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## Explaining Failure: the Highs and Lows of Sardinian Nationalism

Eve Hepburn

### Abstract

Most analyses of nationalist and regionalist parties focus on cases of 'success' – with the usual suspects of the Scottish National Party, *Parti Québécois* and *Convergència i Unió* dominating the field. Yet, by exploring the performance of only a select group of most-similar cases, it is difficult to distinguish what the conditions for success – and failure – in regional mobilisation are. This contribution focuses on the rise and fall of the Sardinian Party of Action (*Partito Sardo d'Azione*), the oldest nationalist party in Italy. It explores the decisions that the party has made in response to multidimensional competition in a multilevel polity, and identifies which factors have led to its continuing electoral and political weakness. These include the party's ideological incoherence, its failure to compete successfully with nationalist competitors and regional branches of statewide parties, the bipolarisation of the party system, its erratic choices of coalition partners, and its limited adaptation to multi-level politics.

**Keywords:** Sardinia / nationalism / ideology / political parties

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### Introduction

Sardinia has been largely overlooked by scholars of nationalism and regionalism. This is primarily because the island's territorial politics have been overshadowed by the success of their Northern Italian counterparts. Unlike the *Lega Nord* (Northern League), Sardinia's stateless nationalist and regionalist parties (SNRPs) have failed to pose a major threat to the territorial integrity of the Italian state or to catalyse constitutional reforms in Italy. But Sardinia is an interesting case for several reasons. The *Partito Sardo d'Azione* (Sardinian Action Party) is the oldest SNRP in Italy, and was the first to demand autonomy and recognition of its nationhood within the modern Italian state. Catapulted onto the Sardinian political scene with 36% of the vote in 1921, the Psd'Az has since remained the largest SNRP in Sardinia. However, its electoral fortunes have declined steadily throughout the postwar period, to the point that the Psd'Az rarely achieved more than 5% of the vote in the 2000s.

Why was the Psd'Az never able to recover its electoral fortunes? This is a pertinent question not only for the *Partito Sardo*, but for all 'declining' regionalist parties. It is just as imperative to explain failure as success when seeking to understand contemporary regionalist mobilisation. A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the usual suspects of the Scottish National Party, *Parti Québécois*, *Convergència i Unió* and the *Lega Nord* (i.e. Keating, 1996; Cento Bull, 1997; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005). But few academic researchers have focussed on negative cases, where nationalist and regionalist parties have not succeeded in becoming electorally significant on a permanent basis. This is an important shortcoming in the literature. As Rydgren (2002) argues, 'in comparative analysis negative cases are as important as positive cases'. Cases of failure provide us with important information about the factors that explain variation in regional mobilisation. Importantly, a case of failure is more than the absence of its success. A number of scholars have identified 'conditions for success' in regionalist mobilisation. Most notably, Müller-Rommel (1998) identified two theoretical explanations for the electoral success of regionalist parties – competitive models and rational choice models. In the former, electoral systems with proportional representation and decentralised systems foster the success of regionalist parties, as does the existence of a strong leader, a strong party organisation and an electorate alienated from mainstream politics (Hauss and Rayside, 1978). Rational choice models, alternatively, emphasise that regionalist parties succeed when they compete on (territorial) issues that mainstream parties fail to account for (Levi and Hecther, 1985). However, these factors explaining the 'success' of regionalist parties often fail to account for their failure. In particular, scholars have much to learn about the strategic choices that nationalist and regionalist parties must make regarding their policy platforms, coalition partners, and their priorities in pursuing vote-, office- or policy-seeking strategies (Strøm, 1990) in order to survive in contemporary party systems. These issues are especially pertinent in the light of new challenges facing SNRPs. What is the most successful response to multi-level, multidimensional politics, and what response spells failure?

In this contribution, the main proposition put forward to account for the decline of the Psd'Az has to do with the party's unwillingness, or inability, to categorise itself on the left-right ideological dimension. This hypothesis accords with Michael Freedén's (1998) argument that nationalism constitutes a 'thin' ideology that must be supplemented with a broad socioeconomic programme in order for a party to achieve electoral success. The Psd'Az has sought to appeal to the broadest strata of the Sardinian electorate united under a banner of

self-government, by de-emphasising class or socioeconomic policy issues. However, the party's ideological flexibility has been a hindrance as well as advantage.

The discussion begins with an overview of the development of the Psd'Az, highlighting a number of difficulties relating to its refusal, or inability, to categorise itself ideologically. However, ideological incoherence is not the only explanation for the decline of the Psd'Az. In a multidimensional, multi-level policy space, there have been other challenges facing the Psd'Az. The second part of the article explores the effects of the reform of the Italian political system in the 1990s on the Psd'Az, at which point the party's electoral fortunes dropped sharply. These factors include the rise of nationalist and regionalist competitors, the territorialisation of statewide parties, the reform of the electoral system (resulting in more bipolar politics), and the challenge of multi-level politics. Each of these factors in turn helps to explain why the Psd'Az has ultimately failed to achieve its aims. The identification of factors accounting for 'failure' in this case of regionalist mobilisation opens up important new agendas for further comparative research.

