

Managing the island territory: A historical perspective on sub-state nationalism in Corsica and Sardinia

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Abstract: Corsica (France) and Sardinia (Italy) are two islands of the western Mediterranean basin separated by a narrow strait. They share a problematic relationship with the mainland states to which they are associated, and from which they obtained their status of subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ). The metropole/island relationship of these two islands is characterized by centrifugal tensions and the presence of sub-state nationalisms. These movements are different in terms of characteristics, strategies and electoral results, because of how France and Italy have managed the integration of the two islands, how the two island nationalisms have evolved, and how both metropolitan states have dealt with them. This article proposes a comparative history of Sardinian and Corsican nationalism and the relationship of Italy and France with these island territories. The intention is to analyse the two nationalisms, based almost exclusively on political science, with an historical perspective, highlighting the impact caused by the central states' attitudes. In this way, the article points out how the differences between the political context of the two islands is defined by the different approach taken by France and Italy in managing their island territories.

Keywords: Corsica, France, insularity, Italy, nationalism, Sardinia, subnational island jurisdiction

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Introduction

Corsica and Sardinia are two Mediterranean islands separated by a strait that, at its narrowest point, is 13 km wide. The islands share many features; indeed, it can be argued that they are part of an archipelago (Farinelli, 2019). Above all, they share a problematic relationship with the continental states with which they are associated, and from which they obtained their status of subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ): in 1948 (Sardinia) and 1982 (Corsica). From its start, the association with the continental state (1790, Corsica; 1861, Sardinia) produced centrifugal tensions in the island-metropole relationships. These led to the formation, during the 20th century, of nationalist movements that, after an initial phase of regionalist politics, claimed autonomy or independence. But, Corsican and Sardinian nationalism have different characteristics: the former is more ethnic and was involved in an armed struggle against France (1976-2015); the latter avoided playing the ethnic card and the use of political violence. Corsican nationalist parties refuse any alliance with French parties; while Sardinian nationalist movements are keener to find allies amongst mainstream Italian political forces. In addition, there are contrasts in electoral results. Corsican nationalists have been enjoying electoral success since 1994 (De la Calle & Fazi, 2010); a coalition between autonomists and independentists (*Pe a Corsica*, For Corsica) controls the island's government since 2015 with a large majority. At the same time, Sardinian nationalism has faced poor electoral results. Still, in February 2019, the *Partito Sardo d'Azione* (Psd'Az, Sardinian Action

Party), the oldest political force campaigning for a change in the island's relationship with mainland Italy, took control of the island's government in alliance with *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League) — a northern Italy ethno-regionalist party recently converted to Italian nationalism — and other right-wing (and Italian nationalist) parties: *Forza Italia* (Forward Italy) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy).

The brands of Corsican and Sardinian nationalism have been analysed separately (except Fazi, 2009, 2012a), mostly by political scientists, with only a few focusing on historical evolution (exceptions are Clark, 1996; Roux, 2012; Pala, 2016). Attention was mainly directed at such elements as electoral results and the strategies of the nationalist parties, or the legislative framework in which their actions took place (Daftary, 2008; De la Calle & Fazi, 2010; Fazi, 2012b; Hepburn, 2009; Roux, 2006). We believe that, to fully understand the two nationalisms and their differences, it is necessary to analyse how France and Italy have managed the integration of these island territories and how they have dealt with the centrifugal tensions caused by this process. This article compares the evolution of Sardinian and Corsican nationalisms and the relationship of Italy and France with their island territories, highlighting the impact of central states' attitudes on island nationalism. To this end, it is necessary to analyse how Corsica and Sardinia have become part of France and Italy respectively, but also to compare nation-building in both islands. After that, we can focus on the period that starts from the second part of the 20th century up to the present time.

