schematic presentation of theoretical model.



Although same-level social groups seem to be ‘closer’ to each other, and the (near) impossibility of identification with multiple same-level groups therefore supports the theory of the *narcissism of minor differences*, Anton Blok seems to focus on just one level at a time. The examples that he provides to support his theory, the Burakumin versus the ‘Japanese’, ‘whites’ against ‘blacks’ in the United States directly after slavery, even his example regarding the Balkans, could all be placed at a similar level in the above scheme. All examples focus on groups that may be different with respect to their power relations, but are equal with regard to their level of ‘abstraction’ in the *kind* of social group they are.

For the European case, I suggest that a more elaborate model is needed. Let me formulate some general expectations based on Blok’s theory. As European cooperation intensifies, the boundaries between nations become less evident. The Treaty of Schengen provides both symbolic and literal evidence for this statement (see van Houtum et al., 2005; Markusse, 2004; Strüver, 2005; Sweeney, 2005). Ambiguous boundaries should then lead to an increased assertion of national identities. This seems to hold true on the one hand by the witnessing of an increased ‘branding of the nation’ (see above), and on the other hand by various nationalistic and sometimes even xenophobic tendencies all over Europe. However, if European unity leads to the assertion of nationalities, then this tendency to an increase in national unity should similarly lead to the assertion of regions *within* these nations (see figure 2).

Figure 2 - Cumulative process of assertion of differences based on the *narcissism of minor differences*.

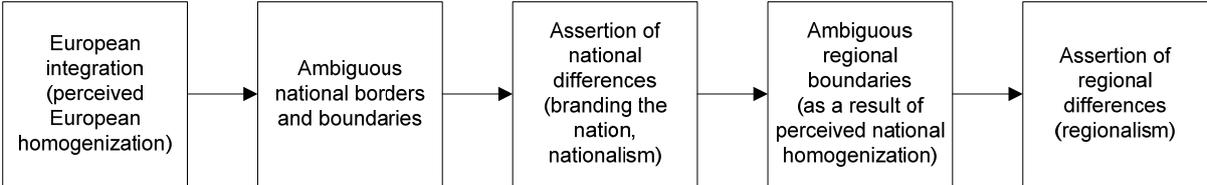


Figure 2 shows how the national level is the key to understanding exactly how a European ‘identity’ eventually should lead to the assertion of regional differences. I therefore suggest that, in addition to Blok’s *narcissism of minor differences*, the *level* of identification is of crucial importance. Nation-states reassert their identities vis-à-vis Europe, while regions claim and defend their identity and autonomy against nation-states. In the European case, it is therefore not *just* the minor differences *within* a given level (between separate regions, for example), but the differences *between* levels that need to be asserted. In other words; not only the boundaries between categories *within* a level need to be maintained, but also the boundaries *between* levels have to be asserted to avoid ambiguity. The fear for the loss of autonomy, culture and, ultimately, identity to a homogenizing Europe is what inspires nationalist feelings. ‘Europe’ appears to be moving ‘down’ a level, while strong regions are moving ‘up’. It is a ‘federal Europe’ that is threatening and ‘coming too close’ to the nation-state from ‘above’ and ‘below’. All in all, it seems that regional identities tend to disidentify with the nation-states in which they reside, while often simultaneously opting for a ‘place for the region in a federal Europe’ (see my examples under *A European component in regional identity*).

A second important remark to be stressed here, is that the European Union is actively involved in *affirming* regional identity, by employing policies to promote regional languages (see Council of Europe, 1992) and focusing many of its programs on regional development of economy and culture, like the ‘European Cultural Capital’, and the ‘Committee of the Regions’ (Shore, 2000). Some authors have proclaimed that the EU is thereby actively *constructing* a European identity (Shore, 1997, 2000; Shore & Black, 1994). As I have shown in the first few sections of this paper, (strong) regional social groups tend to be quite positive about European integration, and often pursue a future independence of their nation-state in a federal Europe. Apparently, the ‘distance’ in level between ‘Europe’ and the regions seems to be sufficiently large (e.g. ‘major differences’) to prevent ambiguity concerning the boundary between their levels. As a result of this, where nation-state identities are potentially threatened by strong devolutionary forces⁹, the EU is not. There is therefore no harm for the EU to reinforce and formally recognize regional identities. This recognition is very important to assert identity, since “a group that was recognized *only* by its members [...] would have very little presence in the human world” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 83).