### **The Rise and Fall of a Nationalist Movement**

The *Partito Sardo d'Azione* (Psd'Az) was formed by ex-combatants from the famous '*Brigati Sassari*' (Sassari Brigades) – a Sardinian section of the Italian armed forces that fought together in Germany during the First World War. Headed by the charismatic ex-soldier, Emilio Lussu, the Psd'Az benefited from a surge of mass popular nationalism in Sardinia during this period, winning the support of a large stratum of the population, especially former soldiers, peasants and miners. The war had provided the first large collective experience of the Sardinian people as a whole, which had been geographically isolated in pockets of communities spread across the island. Their participation in the war ensured that 'for the first time ever [the Sardis] engaged in contact with the reality of the national vision' (Melis, 1982: 23). In return for the sacrifices of the 'intrepid Sardinians' during the war, the Psd'Az demanded a form of political and administrative self-determination in order to protect the Sardinian identity, language and culture. The first party congress was held on 16 April 1921 in Oristano, making the Psd'Az 'the first and most important autonomist movement' as well as one of the oldest surviving parties of any kind in Italy (Vallauri, 1994: 199).<sup>1</sup> In the elections that year, the party won 36% of the popular vote, establishing itself as a mass movement for the autonomy of Sardinia. In the following year, the party developed a more specific political orientation as a republican-federalist party during its second Congress. 'First Sardis, then Italians' was the message of the first *Sardista* demonstration in Cagliari organised

by the Psd'Az (Cubeddu, 1995: 270). The party did not want independence, but rather a clear federal Italian pact. It also made references to the creation of a *Federazione mediterranea*, a theme that would occur in later party programmes (Mattone, 1982: 74; Cubeddu, 1995: 270).

#### *Ideological polarisation of the Psd'Az*

However, the PSD'Az's ideological position was less clear. Attempts to pull the party in the direction of socialism in order to represent the struggle of the workers in an autonomous Sardinia were met with opposition. And when the Italian Fascist Party began making headway in Sardinia in 1923, most of the party's leaders, under the direction of Paolo Pilli, decided to break with Lussu's radical socialists (Addis Saba, 1982: 132). Thus, the party split into two groups, whereby one section entered an alliance with Mussolini's *Partito Italiano Fascista* (which was then quite insignificant in Sardinia), whilst the other, led by Emilio Lussu, vigorously opposed the Fascists. The main reason why the conservative section of the Psd'Az decided to merge with the Fascists was due to Mussolini's promise of 'autonomy' for the island in 1923. This bolstered hopes for recognition of Sardinia as a separate political and cultural entity. But for the negotiators of this deal, what 'autonomy' actually meant was the reward of a billion lire for Sardinia, to be spent on public works and land reclamation. Whilst the money did end up exchanging hands in 1924, the project of granting Sardinia special status was soon abandoned in the lead up to the Second World War and Mussolini's imperial adventures in Ethiopia, when state centralisation was the key order of the day.

The rump of the *Partito Sardo d'Azione*, under the direction of Lussu, re-emerged following the fall of Fascism in Italy in 1943 after years in exile. By this time, the autonomist movement had come to mean many different things for different groups, such as anti-fascism, the struggle of the peasants and miners, and an anti-war movement (Melis, 1982). However, it was unable to galvanise the pre-war levels of support, as the reputation of the party had been tarnished by its association with Fascism and it could not depend on the automatic assistance of the ex-servicemen's associations. Despite this, the party was still considerably large and influential (with 40,000 members, making it the strongest mass party on the island), and set about developing a constitutional programme: 'the Psd'Az is firmly convinced that only a restructuring of the state along republican-federal lines will save and reinforce national unity, guarantee and intensify the exercise of individual, communal and regional rights, and allow for the realisation of a substantive social justice' (cited in Melis, 1982: 30).

The Psd'Az suffered another severe set-back in 1948. Emilio Lussu, the party's best-known protagonist, decided that he was tired of accommodating the conservative-moderate

elements in the party, and established his own *Partito Sardo d'Azione Socialista* (Psdas) in order to revive the socialist *sardism* of the post-First World War era. During the elections that year, the Psd'Az obtained 10.5% of the vote with seven seats in the Assembly, and the Socialist Psd'Az took 6.6% and three seats. The split served to benefit neither party: 'one lost its radical wing and found itself weakened in the face of moderate Christian democracy, the other, viewed with suspicion as a potential rival by the communist party, was never able to find its own niche' (Addis Saba, 1982: 135). Lussu's Psdas finally merged with the *Partito Socialista Italiano* in 1949, which thereafter became more favourably disposed towards greater regionalisation of Italy. Meanwhile, the *Partito Sardo d'Azione* – having lost its socialist strand – veered to the right and began a long collaboration with the Christian Democrats, which was to last until the 1980s when the party moved again to the Left. The party's alliance with the DC meant that it entered a number of the regional governments of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, giving it experience in power as well as the ability to push through with some of its projects. But the Psd'Az also suffered from this collaboration, due to the failure of the government's economic development plans and its inability to break Sardinia's dependence on the central state for favours and patronage.