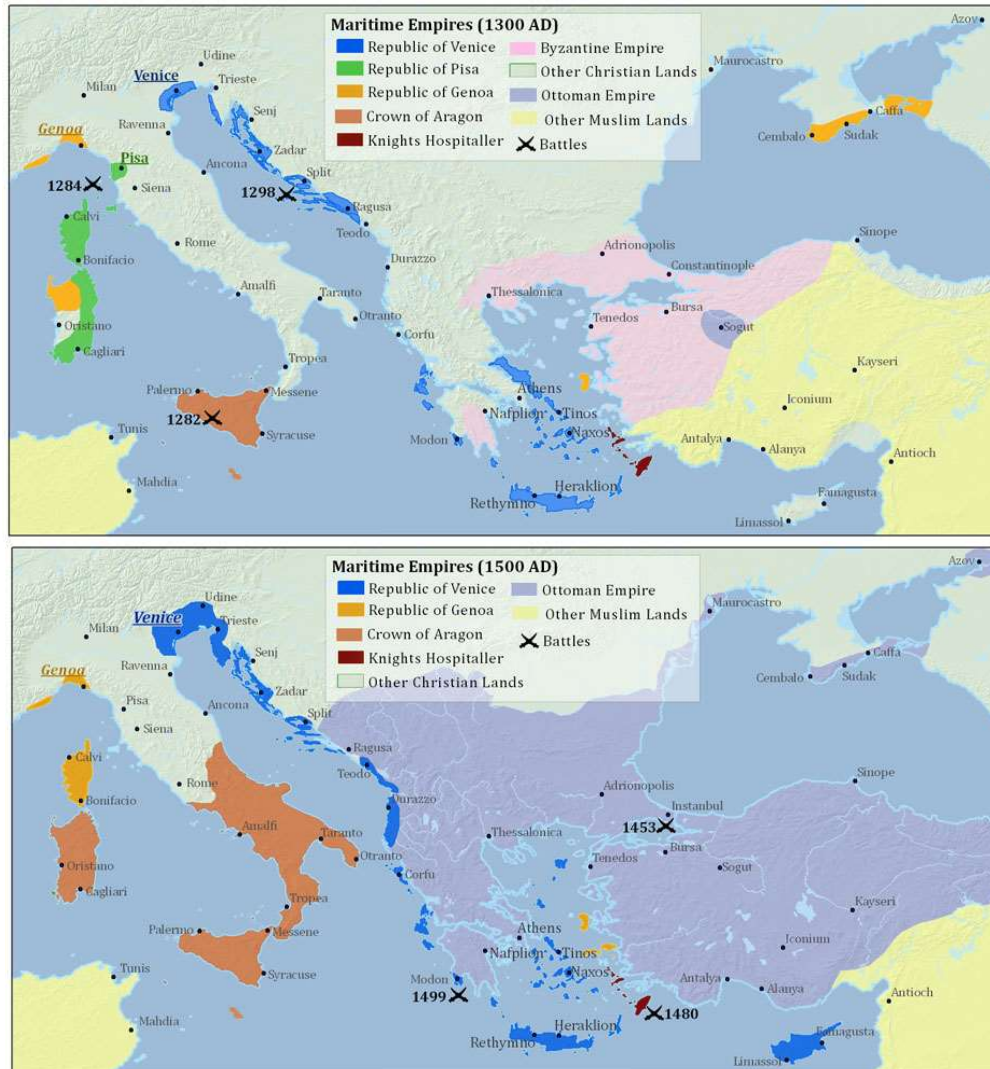
Historical background

Around the 11th century CE, both islands were nominally fiefdoms of the Papacy but were in reality disputed between the Italian city-states of Genoa and Pisa, and local sovereign entities; four kingdoms in Sardinia (called *Judicados*), feudal lords and rural communes in Corsica. To exclude Italian city-states, the Papacy proclaimed the Kingdom of Corsica and Sardinia in 1297 and assigned its sovereignty to the Crown of Aragon. The war that followed was characterized by a complex system of alliances, in which the island's sovereign entities changed side several times, trying to exploit the situation to extend their dominion. Eventually, the Kingdom of Arborea and the powerful Genoese Doria family were the last to defend the island from the invasion, but they were defeated in 1409. The situation was stabilised at the end of the 15th century, when Genoa obtained control of Corsica, while Sardinia became a kingdom of the Crown of Aragon and, as such, a part of the Spanish Empire (Arrighi & Jehasse, 2013; Brigaglia, 1998). The former was controlled by Genoese chartered companies, and the latter was governed by a viceroy and a local parliament formed by Spanish feudal landlords. This situation lasted until the 18th century.

In 1720 the Counts of Savoy, who also controlled Piedmont and Nice, obtained the title of King of Sardinia in the aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession, while Corsica rebelled against Genoa between 1729 and 1769. During this period, the first attempt to establish an independent state based on national sovereignty and regulated by a constitution took place in Corsica (Avon-Soletti, 1999; Carrington, 1973). The experiment ended when Genoa, unable to control the revolt, was helped by France. In 1768-1769, French troops occupied Corsica, and remained on the island pending Genoa's payment for the military operation. This never happened, and Corsica was declared part of France in 1790. It was a way to extend to Corsica the reforms approved in Paris after 1789, and to facilitate the return of Pasquale Paoli, the leader of the revolt who in 1769 went into exile. But the relationship between Corsica and France became very tense, with Paoli accused of being reactionary for having sabotaged, at the beginning of 1793, an expedition to invade Sardinia. French authorities were expelled by the

Corsicans, and the island was then associated with Great Britain, under the formula of the Anglo-Corsican Kingdom. But relations between the two partners deteriorated rapidly, and in 1797 France reconquered the island.

Maps 1 and 2: The Mediterranean maritime powers between 13th and 15th century.



