



## THE DIVISION OF TYROL

Interview with Prof. Günther Pallaver, Department of Political Science, University of Innsbruck ([guenther.pallaver@uibk.ac.at](mailto:guenther.pallaver@uibk.ac.at))

A project carried out by the students of AGI – Akademisches Gymnasium Innsbruck, under the supervision of Gerhard Prassnigger.

### Why was South Tyrol so important for Italy?

The main goal of Western States in the Age of Imperialism was the expansion of their Empires. With the Treaty of London signed in 1915, during World War I, Italy was promised some territorial gains in return for a pledge to enter the war on the Allied side, although at the end of the war the territorial compensations in favour of Italy were partly neglected. Italian nationalists coined the phrase 'mutilated victory' ('vittoria mutilata'), claiming that the country's wartime sacrifices had gone unrewarded. In order to gain part of what had originally been promised to them, the Italians could not renounce their territorial claims for South Tyrol. It was a nationalistic and imperialistic act

After World War II everything that was German became suspicious due to the Nazi ideology that had made inroads in the German Reich. The Italians had a number of arguments for a claim to South Tyrol, such as the significant investment made by the Italian government in the South Tyrolean energy sector, the strategic importance of the area, the Cold war, the threat that the Soviet Union could expand their sphere of influence into Austria. It was above all also a matter of national prestige, as after 1945 Italy had lost its colonial empire. And because in those years the claim was made that the German-speakers should be forced to leave their homeland, as they were in other Eastern European countries, South Tyrolean politicians had to be cautious in their public statements.

In the treatment of the South Tyrol question, the Allied supported Italy, both because the country had taken part in the fight against Nazi Germany after 1943 and because Italy was for them a more important ally than Austria. Moreover, the Paris Peace Treaties of 1946 between Austria and Italy granted the German minorities international protection as well as their positive development. Finally, with the European integration

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process and the entry into force of the Schengen Agreement, State borders stopped being a relevant issue.

### **Why are the settlements of the South Tyrolean population considered a distinctive phenomenon?**

As part of the propaganda campaign at the time of the South Tyrol Option Agreement in 1939, the South Tyroleans were promised, including with the signing of an agreement between Germany and Italy, that they should be moved to an enclosed area. To this end a number of plans were made which envisaged resettling the population to areas like the Balkans, Burgundy or Crimea. As these were all quite unrealistic plans, an attempt was made to transfer the South Tyrolean population to common housing estates whose architectural style was inspired by the South Tyrolean architecture. The first to move were the dispossessed, the employees, the artisans, and the agricultural workers. Many of them were enthusiastic, because the new dwellings had a bathroom and even an electric steam iron. This was a first step in the direction of modernisation that led the new residents to experience genuine joy.

Immigrants from South Tyrol received different forms of welcome in Tyrol. The government's decision to offer them new flats made them objects of envy by the local population, who started to perceive them as competitors and to call them 'Katzlmacher', a derogatory term used to address Italian immigrants.

After 1945, as food, fuel and jobs became increasingly scarce in the country, Austria was hoping that the highest number of South Tyroleans would return to their homeland. However, only a fraction of the original 75,000 South Tyrolean migrants had settled in Austria. Some of them, for instance, had opted to move to various German *Länder*, to Luxembourg or to Sudetenland. As many as 25,000 had returned to South Tyrol, where they were derogatorily called 'Hitlerische', that is, supporters of Hitler. Nowadays some elderly people in Austria still live in the South Tyrolean settlements. They are fully integrated in the local communities, to the point that nobody is aware of their South Tyrolean origins. The settlements are currently being demolished in some areas like Pradl or Kufstein to make room for new dwellings.

### **What advantages would South Tyrol have, should it return to Austria?**

It is not a question of advantages or disadvantages in this case. Compared to Austria, however, South Tyrol has many more competences for which specific financial cover is provided, and therefore benefits from a significantly higher budget. The main

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concern in the event of a reunion with Austria is that the Ladin and Italian-speaking minorities would end up being neglected, as was the case with the Slovenian minority in Austria.