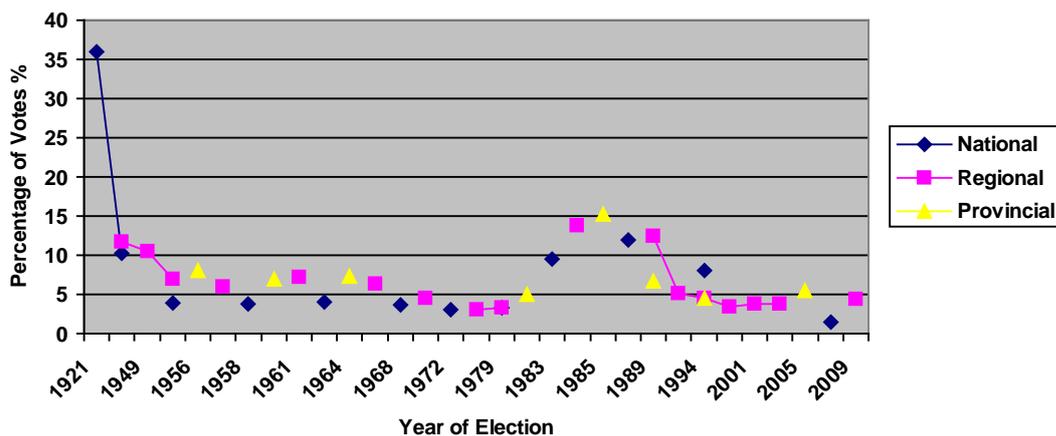
#### *The failure to obtain 'real' autonomy for Sardinia*

In 1946-8, the Psd'Az put forward proposals for a Special Statute for Sardinia in the Italian Constitution. Sardinia's qualification for special treatment was largely due to the strength of the autonomist movement, and the island's historical claim to nationhood.<sup>2</sup> The Psd'Az sought exclusive legislative competences across a wide range of areas including policing, work and pensions, health, finance, industry, agriculture and education (Mattone, 1982: 30). It failed, however, to obtain many of these powers. Months of internal bickering among Sardinian parties led the Italian government to take charge and draw up the *Statuto*, which was then approved by the Italian Parliament. In short, Sardinia was handed a watered-down constitution decreed by Rome that had no popular backing. Of note, within the statute, Sardinia received a special clause that did not appear in any of the other regional constitutions: a commitment by the Italian state to 'the economic and social renaissance of the island' (Art.13, Constitutional Act 1948). The insertion of this clause altered the very nature of Sardinian autonomy within Italy, which signified the 'request for material concessions and modernisation' (Clark, 1989), and sealed Sardinia's future dependence on the state.

On the first matter, the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* – Italy's office for regional development in the South – had implemented several 'Plans of Rebirth' (*Piani di Rinascità*)

with the complicity of the Sardinian regional government to create high-technology industries such as petrochemicals, steelworks and oil refineries on the island from the 1960s. It could be argued that one of the aims of the Italian government's southern development policy had been 'to 'italianise" the obstinate Sards and their centuries-old local culture' (Hospers and Benneworth, 2005: 343). Secondly, the widespread practice of '*clientelismo e sottogoverno*' (Melis, 1982: 2) meant that ruling politicians siphoned off the regional funds to strengthen their own party bases. Thus, the autonomous institutions of Sardinia were run by the entrenched regional political class that were strongly linked to, and highly dependent on Rome. The imposition of an alien form of industrialisation without the involvement of local practitioners spelt disaster. As the industrial plants failed to provide many jobs and the traditional agro-pastoral economy was ignored, the Sardinian people turned against the 'cathedrals in the desert'. Popular resistance to the plans degenerated into criminal activities such as banditry and kidnapping in the pastoral and central mountain areas. The regional government's inability to control the banditry or to set a realizable path of economic development tarnished the *Partito Sardo*'s reputation as a party committed to the protection of Sardinian territorial interests. Thereafter, it entered a period of crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, unable to win more than 5% of the vote (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Pds'Az results in National, Regional and Provincial Elections  
1921-2009**



Source: Istituto Cattaneo, Archivi 'Adele' ([www.cattaneo.org](http://www.cattaneo.org))