Source: <http://exploremed.com/Venice.asp?c=1>

In Sardinia, resistance to the 1793 French invasion evolved into a revolt against mainlanders living on the island — mainly officers and aristocrats from Piedmont — and the Crown, all accused of having abandoned the island to France. The foreigners were expelled, and the Sardinian Parliament addressed a series of petitions to the king. After these were rejected (1794), the revolutionaries split into two factions: the radicals tried to abolish feudalism and absolutism, while the moderates, fearing a Jacobine-style revolution, called back the Piedmontese. In 1796 the radicals were defeated and authority of the House of Savoy was restored. When French troops entered Piedmont in 1797, the only territory remaining in the hands of the royal family was Sardinia and, for the first time, they considered the importance of maintaining the island among their possessions. At the same time, Sardinian aristocrats abandoned the nostalgia for the Spanish past, accepting the new royal house. From this moment on, Corsica was involved in the formation of modern France, representing, as the birthplace of

Napoleon as a national myth, an important place from a symbolic point of view, while Sardinia did the same in the making of a unified Italy. The island kingdom, under the House of Savoy, conquered Sicily and the Italian peninsula in 1859-1861 (Farinelli, 2017).

Joining the Islands to the Mainlands

Far from being anecdotal, these events marked the future relationship of these two islands with their mainland states and the evolution of the two nationalisms, given that the reinterpretation of the past is a central aspect in such political movements. As noted above, Corsica was the birthplace of Napoleon Bonaparte. As First Consul and then Emperor, he promoted many islanders in the administration of the French Empire or in the army. In a certain sense, the history of France in those years is a Corsican matter. However, after the fall of Napoleon, the island was regarded with suspicion. It had a bad public reputation in parts of France because it was perceived as not entirely civilised and deemed at the root of all the problems caused by Bonaparte (Burrows, 2006). This reputation deteriorated further when the Second French Empire, established in 1852 by Napoleon's nephew, Napoleon III, was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war and collapsed. Corsica again was considered the source of France's military and political disaster, and the Republicans proposed to transfer control of the island to Italy (Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004).

Map 3: The Italian Peninsula and its surrounding islands in 1843.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italy_1843.svg

When the House of Savoy was confined to Sardinia (1797-1815), the reputation that the islanders had among Piedmontese society was as bad as that of the Corsicans in France. The House of Savoy regarded the island as the source of its royal title; but the authority of the

Crown on the island was limited by the Sardinian Parliament. This situation changed in 1848 when King Charles Albert conceded a moderate liberal constitution to his mainland territories. However, Sardinia, as a separate kingdom, was excluded, so representatives of the Sardinian Parliament demanded that the island receive the same treatment as the mainland. Therefore, all the territories ruled by Charles Albert were merged into the Kingdom of Sardinia, extending from the island to the Alps. Moreover, in 1849-1861 the Kingdom of Sardinia guided the unification process of the Italian peninsula (the so-called *Risorgimento*). These events were considered a success by the Sardinian ruling class, because through them not only had they achieved full equality between the island and the continent, but the island kingdom also assumed what seemed to be a vital historical role (Accardo & Gabriele, 2011). This situation was disrupted by the events of 1859-61 when the House of Savoy, with the help of Napoleon III, conquered the entire peninsula, transforming the Kingdom of Sardinia into that of Italy. After this, many of those Sardinians who had supported the merger with the mainland states changed their mind, because they had the sense that the island had become the neglected periphery of the new state.

Turning Islanders into French and Italians

The nation-building process was slow on both islands, and the results were very different. According to Weber (1976), rural areas in France remained partially excluded from this process until WWI. Corsica was not an exception, but we must consider that the language spoken on the island was Corsican, while the written language was Italian, and these were mutually intelligible. Starting from 1820, Italian was banned from public administration and, progressively, from education. But Italian continued to be widely used as the literary language, and during the *Risorgimento* some Italian and Corsican intellectuals considered the island part of Italy (Cini, 2000). The French authorities were worried, and after the achievement of Italian unification, Francisation progressed faster. In the 1920s, however, French was still scarcely known among the rural population, who continued using Corsican (Blackwood, 2004).

In Sardinia, nationalisation faced similar problems. Italian had been the literary language from the early 19th century; but the oral language, Sardinian, was not compatible with Italian, and the national system of education was less effective than the French. Italianisation was so poor that, during WWI, the Army formed a special unit just for Sardinians. The motivation was not just linguistic but also ethnic, since some anthropologists considered Sardinians a race endowed by a primitive and violent behaviour (Fois, 2006; Rotondo, 2014). Full Italianisation was achieved in the 1950s and 1960s, when public education was available in every part of the country and, thanks to the so-called economic boom, Italy evolved into a modern urban society. Education, internal migration and the mass media spread the Italian language and the sense of being part of a nation that goes far beyond the island (De Mauro, 1991).

Towards island nationalism

The nation-building process was problematic, and finally caused centrifugal tensions. The evolution of sub-state nationalism began on both islands towards the end of the 19th century. In this case Corsica preceded Sardinia, mostly because Francisation was more successful than Italianisation. While the urban population had abandoned the use of Italian and was increasingly loyal to France, some intellectuals, mostly born in inland areas, were opposed to the imposition of French. They preferred using Corsican rather than Italian in writing.