In the regional elections of 2013 in South Tyrol three parties campaigned for self-determination, namely 'Die Südtiroler Freiheit' (South Tyrolean Freedom), 'Die

Freiheitlichen' (variously translated as 'The Freedomites', 'The Libertarians' or 'The Liberals') and the 'Union für Südtirol' ('Union for South Tyrol'). On that occasion, they collectively secured 27% of the votes. Nevertheless, in the last regional elections of 2018, these same parties dropped in their share of the total vote to 12%. Moreover, their political narrative has changed over time, focusing no longer on the violation of fundamental ethnic rights such as linguistic rights or the right to autonomy, but rather on economic aspects.

Their first claim is that South Tyrol should be part of a more economically stable country like Austria, rather than Italy. They appear to have prioritised economic arguments over political arguments. It is worth noting, however, that in the surveys on the right to self-determination that have been regularly commissioned in South Tyrol, the majority of the population has never supported a reunion with Austria.

Equally important is the fact that the highest income per capita in Italy has been registered in South Tyrol and the Aosta Valley, and that South Tyrol is listed among the 25 richest regions in Europe. In addition to that, a large number of privileges used to be granted to South Tyrolean citizens in Austria before the country's accession to the European Union – university students from South Tyrol, for example, were granted the same rights as their Austrian counterparts, while South Tyrolean citizens were allowed to work in the Austrian public administration. Since the accession of Austria to the Union, all EU nationals benefit from the same rights as Austrian citizens, but South Tyroleans are still likely to receive special treatment, if only by virtue of their cultural affinity. Nonetheless, a return of South Tyrol to Austria is no longer an issue within the framework of a Union where borders tend to be removed rather than moved.

### **What kind of impact does autonomy have on the Italian economy?**

Five Italian regions are granted special autonomy, namely the region Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, which is composed by the two self-governing provinces of Trento and Bolzano, the Aosta Valley, the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia and the two main islands, Sicily and Sardinia. Over the years the five regions with home rule have been increasingly criticised, particularly by the ordinary regions of Northern Italy, and there have been attempts to question their special establishment statutes, on the ground

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that the autonomous regions, *in primis* Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, enjoy substantial financial privileges to the detriment of the remaining ones. A wealth of literature exists on the conflicts between the rich special-status regions and the poorer ordinary-status regions.

### **Why is it not possible to transfer the substantially successful project of integration and autonomy of South Tyrol to other regions?**

Several minority groups come to South Tyrol to examine its model of integration and autonomy, from the German minority in Hungary to delegations from Tibet and Palestine. How was it possible to find a peaceful solution to such a conflict-ridden situation?

While this kind of model cannot simply be transferred across regions because no two environments are the same, it is however possible to identify an 'exportable good', namely the process which enabled the parties involved to find a solution. This process is the so-called 'consociational democracy', in other words the practice of seeking maximum participation of all stakeholders. In the case of South Tyrol, the following actors took part in negotiations: the Italian and Austrian governments, South Tyrol, North Tyrol and Trentino.

Therefore, it is essential to first grant maximum participation of all stakeholders and then to develop a culture of negotiation and compromise, which is not always easy. Opposing conflicts have to be turned into non-opposing conflicts of interest. This is exactly what happened in South Tyrol, where fundamental rights were recognised and numerous compromises were reached. For instance, South Tyrol's Autonomy Statute establishes that the two main linguistic groups should be represented in the Government of South Tyrol in a way that is proportional to the size of the linguistic groups as represented in the Provincial Council, while special rules apply to the smaller Ladin-speaking minority. Until 10 years ago the 'Südtiroler Volkspartei' (South Tyrolean People's Party) could have governed alone, but this never happened because it was agreed that all linguistic groups would cooperate to form a coalition government.

So the process was important, and nowadays there are still many commissions where all the actors are represented to discuss the future development of South Tyrol's autonomy. To this end a fully-fledged consociational democracy is needed which has developed over the years.

[Translated from German by Daniela Ferrari]

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