### *Absorbing cultural nationalism – Pds'Az and neo-sardismo*

The precarious position of the Pds'Az was soon reversed as it began to take advantage of the burgeoning success of a new cultural nationalist movement, known as *neo-sardismo*. This

movement, which was based on the demand for the use of the Sard language in schools and the media, and the maintenance of Sardinian cultural traditions, soon gained considerable popular success in the late 1960s. The expression of Sardinian identity was one of the mantles taken up by the militant student movement, and was supported by intellectuals and cultural associations across the island. Indeed, a number of organisations were established during the early 1970s that sought to achieve these explicitly socio-cultural goals. The movement soon acquired political overtones, namely a demand for independence based on territorial and cultural grievances that were framed in the language of anti-colonialism and 'third-worldism'. Its new political protagonists included *Il Fronte Independentista Sardo*, *Sardinnya e Libertat*, *Democrazia Proletaria Sarda* and *Su Populu Sardo*. The latter organisation, established in 1973, was a militant student group that temporarily merged with the Psd'Az in 1981 (it would later split away again to form a competitor nationalist party in Sardinia, *Sardignia Natzione*). As a result of this, and the Psd'Az's adoption of specifically cultural and linguistic goals, the party enjoyed a boom in electoral support, and in 1985 the Psd'Az received over 15% of the vote across the island, which increased to over 20% in Oristano and quarters of Cagliari.

The involvement of the Psd'Az in the neo-sardism movement had other effects on its organisation and policy. The party adopted many of the neo-sardist movement's goals, such as making the Sard language official in public institutions and taught in schools. Prior to this, the party had rarely mentioned language in its policies and goals (Clark, 1980: 452). Most significantly, the party officially changed its main goal from federalism to supporting independence in 1979-80 (Petrosino, 1988). This led many *neo-sardisti* to join the party, thus expanding and diversifying the party's membership. In response to its new membership, the Psd'Az moved again to the left. However, the goal of independence was unclear. The party argued that its support for independence was 'functional' but did not detract from their goal of reforming the Italian state on the basis of a federal constitution. This ambivalence frustrated its new members, leading to internal divisions and the creation of a new political party with the explicit goal of creating an independent Sardinia along socialist lines (see below). The Psd'Az itself, having lost its militant wing, thereafter engaged in a governing coalition with the left (the Communists and Socialists) and others (PRI and PSDI) in 1984-89.

### *A European lifeline?*

As its difficulties mounted in the Sardinian political arena, the Psd'Az began to look to Europe as a potential salve for its woes. Since its inception, the Psd'Az has consistently adopted a pro-European attitude, envisioning Sardinian self-determination within a wider

Europe of the Peoples. Furthermore, unlike some nationalist and regionalist movements in Italy, the Psd'Az prides itself in articulating a pro-European outward-looking 'civic' brand of nationalism (Melis, 1994), denouncing the *Lega Nord* as 'Northern racists'. These Europhile aspects of its programme and rhetoric allowed the Psd'Az to position itself as the most pro-European and Europe-savvy party in Sardinia. And with the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, this opened up a new and important channel for the Psd'Az to advance its territorial project. When it first competed in European elections in 1984, the Psd'Az managed to elect one of its representatives, Mario Melis, to the European Parliament (see Table 1). This was an impressive accomplishment given that Sardinia shares an electoral constituency for the European elections with Sicily, which is 4 times the size of Sardinia. But the party was able to strike a deal with the Sicilians, and put together an electoral list with *Union Valdôtaine* in the North of Italy. Melis was well-known to voters and won a great deal of popular support, as President of the Region of Sardinia in 1982 and 1984-89. Melis also played a significant role in pushing the issue of European political integration to the forefront of Sardinian politics, by envisaging a stronger role for the regions in determining European policy and its future direction. Melis was among the first to use the concept of a Europe of the Regions in his proposals in Brussels and he was also instrumental in drawing up the laws establishing the Committee of the Regions (Melis, 1994). This earned him a great deal of respect in Sardinia and Europe, and he was re-elected in the 1989-94 European Parliament.

**Table 1: European electoral performance of Psd'Az & coalition partners, 1979-2009**

	<b>Regionalist list</b>	<b>Votes (no.)</b>	<b>Vote Share (%)</b>	<b>Seats</b>
<b>1979</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>1984</b>	Psd'Az & UV*	115,862	12.7	1
<b>1989</b>	Psd'Az & UV	98,095	10.6	1
<b>1994</b>	Psd'Az & UV	5, 872	0.66	-
<b>1999</b>	Psd'Az & PdC**	20,209	2.6	-
<b>2004</b>	Lega per l'aut.***	13,112	1.46	-
<b>2009</b>	-	-	-	-

Source: Istituto Cattaneo and Roux (2006)

\*UV – *Union Valdôtaine*

\*\*PdC – *Partito dei Consumatori*

\*\*\**Lega per l'autonomia* included Psd'Az, Alleanza Lombarda, Liga Fronte Veneto, Union für Südtirol, Lega Pensionati

This 1980s were a crucial period for the Psd'Az in establishing itself as a European party. Its central goal of exercising autonomy in a federal Europe of the Peoples demonstrated to the Sardinian electorate that the Psd'Az would highlight the cause of Sardinian self-determination in Europe, and protect its interests in Brussels. One author has argued that the Psd'Az was a 'precursor' of the idea of a Europe of the Peoples and the Ethnicities (Vallauri, 1994: 1999). This refers to the writings of the Sardinian nationalist intellectual Antonio Simon Mosso in the 1960s, who argued that Sardinia should be assured a place within a European federation that was based on the 'ethnicities' of Europe (Contu, 1992: 30). The Psd'Az was also a founding member of the European Free Alliance (EFA), a 'Europarty' for nationalist and regionalist parties in Europe. This involvement in European institutions and networks cemented the Psd'Az's alliance with a number of like-minded parties across Europe, in particular with nationalist and regionalist parties in Corsica, Catalonia and the Basque Country.