In Sardinia, the evolution of nationalism started later. Despite being influenced by Spanish and Catalan, Sardinian was never considered a dialect, and it had been used in printed texts since the 18th century. The elites had mostly adopted Italian during the 19th century, and no linguistic or identitarian questions were raised as in Corsica. Instead, intellectuals and politicians criticised the administrative and economic relationship with the mainland, asking for self-government, and giving birth to the so called “Sardinian Question” (Del Piano, 1997). They asked for special treatment of Sardinia as an island because its problems were not that of southern Italy (*Note*: in the same years a “Southern Question” was raised). Between 1919-1921, WWI veterans founded PSD’Az, with autonomy as the party’s main objective and solution for the island’s problems, including poverty, lack of infrastructure, isolation and backwardness. It was the first mass party to have success on the island, winning local and national elections in 1919 and 1921. Sardists, as they called themselves, refused separatism, avoided the nationalist label and defined the island as an “abortive nation”. Nevertheless, their slogan was “Sardinians first; then Italians”, and most of the party’s supporters conflated autonomy with independence. As PSD’Az was the most popular force in Sardinia, when Mussolini seized power in 1922, he tried to strike a deal with Sardists, dividing the party into two factions: one joined Fascism, with the idea of being able to control the local section of the Italian Fascist Party, and the other one did not. The antifascist PSD’Az was dissolved by Mussolini’s regime in 1926; but it was re-founded in 1943 and thus participated in the birth of the Italian Republic (Roux, 2006, 2012).

In 1923, WWI Corsican veterans also formed a party, the *Partito Corso d’Azione* (PCA, Corsican Action Party, in 1927 renamed Corsican Autonomist Party). Its rhetoric was anti-French and nationalist, advocating for full independence or an association with mainland France inspired in part by the ideology of the Irish Free State. Reviving an old argument of Italian nationalism, the party had an ambiguous attitude towards Italian Fascism that called for the annexation of the island. For this, PCA members were accused of being Italian irredentists, in both French and Corsican public opinion, and the party remained isolated until it was disbanded in 1939 (Paci, 2014; Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004, pp. 241-250). It was a minor force, never running for election and never gaining popularity, mainly because of its pro-Fascist and Irredentism stances. Therefore, when Corsica was invaded by the Italian Army in 1942, the nationalists were considered collaborators and, after the end of the war, their leaders were condemned as traitors.

The differing evolution of island nationalism

After 1945, Corsican and Sardinian nationalism evolved in different ways. During the Italian occupation, many Corsicans were involved in the Resistance, and the island was liberated in October 1943, a year before mainland France. In this context, PCA leaders were prosecuted, and the idea of autonomy, synonymous with Fascism and irredentism, was banned from political debate. The Constitution of the 4th French Republic took no account of the island geography of Corsica, and the island continued to be combined with Provence and the French Riviera in the *Département de Provence-Côte d’Azur-Corse*. In 1960, the French government transformed the department into a region, but without transferring significant powers. One of the poorest and least populated parts of the region, Corsica continued to be linked to Provence and the French Riviera.

Sardinia’s evolution was different. After the Allies landed in Sicily in 1943, Fascism collapsed, the Peninsula was invaded by the Germans, and the Kingdom of Italy was dissolved. In this context, antifascist parties formed a provisional government in which the most important

forces were the Communists, the Socialists and the Christian-Democrats. But in Sardinia the main political force was the PSd'Az, so the party joined the provisional government and in 1946 two of its members were elected to the Constituent Assembly. In the same year, autonomy was granted to Sicily, in order to neutralise the separatist movement born after the landing of the Allies there in (Finkelstein, 1998). Sardinian nationalists sitting in the Constituent Assembly, supported by other Sardinian members of the assembly not associated with PSd'Az, proposed the granting of the status of autonomous territory also to their island. But not all Sardinian political forces supported autonomy. Communists and Socialists were against it, fearing that the island could be cut off from the social revolution they expected on the mainland, while the landowners were not as powerful or supportive as those in Sicily. Although the middle class was in favour, it was too dependent on state jobs and subsidies to demand strong self-government. Finally, the formula adopted included fewer powers than those granted to Sicily, with control over territorial administration and economic planning, but with little power over education, culture and finance (Clark, 1996, pp. 89-93; Fazi, 2009, pp. 263-269). Sardinia and other three mainland territories (Sud Tyrol, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Aosta Valley) were declared Special Statute Autonomous Regions by the Italian Constitution (autonomy was granted to Sicily in 1946). The most important aspect of Sardinia's autonomy was the authority of the regional government to draw up and manage a state-funded "Rebirth" economic plan. Aimed at ensuring economic development and modernisation, the plan was implemented during the 1960s to reduce emigration and banditry, regarded as the most serious features of the island's lack of development.