The case of Padanian identity

To show how the above theoretical framework can be put into ‘analytical practice’, I have provided an overview of the Padanian regional identity, and how it connects to the concept of Europe, below. Padania is actively promoted by ‘Lega Nord’ (LN), a political party and separatist movement in Northern Italy. Their objective is to eventually achieve independence from Italy for a large portion of the Italian North, which they call ‘Padania’ (see figure 3). To a large extent, Lega Nord’s far-right political program is characterized by “xenophobia, racism, and demagoguery” (Scarduelli, 2005, p. 137), but the aspect that is most interesting about the region and Lega Nord, is that Padania is an ‘invented region’ (McNeill, 2004, pp. 81-85; Scarduelli, 2005). Lega Nord intentionally *created* a nationalist ideology in order to strengthen its support base through a sense of political unity and ideological identity (Scarduelli, 2005, p. 137). This way, Padania “became a textbook example of the *symbolic*

⁹ E.g. Flanders threatening Belgian identity, Scotland threatening British identity, South-Tyrol threatening Italian identity, etc.

invention of place identity" (McNeill, 2004, p. 82). In the following paragraph, I will elaborate on which instruments were used by LN in the process, and how these relate to the 'concept of Europe'.

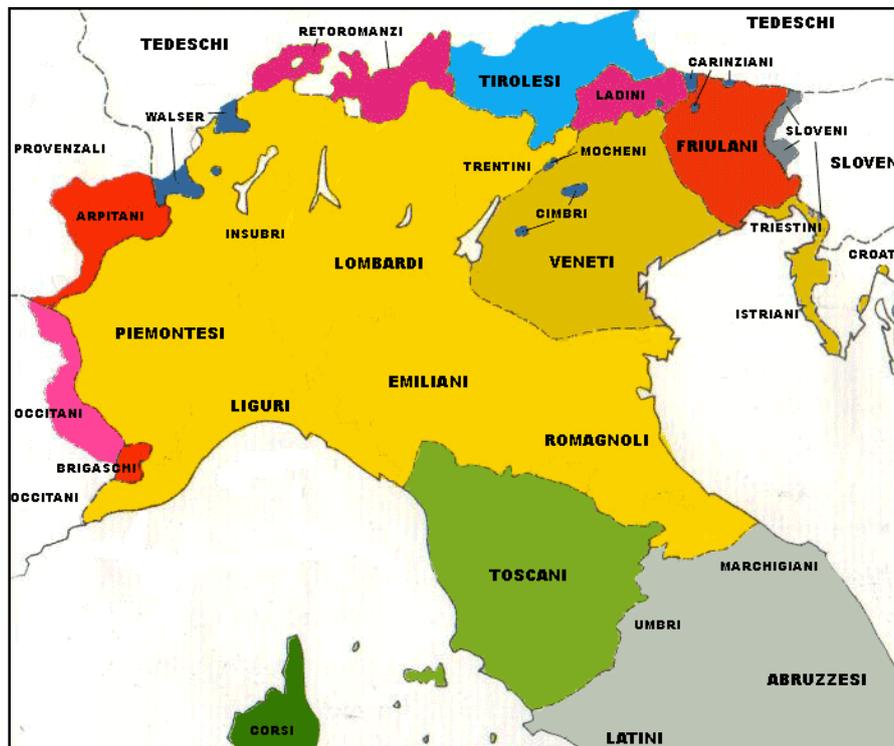


Figure 3 – The largest region in the middle (Piemontesi, Lombardi, Romagnoli) is presented as the 'homeland' of Padania by Lega Nord.