However, there have been some problems with the Psd'Az's use of Europe to find solutions to its territorial demands. Firstly, during this period of direct Sardinian representation in Europe, all of the mainstream parties in Sardinia became pro-European. However, the difficulty here was that Europe also became unproblematic in Sardinian politics: party approaches to European integration were (and remain) reactive and uncritical, at least when policies do not affect Sardinian economic interests. This party consensus on Europe undermined the Psd'Az's unique stance of seeking a Europe of the Peoples. Secondly, after the 1980s, Sardinia later experienced problems of representation in European institutions, with Sicily almost always electing one of its own candidates to the European Parliament. Sardinia has not had its own MEP since 1994. A large barrier to Sardinian political engagement with Europe is thus its lack of direct representation. This caused the *Partito Sardo d'Azione* and other nationalist and regionalist parties to boycott the European elections in 2009 and called on Sardinian voters to do the same (*L'Unione Sarda*, 15 May 2009). Their campaign to dissuade Sards from voting had a strong effect: voter turnout, at 40.9%, was the lowest in Italy and showed the highest decrease of any region (Cattaneo, 2009)

Furthermore, whilst the Psd'Az was actually able to elect a representative to Europe in 1989, its support in the regional election that year dropped to 10%, which started a period of a long electoral decline. Despite its efforts to trumpet its achievements in Europe, these were

overshadowed by the party's discredited alliance with the statewide parties in regional government, and the failure of the government's plans for industrialisation, in the Sardinian political arena. Furthermore, the party's reluctance to press for independence, preferring instead autonomy in a federal Europe, ended up damaging its reputation: it was seen to have failed on its key commitment to securing a 'real' autonomy for the island.

### *Joining the Olive Alliance*

The Psd'Az faced a further problem in the early 1990s: the move to a bipolar party system in Italy. The party's response was to cement its alliance with parties of the centre-left in Italy, with which it had worked since the 1980s. The centre-left appeared to constitute the better protector of Sardinian interests as they were instrumental in pushing for state decentralisation to take the separatist rug from beneath the *Lega Nord's* feet. The Left also appeared more sympathetic to protecting Sardinian cultural interests at the regional level.

In 1994 the *Partito Sardo* elected four members to the Regional Council, who participated in the centre-left government and contributed to legislation on the Sardinian language, and laws on banditry. The Psd'Az later entered the *L'Ulivo* alliance in 1996, hoping to reinforce its socialist credentials and to influence the centre-left alliance from within to adopt a position more favourable to increased regional autonomy. This served the party well in the elections of 1996, as the pact signed between Romani Prodi and the Psd'Az resulted in the party's president, Franco Meloni, being elected to the national senate. However, the party's alliance with the Left also resulted in a major internal crisis. The party still contained a right-wing section, and collaboration with the Olive alliance resulted in the defection of one prominent member, Efsio Serrenti, and his followers. Due to this internal ideological crisis, the Psd'Az chose to stand outside the two main poles in the 1999 elections. The party divided into two camps: the 'official' party being led by Giacomo Sanna and Franco Meloni, who sought rapprochement with the Left, and the section headed by Serrenti entered a coalition with the centre-right, later founding a new nationalist right-wing party: *Sardistas* (which has since remained electorally insignificant) Efsio Serrenti was himself elected President of the Region with support of the two main right-wing Italian parties: *Forza Italia* and *Alleanza Nazionale*. Following the break-up, *Sardistas* continued to use the traditional *sardista* logos, slogans and symbols of the Psd'Az, which incited the fury Giacomo Sanno who claimed that *Sardistas* was not a 'proper' nationalist party (*La Nuova Sardegna*, 1 May 2001).<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of this ideological turmoil, the Psd'Az congress voted against renewing its alliance with *L'Ulivo* in 2001. Party Secretary Giacomo Sanno also argued that Prodi's

alliance 'did not have any have any arguments in the interests of Sardinia' and the Sardinian centre-left parties did not have 'the minimum of autonomy from Rome' (*La Nuova Sardegna*, 1 May 2001). The Union's rhetoric about strengthening Sardinian identity and autonomy was criticised as an empty gesture to ensure the support of the Psd'Az, whose partnership it needed to form a government. The Left's reluctance to recognise regional claims may have been because at the state level, any endorsement of the right to self-determination could play into the hands of Bossi's demand for independence. At this point, the Psd'Az decided to reinforce its nationalist credentials rather than its socialist credentials, and to seek to build an alliance with other newly-emerging nationalist and regionalist parties in Sardinia.