In Corsica, the lack of autonomy led to radicalisation. The problem here was an emigration so intense that the Corsicans felt that they would disappear in a few generations. Between 1861 and 1962 the island lost some 150,000 inhabitants, 40% of the population. Despite this haemorrhage, successive French governments appeared to be not very concerned, and an economic plan to deal with this situation was approved only at the end of the 1950s (Renucci, 1974, pp. 106-131). The plan was based on the expansion of tourism and land reform, and its implementation was entrusted to two state agencies, the *Société d'équipement touristique de la Corse* (SETCO), and the *Société d'aménagement pour la mise en valeur de la Corse* (SOMIVAC). After WWII malaria was eradicated on the island, as in Sardinia, and this made available a large amount of uncultivated land. The idea was to distribute the reclaimed land to Corsicans, who, with the assistance of SOMIVAC, would have turned it into farmed land. But in 1962, independence by Algeria displaced about 800,000 refugees to France, and this had serious effects on the viability of land reform. Nearly 17,000 of these refugees (8-9% of the island population) were resettled in Corsica, ended up receiving 57.5% of the reclaimed land (Renucci, 1974, pp. 284-292). This created tensions between the newcomers and islanders, the latter accusing the French government of wanting to replace them (ethnic cleansing).

During the 1960s, a separatist movement emerged in Sardinia. The relationship between Italy and Sardinia was seen as colonial, mostly after the Rebirth Plan was implemented (Cabitza, 1968). Industrialisation was based on the extraction of raw materials, oil refining and the use of coal to produce energy. These activities were controlled by mainland companies supplying plants in Northern Italy, and resulted in negative environmental impacts on the island. Moreover, the spread of the Italian language was denounced as an imposition (Columbu, 1968): with the archaeologist Giovanni Lilliu, a Christian Democrat, arguing that the island's historical evolution was marked by resistance to external invaders, including the Italians (Lilliu, 1971). Finally, the whole plan was considered an attempt to eliminate the traditional way of life, based on sheep breeding and agriculture, and the disenchantment with autonomy increased (Clark, 1996, pp. 95-97; Sotgiu, 1996, pp. 166-176). Two elements further

complicated the situation: banditry and militarisation. Despite the efforts by Italian authorities, who sent special forces to the island, criminal activities such as kidnapping, feuds and bank robberies were usual in inland Sardinia. These Italian army units were seen as an occupying force, not only by nationalists, but also by other political groups, especially on the political left (Sorge, 2015). In addition, Sardinia was, and still is, the most militarised territory in Italy, with 35,000 hectares of land and 20,000 km² of water (for a total of 60% of the territory) being used by Italian and NATO armed forces as military bases and exercise areas (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2011). In 1965-1968, the sum of these factors led to the formation of separatist groups both inside and outside PSd'Az. Although there were some attempts to organise a pro-independence guerrilla movement, these were unsuccessful and, more significantly, the initiative came from the Italians, not from the Sardinians. In 1968, the left-wing publisher Gian Giacomo Feltrinelli tried to convince the most famous Sardinian bandit of the time, Graziano Mesina, to lead a revolt against Italy, and a decade later the Red Brigades tried to organise an armed group aimed at establishing a Sardinian communist state. Both plans failed due to a lack of support from the island's population (Bellu and Paracchini, 1983).

Meanwhile, a regionalist movement emerged in Corsica, which would later become nationalist. From 1960 onwards, different organisations of students, young people and Corsican emigrants were increasingly concerned about the situation on the island. In 1966 they founded the *Front Régionaliste de la Corse*, (FRC, Corsican Regionalist Front), and the association launched a campaign against the French government, accusing it of treating the island as a colony (FRC, 1971). But the FRC soon split into a left and a right faction, with the latter founding the *Action Régionaliste de la Corse* (Corsican Regionalist Action, ARC) in 1967. It was more concerned with linguistic and ethnic issues, accusing the French government of trying to replace native Corsicans with refugees and mainlanders (Simeoni, 1974). ARC asked for autonomy and its popularity grew quickly on the island. In this context, tensions between the newcomers and islanders increased, and several properties of Algerian refugees were attacked with explosives. French governments and public opinion did not pay much attention to the protests, and considered Corsican activists as far-right militants or Italian irredentists. In 1975 the leader of ARC Edmond Simeoni decided to dramatically denounce the situation. Simeoni and other activists, armed with shotguns, occupied the farm of a North African refugee. French authorities responded in disproportionate fashion. The farm was attacked by some 1,200 armed men, with helicopters and armoured cars, leaving two police officers dead and an occupier wounded. In the nearby town of Bastia, unrest broke out, during which another police officer was shot dead. In the aftermath, ARC was dissolved and Simeoni was arrested and prosecuted. In this context, radical nationalists formed the *Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale Corsu* (FLNC, National Liberation Front of Corsica), an armed clandestine militia whose objective was no longer autonomy, but outright independence. The political vision and narrative were inspired by organisations such as the Irish Republican Army and the Basque *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*. However, the FLNC preferred to direct its attacks at symbolic targets such as state buildings or private properties of non-Corsicans rather than killing people (Crettiez, 1999).