European ties and the north-south divide

The EU does not provide support to LN in any way. There is no local language associated with Padania that is supported through European programs, and Padanian 'culture' or 'identity' is not formally recognized as a European minority-nation. However, Lega Nord's explicit political goal is to come to an independent Padania within Europe (Movimento Giovani Padani, 1997), and 'Padanian identity' is still partly dependent upon an association with Europe. LN uses a crude north-south divide in the *othering* of regions within Italy (Giordano, 2000), but applies a similar dichotomization to Europe. Within Italy, they find their most important counter-identity in everything that is 'Roman' or 'Southern' (Scarduelli, 2005). In the European context, they associate themselves with 'Northerners', who represent "hard-working Calvinists (i.e. anti-Catholic)" and "Celts" (McNeill, 2004, p. 83). Both of these stereotypical 'brandings' of their own region are presented as being diametrically opposite to "Roman" or "Latin" culture (Scarduelli, 2005). "The propaganda put out by the Lega Nord depicts the history of the Italian peninsula as an ongoing conflict between the north and Rome" (Scarduelli, 2005, p. 144). Where Padania is presented as a nation without a state, Rome is seen by LN as a state without a nation (ibid.). Applied to the European dimension in this case: "The imagined Celts of the northern Italian territories are not only depicted as differing markedly from the Roman invaders; but as closely resembling, in terms of culture, the Germanic peoples of Northern and Central Europe, their 'European brothers'" (Scarduelli, 2005, pp. 145-146). In line with the opposition between North (Celtic) and South (Roman), Padanian cities are assumed by LN to possess a certain "Europeanness", that "Roman" cities lack (McNeill, 2004, p. 82). As McNeill mentions: "It is often said that Milan is closer to London than it is to Palermo, and [...] that Sicily is as African as Milan

is Swiss” (p. 81). However, an outsider would probably say that the differences emphasized by LN between the Italian regions are in fact quite minor, which is a case in point for Blok’s theory.

Creating the past

An interesting aspect of LN’s creation of Padanian identity, is that they ‘construct’ the historical roots of the region by providing a “fictitious link between two chronologically and culturally distinct periods, the Celtic pre-Roman Age and the Middle Ages” (Scarduelli, 2005, p. 142). In doing so, they legitimate the existence of Padanian identity by ‘creating a past’ (see Keesing, 1989), and, perhaps even more importantly, they place their own origins *before* those of the Italian nation-state. This makes ‘Padanians’ the rightful heirs to the area associated with Padanian identity, instead of the ‘Italians’, or as LN’s politicians would probably call them, the ‘Romans’. In this version of history, Elias’s opposition between the ‘established’ (Padanians) and ‘outsiders’ (Romans) suddenly becomes highly relevant (see Elias, 1976). In this presentation of history, Padania is the ‘established’ social group that is ‘occupied’ by an ‘outsider’ group. “Only after Lega Nord was founded did the Padanians begin to be aware of the ‘cultural violence’ [...] practiced on them by the southern invaders and of their own ethnic identity” (Albarelo, in Scarduelli, 2005, p. 144). Although Padania is a “political invention”, its interpretation of the past “aimed at giving historical legitimacy to the concept of Padania” is comparable in its strategy and its success to other secessionist movements “which present themselves as advocates of oppressed nations” (Scarduelli, 2005, p. 147).

‘A free Padania in a free Europe’

In order to find out exactly *how* and *why* LN commits itself and Padania to a ‘federal Europe of peoples’, I decided to scour the internet for interesting statements and political documents regarding Padania and/or Lega Nord, since not that many

scientific articles or books focus specifically on the relation between Padania and European integration. There were some interesting clues that I came across. Since this case study of Padanian regional identity merely serves to illustrate my point, I will briefly go over the most striking findings, instead of providing an in-depth review of the assertion of the link

between Padanian identity and a future in a ‘federal Europe of peoples’.

First of all, I came across several euro-coins minted by LN (figure 4). Obviously, these coins were never legitimate currency, but they do show an interesting way to assert Padanian ‘independence’ within a European framework. It seems worth mentioning that other European minority-nations, such as Scotland, have produced similar symbolic euro-coins. The Padanian coins all have the same



Figure 4 - An example of how an independent Padania is asserted by linking itself to a *Europa Federale dei Popoli*, a 'federal Europe of peoples' through the symbolic production of Euro-coins.

inscription at the back, reading *EUROPA FEDERALE DEI POPOLI* ⊕ *PADANIA*. The Celtic star-like symbol between the words is the 'national' emblem of Padania. Referring to a 'federal Europe of peoples' on the back of self-minted euro-coins may be one of the most obvious methods imaginable of connecting the regional identity to a Europe of 'minority-nations'.