### **Other factors accounting for Psd'Az decline**

So far, we have seen that ideological flexibility has constituted a double-edged sword for the Psd'Az. The Psd'Az has sought to appeal to the broadest strata of the Sardinian electorate united under a common banner of self-government. This has involved making electoral and government coalitions with parties of both the left and right. Although this strategy has given the Psd'Az experience in government, it has been inherently problematical, resulting in divisions, splits and a loss of popular support. However, ideological incoherence is not the only reason for explaining for the decline in the Psd'Az. There were other salient factors resulting from the changing Italian party system. First the Psd'Az faced competition from new nationalist and regionalist parties in Sardinia (which had split from the Psd'Az), and which adopted more radical autonomy goals. Second was the 'territorialisation' of statewide parties, whereby Sardinian branches sought greater autonomy from the Italian party organisations, and adopted stronger territorial goals to compete with the Psd'Az. This included the birth of a highly successful centre-left—nationalist movement called *Progetto Sardegna*. Third, the Psd'Az faced challenges resulting from electoral system change and the move to more bipolar politics in Italy, which squeezed out smaller parties. And finally, there were challenges of multi-level politics, whereby the Psd'Az was forced to develop integrated strategies on three fronts: Sardinia, Italy and Europe, which it failed to do. Let us now explore each of these issues in greater detail to assess their impact on the Psd'Az's electoral fortunes.

#### *The Challenge from the Nationalist Left*

As the Psd'Az moved back and forth on both its ideological and its constitutional objectives, it was challenged by two smaller nationalist and regionalist parties that had much firmer convictions on both these matters. *Sardigna Nazione* (SN) and *Indipendentzia Reppublica*

*Sardignia* (IRS) emerged on the political scene advocating independence for Sardinia, framed in the language of anticolonialism. Both parties had their roots in the neo-sardism movement, which opposed the corruption of statewide party politics and called for the full 'emancipation' of Sardinia (as opposed to the creation of a federal Italy as the Psd'Az advocated). The oldest of these, *Sardigna Nazione* (SN) claims *Su Populu Sardo* as a direct predecessor. Following the Partito Sardo's abandonment of the goal of independence in the early 1980s, the wing of the party comprised of former *Su Populu Sardo* members (a strongly leftist student-led organisation that had joined the Psd'Az in 1981) broke away to form their own party. The *Partidu Sardu Independentista Sotzialista Libertariu* (PSIN) was created in 1984 to pursue the goal of independence for Sardinia. As the name suggests, the party also had a specific ideological orientation: that of libertarian socialism. The PSIN was inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the re-awakening of nationalism in the former USSR. The party was responsible for beginning a tradition of militant political nationalism on the island, organising demonstrations against the perceived oppression of Sards by Italian elites.

*Sardigna Nazione* (SN) was founded by former PSIN members in 1994. The SN maintained the rhetoric of the earlier cultural movement, and used the language of anti-colonialism to wage its battle against the Italian state. However, the party was still forced to compete with the Psd'Az for nationalist support. In the regional elections of 1994, the SN won 3% of the vote. The SN sought to distinguish itself from the Psd'Az by supporting full independence for Sardinia. To reflect this objective more clearly, the party added the word 'independence' to its name in 2002: it is now called *Sardigna Nazione Independentzia*. But another way of distinguishing itself from the *Partito Sardo*, according to the national coordinator of the party, Bustiano Cumpostu, was to transcend all ideology and reject any collaboration with Italian parties of the left or right, in order to pave the way for national self-determination.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the SN, despite its clearly socialist roots, sought to become even more ideology-free than the Psd'Az, by renouncing any coalitions with statewide parties. The SN was highly critical of the Partito Sardo's coalitions with the DC and then the PSI/PCI. At the same time, the SN's declaration of belonging to no ideological group should be understood as a rejection of left-right party politics in Italy rather than the lack of a set of social principles. For the SN does have an ideological position; by analysing its party literature we can see that it is clearly situated on the left of the political spectrum (SN 1996, 1999, 2000). This is evident in the party's references to its socialist libertarian predecessor, its language of anticolonialism, its objection to the globalisation of markets, its advocacy of international solidarity, its belief in the welfare state, and its condemnation of neoliberalism.

The SN's strategy may be understood as a refusal to play the Italian political game – which it sees as being characterised by left-right party competition. In fact, the SN argues that ideological polarisation is simply a political instrument used by Italian political elites to split the Sardinian nation into two ideological camps as part of a 'divide and conquer' strategy.

