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The Rise of a Regional Agenda

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The rise of a regional agenda in different national contexts is – as may be argued with reference to the case studies which are presented in the following four chapters and which constitute part II of the volume – closely linked to the agenda of the state. Interest in regionalism, it seems, is directly intertwined with national policies. This should, perhaps, not come as a surprise, given that most of the institutions which, in different degrees of intensity, are pursuing a regional agenda, and which are analysed here, are state-financed: universities, museums, archives. However, history societies, artists, folklorists, and political pressure groups with a regional agenda (such as the German *Vertriebenenverbände* and *Landsmannschaften*) seem also to be driven by an agenda which reflects the relationship between the state and a region. Regionalism, as it is presented in these surveys, is thus not an “underground movement” nor does it form part of a “counter-culture” with an agenda detached from national politics. The declining influence of the *Vertriebenenverbände* in German politics reflects not only a fall in membership due to the passage of time – where first-generation expellees are simply ‘dying out’ – but also a changing political agenda in Germany and in Eastern Europe.

At first glance, it also seems that differences between the regional agenda in different countries are not as strong as had initially been assumed. States with a longer tradition of central government and centralized institutions such as Britain, France, and Spain have witnessed cycles of interest in a regional agenda which were similar to those of the states in post-war (and post-Communist) Eastern Europe. In many cases, the political developments of the second part of the 20th century have set the agenda for an increasing interest in regions. The incentive to pursue a regional agenda was (and is) very much policy-driven, and here border regions were (and are) of particular importance. This is clearly the case in the problematic border regions between Germany and its eastern neighbours, but also, as has been demonstrated, between Austria and its neighbours and between the countries of the erstwhile Austro-Hungarian Empire. Likewise, the acknowledgement of a multi-ethnic past, which had been silenced in Eastern Europe after 1945 and understated in western Europe until the 1970s, now facilitates a closer look at border regions as contact zones with an ethnically- and religiously-mixed heritage. This agenda aims to tackle the prejudices and stereotypes that are often still associated with minority groups of different ethnic origin and/or religious belief. In Eastern Europe, these developments undoubtedly followed a distinctly political agenda, not

least under the guidance of EU initiatives and also under the numerous bi-lateral (often state-sponsored) initiatives which aimed to overcome the terrible legacy of the Nazi Regime and the Second World War between Germany and its eastern neighbours¹. It might be argued that these initiatives replicated earlier trends in the West. Cross-border initiatives in the German-Belgian-Dutch border region, and particularly the creation of Euregios such as the Ems-Dollart Region (1977) and the Euregio Maas-Rhein (1976) preceded similar developments in the east. Their aim was to streamline cross-border economies, but also, more importantly, to reconcile the divisions and painful memories fostered by the two world wars and German occupations. Similarities – in terms of economic profile, a common heritage and cultural interests – not differences were on the agenda. These initiatives were, and are, often directed towards striking a balance between different perceptions of identity and different memories which, in some ways, need to be reconciled. Whether and how far these initiatives will influence the public sphere beyond agreements on cross-border policies on employment, health, and education remains to be seen.

Composite states originating in the early-modern period with a strong central government such as Britain and Spain often responded rather reluctantly to the regional agenda of what have been labelled ‘would-be-nations’ on the peripheries of their territories; but recent developments such as political devolution in Scotland and Wales, and autonomous status within Spain for the Basque country (where recent elections may suggest that the desire for independent institutions acknowledging Basque traditions is now saturated) have demonstrated a shift in region-state relations, which seems to emancipate regions from the dominant influence of the state. In this context, the example of Northern Ireland, or more specifically the Province of Ulster, offers an interesting case study of a border region whose cultural and political orientation has responded to a changing political agenda: with the peace process in Northern Ireland, regional identity is now, as has been pointed out, increasingly contextualized within a broader context embracing both British and Irish traditions. How far these concepts will help to reconcile communities torn apart by the decades of ‘The Troubles’, and long memories of earlier inequalities, remains to be seen.

A number of conclusions and suggestions for further research can be drawn from these observations. Firstly, there is still no common framework in which academics or members of the public conceptualize regionality. In Ireland, for instance, the concept seems to be almost non-existent (with, perhaps, the exception of Northern Ireland), despite the island’s historic four provinces: identity is more frequently harnessed to counties or cities. The differences between regionality and locality are often blurred. Secondly, border regions have been identified as of particular importance for a regional agenda, both in terms of their relation to the state and their role in transcending national and state boundaries. As is pointed out in the contributions on Scotland and on Slovakia, national identity (in the 19th century) very often derived from regional identities, which were

either composed of a mixture of variations then identified as 'national', or harmonized so as to ensure the incorporation of a multitude of regional identities into one 'national' narrative. Spanish identity, on the other hand, had, until the death of Franco, been conceptualized as Castilian, while British identity was seen as quintessentially English. It seems important, however, to emphasize that, in the interplay between regional and national powers, regions were not always forces of resistance against a central agenda: they might also act as motors of innovation and renewal prompting change in a wider national or supra-national arena. In this context, a closer look at border regions should be particularly helpful.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for instance, the initiatives of the *Deutsch-Tschechischer Zukunftsfond*.