A striking similarity between 'pro-Padanian' websites was that they – almost without exception – referred regularly to other, mostly well-known *historical* regional identities such as Scotland, the Basque Country, and Flanders. They did this by showing news items such as the recent victory of the Scottish National Party, and expressing solidarity to efforts put in by Flemish separatists. Typically, at least two websites showed the *Scottish* flag as a menu selection for the site's English-language version. These too, are strategies employed by other devolutionary movements as well¹⁰. It seems that by pleading for more autonomy for other devolutionary movements throughout Europe, they provide a legitimization for their own efforts to create an autonomous political entity. In other words, Europe may be the instrument that enables minority-nations to bundle their efforts on a European scale.

A final clue that reveals how and why LN draws on a European component in their regional identity can be derived from their political documents. The following statement nicely sums up their view on Padania's position towards the nation-state (Italy) and towards Europe: "[...] as a result of the ruinous intermediation of the Italian State, Padania risks being excluded from [...] the inner circle of European integration. In this way, it will be kept away from an area to which it belongs historically, economically, and culturally" (Lega Nord Seveso, n.d.). This quote almost seems to imply that "the Italian State" is somehow 'less European' than Padania. It derives them from being 'reunited' with their 'historic roots': "Padania has always been part of Europe. For more than nineteen centuries of its approximately twenty-five century history, Padania has been closely tied to the rest of continental Europe" (ibid.). Lega Nord also has quite clear ideas about the future of Europe: "The Lega Nord has no interest in passing from a group of classical nation-States to a new European super-State", instead "The peoples of Europe and Padania need something quite different: a Europe of the Peoples and of the Regions" to do justice to "deeply-rooted diversities" between these peoples (Movimento Giovani Padani, 1997). "Integration means seeking out all that is shared in common and appreciating all that is specific. From the Mediterranean to the North Sea, Nations without a State, quasi-Nations, and regional groupings recognize this historical opportunity". Furthermore, they see regionalism as "a European-wide phenomenon which the retarded and provincial Italian State, culturally and economically mired in the backwaters of Europe, cannot and wishes not to see for evident reasons of self-interest" (Lega Nord Seveso, n.d.).

Conclusion

In this paper I have evaluated the interaction between regional identities, nation-states, and Europe, with an explicit focus on the first and the latter. After a short introduction to the subject, I first established the existence of a 'European component' in regional identities in order to support to validity of my questions. After that, I elaborated on Blok's *narcissism of minor differences*, which I took as a starting point for a theoretical evaluation of the subject. When my theoretical framework had been established, I endeavoured to provide a modest theoretical model of Europeanization and regional identity. Finally, I provided a brief case study of Padanian identity to show how some of the

¹⁰ See, for example, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.be/0/3264>.

major elements of my theoretical construction can be supported. To finish off, I will now present a short conclusion.

In the above case study of Padanian identity, it should have become evident that Lega Nord actively expresses an ideology that poses 'the Italian state', 'Rome', or the 'South' (all referring to more or less the same entity) as its major counter-identity. It enhances this movement by explicitly associating Padania with 'Europe' as its historical roots as well as its political future, and juxtaposing Italy to this Europe. European integration thus becomes the *instrument* with which differences are asserted.

When evaluating the 'fit' of the *narcissism of minor differences* to the Padanian case, I should note that it contributes quite a bit to the understanding of *current* relations between LN/Padania and its Others, but falls somewhat short if we were to understand the *emergence* of Padanian identity. Since Padania is a *deliberate* sociopolitical construction, there are no pre-existing differences between 'the Italian state' and Padania that can decline. In other words; the assertion of differences by Padanian secessionists *cannot* be the result of the Italian state that was 'coming too close', because there was nothing to come close to. Barth's classic *ethnic groups and boundaries* (1969) may prove to be a better suited explanation of the emergence or 'creation' of Padanian identity; where no boundaries existed before, they were drawn at a certain moment in time (in this case, for political reasons), thus forming two distinct groups where previously there had been only one (see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979, for an elaboration on 'minimal group experiments').