Though certainly not conquered, the Sardinian nationalist movement was further divided with the birth of the PSIN/SN. This was essentially a division between *federalisti* and *independentisti*. But in 2001, the situation became more complicated after a wing of the SN broke away to form another party, *Indipendentzia Reppublica Sardignia* (IRS). The breakaway of IRS from Sardinia Natzione was caused by the latter's search for a coalition partner in the form of the federalist Pds'Az. IRS leader Gavino Sale and his colleagues refused to participate in any form of dialogue with the Pds'Az, which it perceived as just another 'unionist' party in Sardinia which, through its coalition with statewide parties, had sold out the island's autonomy. Aside from this, there are few differences in the programmes of the IRS and SN. Like the SN, the IRS supports full independence of Sardinia and uses the language of anti-colonialism and anti-globalisation to support its argument for creating an independent Sardinian republic. Both parties also wish to protect Sardinia's language, culture and heritage, to safeguard Sardinia's traditional agro-pastoral economy and to protect the environment, thereby fusing nationalism with ecological concerns to create a type of 'econationalism' (IRS, 2004).

Yet although the IRS has much in common with the SN, it is also suspicious of the latter's motives, especially where its coalition interests are concerned. The SN's enthusiasm for an alliance with the Pds'Az in 2001 (as discussed below) was vigorously opposed by the IRS, which perceives the Pds'Az as an 'establishment' party that is intent on keeping Sardinia within the Italian state. The IRS argues that the 'autonomy' endorsed by its national competitors has resulted in economic deprivation, the destruction of Sardinia's forests and agricultural economy, the pillaging of its mineral resources, cultural stigmatisation and the 'shame' of being Sardinian, the prevention of the flourishing of the Sardinian language and the political alienation of the Sardinian people from the regional clientelist class (IRS, 2005). These types of accusations have so far won little electoral support. In the 2005 administrative elections the party won 1.7% of the vote (though this figure reached 3.7% in the province of Sassari, which was sufficient to elect leader Gavino Sale as a councillor) and in the 2006 national elections it won only 1.1% of the vote in Sardinia. The IRS thus remains a very minor force in Sardinian politics, and has no formal links with the SN or Pds'Az.

During this period, the Psd'Az itself moved further to the left of the political spectrum. A precedent had already been set in the 1980s when the Psd'Az joined alliance with the PSI and PCI in the regional government, but a growing centre-left orientation has been more evident in its recent policies. For instance, during the debates over devolution proposals in 2005, Psd'Az spokesperson Antonio Moro called Bossi's version of devolution a *federalismo egoistico*. He asserted that the Psd'Az sought to create a solidaristic federalism based on cooperation between regions. The party also argued that the proposals for fiscal federalism were 'too vague and indefinite' (Psd'Az, 2006). The Psd'Az believed that Bossi's plans would benefit the northern regions to the detriment of the poor through its reform of the fiscal equalisation programme. This placed the party clearly within the ambit of the centre-left's position on decentralisation versus devolution.

### *Nationalism and the Statewide Parties*

The strong territorial dimension of politics in Sardinia has meant that 'autonomy', and less class and religion, is the 'central axis' upon which Sardinian parties compete (Tidore, 1992: 29). According to Paolo Pisu, regional councillor for the *Rifondazione Comunista*, 'in Sardinia we're all federalists, autonomists or separatists'.<sup>5</sup> In Sardinia, the regional branches of statewide parties have been expert at playing the Sardinian card and have pressed for further regional rights. Support for a 'real' autonomy has gained momentum across parties, and a declaration of the sovereignty of Sardinia was approved by a majority of members of the Regional Council in 1999. This has not always been the case. At earlier times, the positions of many Sard parties were unfavourable to autonomy, seeing any form of particularism as backward. Statewide parties moved back and forth on the territorial dimension throughout the postwar period, which is our next subject of discussion.

The Christian Democrats (DC) constituted the party of government in Sardinia from 1948 to 1991 (with a short break in the 1980s when a nationalist-left coalition came to power – see Table 2). This meant that, within the Sardinian autonomous institutions that they presided over, the *DC Sarda* was also the party of autonomy. During the drafting of the Italian Constitution in 1946-48, the *DC Sarda* enthusiastically supported the creation of autonomous institutions for Sardinia. This was in keeping with the state party's stance, which favoured a decentralised Italian state in line with its commitment to 'local participation' and the Catholic notion of subsidiarity (Partridge 1998: 54).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Sardinian DC's regionalist orientation did not create a problem for the statewide party, and nor did its long-term governing alliance with the Psd'Az. At times, it seemed that the DC had stolen the *Partito Sardo*'s clothes, in

their desire to increase the powers of the region.<sup>7</sup> However, there was a clear difference in the constitutional demands of the two parties: whilst the *Psd'Az* called for the creation of a federal Italy in which Sardinia could exert its own authority, the DC believed that whatever Sardinia's devolved powers, it should remain firmly in the ambit of Italian state politics (Clark 1989: 423). However, this position was questioned in the aftermath of the failed economic 'plans of rebirth'. After years of having been complicit with the Italian government's questionable economic experiments in Sardinia, the Young Turks in the *DC Sarda* embarked on a *politica contestativa*: 'a politics of open confrontation with Rome and the same political class in Sardinia which, with a considerable influence in all of the parties and a presence in the national parliament [...] was accused of not doing enough possible for the interests of the island and, on the contrary, of favouring government projects and programmes that undermined the autonomy and self-determination of the Sards' (Brigaglia et al, 2002: 76). However, these efforts were considered to be too little and too late (Clark, 1996: 90) and the autonomist movement became associated with the Left.