In Sardinia, in the meantime, independentism became popular among university students. The most important organisation was *Su Populu Sardu* (Sardinian People), highly influenced by Italian radical left groups. It criticised the politics of the Italian governments not only because they profited from multinationals and Italian companies, but also because it was considered a threat to the traditional Sardinian economy, based on sheep-farming and common land ownership. During the 1970s nationalists were worried about the loss of the Sardinian identity among the island's population, and one of their main claims was to demand that

Sardinian be recognised as the official language. In this context, PSd'Az and other forces called for a Constituent Assembly to reform the statute of autonomy, and Sardists, until then allied with centre parties (mostly the Christian Democrats) proposed “the Sardinian way towards Socialism”. Finally, the party moved from autonomism to independentism in 1981. After 1949, the PSd'Az had suffered a series of bad results in regional elections, reaching its lowest point in 1979 with only 3.3% of the popular vote. But after it changed its strategy, it scored 13.8% in the 1984 elections, and its leader Mario Melis served as the President of the regional government in a coalition with centre-left non-nationalist parties (see Table 1). The main objectives of the regional government were that the island should be recognised as a nation *within* Italy, and the Sardinian culture should be protected. Melis eventually could not reach these goals and PSd'Az left the presidency to the Christian Democrats after the 1989 elections (Hepburn, 2009). During his term, Melis and others were accused of plotting for independence with the support of Libya and FLNC. At the trial, however, they were acquitted, and only some militants were convicted (Bellu, 1984, 1985a, 1985b). The whole affair, however, undermined the reputation of radical Sardinian nationalism in public opinion, and the movement remained a minor political force. Nevertheless, nationalist rhetoric remained an important element in Sardinian politics. In 1997, the Sardinian Parliament approved a law to promote and enhance Sardinian culture and language for the first time; and, in 1999, it declared the sovereignty of the Sardinian people over Sardinia, its near islands, territorial waters and continental shelf (Franchini, 1999). Both were proposed by the PSd'Az, and were approved with the support of non-nationalist parties. These are examples of the use of nationalist rhetoric by the local branches of the Italian mainstream parties, which do not therefore represent Sardinian nationalism. It is important to note that this happened when the Italian State was transferring more powers to local authorities, under pressure from LN, a party that asked for northern Italian regions to be granted as much or more autonomy as in Sardinia and Sicily. This worried Sardinian nationalists, who feared losing the island's special status, but also other parties for whom the defence of autonomy was a central element of their politics. Although this did not lead to radicalisation, it did result in the formation of a new generation of independentist parties and in several proposals to increase the sovereignty of the Sardinian people (Pala, 2016). To some extent, references to sovereignty and self-government have become common to almost all political forces on the island.

After participating in the 2004 elections as part of a nationalist alliance, in 2009 the PSd'Az joined the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi's party *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom, PdL). Through this new strategy, PSd'Az was trying to exploit the fact that one of PdL's main allies was LN, to which Berlusconi had promised the implementation of a federalist reform. Meanwhile the Sardinian Government, controlled by a centre-left non-nationalist coalition, proposed a “new statute of autonomy and sovereignty for the Sardinian people” but eventually disagreement within the political forces and the intervention of the Constitutional Court prevented the reform (Hepburn, 2009; Fazi, 2009, pp. 474-476). After these failed attempts to improve the island's self-government, further reforms were proposed, but without any tangible results. In the 2014 Sardinian elections, an alliance between the independentist party ProGres and two electoral lists backed the candidacy of the popular writer Michela Murgia, obtaining 10.3% of the vote. This indicates an increase in the public's appetite for self-government, but eventually the coalition was excluded from the Sardinian Parliament and the regional government was formed by a centre-left coalition. The level of the nationalist vote was 27.8%, a historic achievement, but it remained divided into 7 organisations, and only nine out of sixty MPs turned out to be independentists (see [Table 1](#)). Instead of building up a nationalist alliance, in 2018 PSd'Az became the Sardinian main partner of LN that its leader, Matteo Salvini, had recently transformed into an Italian nationalist force (Albertazzi et al.,

2018). A coalition led by LN and PSd'Az won the 2019 polls, and the leader of the latter, Christian Solinas, was elected President. Although nationalist and ethno-regionalist forces appears to have relatively low scores at local elections, a 2011 survey showed that 41% of Sardinians expressed a desire for independence, while 49% wanted more autonomy (Mola et al., 2013, p. 35). This suggests that important cleavages exist between voting behaviour and expectation toward independence and/or nationalist policies.