It seems that LN's Padania makes a particularly strong case for the importance of identification (and 'branding the nation/region') as opposed to explanations based on the availability of political/economic resources. Neither LN, nor its 'creation' are formally recognized by, or receive cultural, economical or political support from the EU, but still there is a strong tendency for Padanian regionalists to pursue a federal Europe of regions. This seems to confirm my expectation that the nation-state level (see figure 1) acts as a kind of 'mediator' between the regional and the European level. This appears to be in line with Blok's theory to a great extent, but there are some important additions to be made to enable a fuller understanding of regional-European interaction. First, not only the importance of same-level boundaries between social groups need to be maintained, but also the decline of differences *between* levels may lead to the assertion of national or regional identity. Second, it seems that the principle of identification versus disidentification (or counter-identities) provided by De Swaan (2000; de Swaan, 2003, 2007) offers valuable insights into sociopolitical relations. Third, Blok's *narcissism of minor differences* fails to explain the *creation* of ethnic groups and tends to focus on the *interaction* between them. Barth and De Swaan do a better job at trying. However, Blok seems to be aware of this aspect of his theory (Blok, 2000). Finally, when considering even *imagined* historical nations, Elias's theory on the 'established' and 'outsiders' potentially adds to the explanatory power of Blok's theory, particularly because this creates room for the implementation of power relations between different social actors (after all, it is generally the powerful who write history). Future studies on European regional identities should definitely look into the value that Blok's theory has to offer, but should also recognize its shortcomings. In my view, the most important conclusion to be drawn is that there can be no exploration of regional identities in Europe without taking into account the nation-states *and* the European dimension of (counter-) identities.

Notes

ⁱ Retrieved from <http://www.udb-bzh.net/>. Own English translation.

ⁱⁱ Retrieved from <http://www.fnp.nl/>. Own English translation (based on Dutch original text).

ⁱⁱⁱ Retrieved from <http://www.svpartei.org/>. English translation offered on website.

^{iv} Retrieved from <http://www.plaidcymru.org/>. English translation offered on website.

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Appendix I – Map showing several European ‘minority-nations’



Figure 5 - Source: www.eurominority.org.

Appendix II – List of European minority-nations

These are the nations as recognized by EuroMinority (see www.eurominority.eu for more details). The depicted names of peoples represent minority-nations with varying degrees of secessionist tendencies, ranging from highly secessionist (e.g. Basque Country, Scotland) to no claims to autonomy whatsoever (e.g. Seto, Cashoubs)

- Åland Islands
- Albanians
- Alsace
- Aosta Valley
- Arabs
- Aragon
- Armenians
- Aromanians
- Asturias
- Azores
- Basque Country
- Belarussians
- Bosniacs
- Brittany
- Bulgarians
- Bunjevci (Bunyevtsi) in Serbia
- Canary Islands
- Cashoubs
- Catalonia
- Cimbres
- Cornwall
- Corsica
- Crimea
- Croats
- Csángó
- Czechs
- Danes
- Estonians
- Faroe Islands
- Finns
- Flanders
- Frisia
- Friuli
- Gagauzia
- Galicia
- Germans
- Greeks
- Grishun
- Hungarians
- Ingria
- Ireland (North)
- Italians
- Karelia
- Kosovo (Albanians)
- Kurdistan
- Ladins
- Latvians
- Lipovians
- Lithuanians
- Livonians
- Lorraine - Moselle
- Low Germans
- Ludians
- Luxembourgers
- Macedonians
- Madeira
- Man / Isle of Man
- Mirandians
- Mócheno
- Montenegro
- Moravia
- Occitania
- Poles
- Pomaks
- Prussia
- Romanians
- Roms
- Russians
- Ruthenians
- Sami (Lappland)
- Sardinia
- Savoy
- Scania
- Scotland
- Serbs
- Seto
- Silesia
- Slovaks
- Slovenes
- Sorbs
- South Tyrol
- Swedes
- Tatars
- Transdnestr / Transnistria
- Turks
- Ukrainians
- Vepsia
- Vöro
- Votes
- Wales
- Wallonia
- Walser
- Yenishes
- Yiddish