The evolution of Corsican nationalism suffered similar divisions, complicated by political violence, but since 2010 it has been a major political force (see [Table 2](#)). Between 1976 and 1981 FLNC attacks increased from 304 to 438, a considerable number in an island of 300,000 inhabitants (Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004, p. 503). French governments were in part responsible for this escalation, not only for the policy adopted on the island, but for the use of paramilitary groups to contrast nationalism. The most relevant was FRANCIA, which between 1975 and 1981 attacked members of FLNC and of other nationalist organisations. At the same time (1975), the French Government tried to calm the protest movement by transforming the island into a region. But this had limited administrative powers and no elected body, so nationalist forces remained unsatisfied. In this context, the French Socialist Party supported an amnesty and an extension of the powers granted to Corsica, while FLNC proclaimed a ceasefire for the 1981 electoral campaign. So, after François Mitterrand, leader of the French Socialists, won the elections, the island was transformed into a *Collectivité Territoriale*. This formula was unique in metropolitan France and granted to Corsica a wider administrative autonomy, but without any legislative powers. Nevertheless, it gave local forces an opportunity to address the island's problems in a regional parliament. Simeoni, who headed the autonomist faction of the nationalist movement, represented by the *Union du Peuple Corse*, (UPC, Corsican People Union), won 7 out of 51 seats at the first election. Instead, FLNC resumed the armed struggle and initially boycotted the elections, but later decided to combine clandestine actions with politics, standing in local elections through several political organisations. Despite their participation in the political debate, these organisations were disbanded each time by the French authorities. This, combined with the contrasts between autonomists and independentists, further complicated the conflict (Crettiez, 1999).

French President Mitterrand's policy failed because it did not grant legislative powers to the island, and because the Corsican SNIJ was not secured by a constitutional reform. Later, when metropolitan regions were created on mainland France in 1986 with the same powers as Corsica, this was perceived as a threat to the island's asymmetrical political status. To find a solution, Mitterrand proposed a new statute for Corsica (*loi Joxe*) during his second term, approved in 1991. The island was declared a *Collectivité Territoriale à Statut Particulier*, a formula that granted more powers, but the recognition by the French Constitution of the existence of a Corsican people, even if backed by the Government, was not accepted by the Constitutional Court: it would have been a violation of the indivisibility of the French people. This was a key demand of the nationalist forces, through which they hoped to exclude non-Corsicans from public employment or the purchase of land. Other problematic issues were the teaching of Corsican (which met similar resistance) and the overlapping of local and central authorities, which in fact limited the power of the *Collectivité*.

Moreover, the reform of Corsica led to schisms and a struggle among factions within the FLNC that caused more deaths than the struggle for independence. In 1998, the prefect of the island was assassinated. The situation was considered so serious that his successor again used illegal measures against the independentists, ending up under arrest himself in 1999. In this context, negotiations were started to define a new institutional framework.

Table 1: Electoral Results of Nationalist and Ethnoregionalist Parties in Sardinia. Regional Elections.

	1949	1953	1957	1961	1965	1969	1974	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
PSd'AZ	10.4	7	6	7.2	6.4	4.4	3.3	3.1	13.8	12.4	6.81	8.3	3.87	4.29	4.6	9.86
PSd'Az (Socialist)	6.6															
Sardigna Natzione (SN)													0.59			
Indipendentzia Republica de Sardigna													1.95	3.06	0.82	
Unidade Indipendentista														0.55		
Rossomori (left-wing split of PSd'Az)														2.54	2.64	
Partito dei Sardi															2.67	3.67
Fronte Indipendentista Unidu															1.03	
Gianfranco Pintore (SN and others)											2.69					
Bustianu Compostu (SNI and others)												5.8				
Mauro Pili															5.72	2.31
Michela Murgia (ProGres, 2.76%; other electoral lists, 6.77%)															10.3	
Andrea Murgia																1.91
% Vote Share	17	7	6	7.2	6.4	4.4	3.3	3.1	13.8	12.4	9.5	14.1	6.41	10.44	27.78	17.75

Source: Regione Autonoma della Sardegna.

The electoral system has changed over the years. During 1949-1994, parties ran separately in the elections, and voters decided on the composition of the Regional Council. The President was then elected by the Council. A semi-direct system was introduced in 1992, whereby parties grouped together on electoral lists suggesting a presidential candidate. The system became direct in 2013, so the parties grouped into large alliances and proposed a candidate for the presidency. Person's name indicates a candidacy supported by nationalists, or by nationalist and ethno-regionalist organisations. Such alliances may change at every election.

Table 2: Electoral Results of Nationalist and Ethnoregionalist Parties in Corsica. Regional Elections (First and Second Rounds).

	1992		1998		1999		2004		2010		2015		2017	
	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd
Corsica Nazione ¹	13.66	13.66	5.21	9.85	10.41	16.76								
UPC			4.97		3.85									
Unione Nazionale ²							12.14	17.34						
Femu a Corsica									18.4	25.9				
Corsica Libera									9.36	9.85				
MPA (Corsica Demucrazia) ³	7.43	7.98	3.4											
A Manca Naziunale			0.65		0.79		0.58							
I Verdi Corsi			1.15											
Corsica Viva			1.94											
Uniti					3.97									
Rinnovu Naziunale					4.44		2.19				2.58		6.69	
Pe a Corsica ⁴											25.35	35.34	45.36	56.49
% Vote Share	21.09	24.83	17.32	9.85	23.56	16.76	14.91	17.34	27.76	35.75	27.93	35.34	52.05	56.49

Source: De la Calle & Fazi (2010); Ministère de l'Intérieur de la République Française.

1: In 1992, *Corsica Nazione* was a coalition of five nationalist organizations, among them UPC. In 1998 included only two organizations.

2: *Unione Naziunale* was a coalition made up of *Partitu di a Nazione Corsica*, *Corsica Nazione*, *A Chjama Naziunale* (Edmond Simeoni) and others tiny groups.

3: Movimento per l'Autodeterminazione.

4: In 2019, *Pe a Corsica* was a coalition made up of: *Corsica Libera* (independentist) and *Femu a Corsica* (autonomist). After 2017, it was joined by *Partitu di a Nazione Corsa* (autonomist).

In 2002, more powers were granted to the island, but a recognition of the Corsican people was still denied. During negotiations, nationalist forces suggested the ‘New Caledonia solution’ where, in a context marked by decolonisation and ethnic tension, an insular citizenship and a wide autonomy had been granted in 1998 (Chappell, 2013). Yet, this option was rejected by the National Assembly. When the Socialists — who had proposed the reform — lost the 2002 elections, the recognition of the Corsican status in the Constitution and other issues remained unresolved.

A year later, a contentious proposal by the Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, to reform Corsica’s status, was submitted to a local referendum; Corsicans rejected it by a narrow margin. However, no further escalation in the conflict was provoked, as had happened with previous reforms. In 2014, the main faction of FLNC announced the end of the armed struggle. The Corsican status was further reformed in 2015 to end the overlap between the Corsican Assembly and the two Departmental Councils that limited the powers of the executive. Since December 2015, a coalition of independentists and autonomists have governed Corsica (see [Table 2](#)); political violence seems to have ended. However, nationalist parties still insist on the full acceptance and normalisation of Corsican as an official language and on recognition of the island with the same status as France’s overseas territories: this would allow it to adapt French law and to set up a kind of island citizenship.

Conclusion

The two nationalisms of Corsica and Sardinia are different: a legacy of how the two island-metropole relationships evolved. Corsica became part of the Kingdom of France by force, and the relationship with the mainland was problematic from the start. Centre-periphery relations in France are driven by a strong centralism, aimed at making the different parts of the national territory perfectly equal, until a slow process of decentralisation started in the 1960s. The only concessions made to Corsica were a different customs regime (abolished in 1912), and some tolerance towards the use of the Corsican language during the 19th century. The recognition of the autonomy of an island territory or safeguarding Corsican culture, was never entertained. French authorities resisted considering Corsica’s islandness as justification for special status, despite this having been granted to French colonial dependencies in 1946. The dismissive attitude of the French authorities radicalised Corsican nationalists and drove them to violence (Daftary, 2008). This argument adds credence to the effects of a problematic nation-building process and a low level of national integration in France.

Sardinia was different: it was not conquered, but transferred to the House of Savoy. Moreover, the existence of a quasi-independent island kingdom from 1297 to 1848 assured a certain autonomy, and – except for some nostalgia for the Spanish past among the ruling class in the 18th century – there was no irredentism as in Corsica. Italy in 1861 adopted a centralised territorial management system, imitating France; but, in 1897-1907, it approved special laws to support economic growth in Sardinia, implicitly recognising its unique status. Thereafter, different models of governance were proposed for Sardinia, and after WWI an island party (PSd’Az) tabled autonomy in the Italian Parliament. Until 1981, PSd’Az’s main objective was to reform the whole of Italy into a federal republic, not full independence. PSd’Az took part in the birth of the Italian Republic, securing semi-autonomous status for Sardinia and enabling the party to ally itself with mainstream Italian parties. Once autonomy was approved in 1948, it became a shared value among the Sardinian branches of most mainland parties. Some of the latter’s militants, moreover, such as Giovanni Lilliu, were sympathetic to nationalism. This avoided radicalisation and use of violence. And so, emergent Sardinian separatism mainly adopted legal and political, not clandestine, action. Still, Sardinian independentists were under police surveillance and in some cases unfairly accused of plotting a violent uprising; while a few did consider a path of armed struggle.

These historical variances help explain why nationalism in Corsica has a radical anti-French stance, while in Sardinia it is moderate and ready to work with mainstream Italian parties. The former struck an anti-governmental tone, including use of political violence, as a response to opposition to any proposal to decentralise. The latter secured special economic packages and autonomy thanks to an (often tense) alliance with mainstream Italian political forces. Centrifugal tensions and requests for status reform persist on both islands. Although full independence is not an aspiration of most subnational island political action (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012), Rome and Paris are likely to continue having problems managing their adjacent island territories. Italy accepts that island governance, as for Sardinia and Sicily, requires a high degree of autonomy; but France does not.

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