**Table 2: Regional Electoral Performance of Sardinian Parties, 1949-89 (% of votes)**

	1949	1953	1957	1961	1965	1969	1974	1979	1984	1989
<i>Psd'Az</i>	17.0	7.0	6.0	7.2	6.3	4.5	3.1	3.3	13.8	12.9
<b>DC</b>	33.0	41.1	43.0	46.3	43.4	44.5	38.3	37.7	32.1	35.0
<b>PCI</b>	19.4	22.3	17.5	20.5	20.5	19.7	26.8	26.3	28.7	23.1
<b>PSI/PSDI</b>	8.9	10.6	12.2	12.8	16.1	16.3	17.3	15.8	14.4	18.6
<b>MSI/PNM</b>	18.5	16.3	11.6	11.0	7.5	6.7	7.8	5.3	3.9	3.5

Source: Regional Council of Sardinia and Istituto Cattaneo

The Left in Sardinia has not always been supportive of demands for autonomy. During the 1940s, both the Socialist Party (PSI) and Communist Party (PCI) were stolidly against giving autonomy to the regions, as this was perceived as being detrimental to the goals of creating a centralised, unitary state. As Cento Bull (1997: 2) points out, the Communists and Socialists 'were suspicious of any form of federalism in case it promoted reactionary political tendencies at the periphery'. However, in the Sardinian branch of the PCI there also existed a

'tepid autonomist position' (Sotgiu, 1996: 31) that acknowledged the specificity of Sardinian identity, history and traditions. For some party members, the party did not go far enough in recognising the unique identity of Sardinia and in 1944 Antonio Cassita broke away and established the *Partito Comunista Sardo*. The PCS sought to create 'a Federal Socialist Republic in which Sardinia will be inserted as an Autonomous Sardinian Republic' (cited in Mattone, 1982: 29). Its position helped force the hand of the PCI, which moved towards supporting a more 'moderate regionalism' (Melis, 1982: 34), but the ambiguity in its territorial goals remained. Its main challenge was to integrate those Sards who were sympathetic to the ideals of Communism but who also wanted to give autonomy a class-based interpretation. But it could not make 'autonomism' synonymous with communism, as many right-wing Sards supported autonomy and, moreover, demands for special recognition were antithetical to the Marxist interpretation of class struggle. For this reason, the PCI had to officially oppose 'particularism', and any measures that could unite Sardinians against the Italian state.

In the immediate post-war period, the Socialist Party seemed equally hostile to Sardinian autonomy. The Cagliari branch of the PSI was convinced that socialism would answer the problems of ethnic difference by levelling them (Pintore 1996: 9), which would thwart the domino effect of regional demands leading to independence, and prevent the demise of Italy. Yet the party was soon forced to reconsider this position when Lussu's breakaway party, the Socialist Sardinian Party of Action, joined the Italian Socialists in 1949. It sought to change the PSI's views on the regional question, and to some extent succeeded: 'the entrance of the socialist sardisti accelerated the process, already begun, of the conversion of the party to the idea of autonomy' (Contu, 1992: 29). Furthermore, following the rise of the neo-sardism movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the PCI and PSI in Sardinia were both forced to re-evaluate their positions on the regional question (Ortu, 1998: 87). This was in part motivated by a concern that their resistance to reforms safeguarding the Sard language and teaching of Sard history would lose them electoral support. It was also motivated by statewide factors: in the 1970s, regional governments had been established elsewhere in Italy. This was an initiative of the PSI/DC/PCI government that carried through the reforms promised in the 1948 Constitution, resulting in Italy becoming a 'regional state' (Clark, 1984: chap. 18).

The PCI became the main beneficiary of increased representation in decentralised institutions in the central belt, making it more open-minded to claims for autonomy. But this was 'autonomy' of a particular kind: for instance, the PCI opposed the creation of *zona franca* and insisted that the regional authorities must be empowered to draw up and execute a new set

of economic development programmes so that Sardinia could 'catch up' with the rest of Italy (Ortu, 1998: 80; Accardo, 1998: 130). The PSI took a similar stance, arguing for a more effective exercise of current regional powers, rather than more powers (Accardo, 1998: 133). The Left maintained that the previous plans of rebirth had failed because of the DC regional elite's misuse of authority and argued that they would better use the resources available to increase the welfare of the Sardinian people (Ballero, 1985). They got their chance when a coalition of the Psd'Az, PCI and PSI was elected to government in 1981-2 and 1984-89. But even the Left was unable to overturn Sardinia's ailing economy or to break its dependence on the state, and the failure of the government's reforms incited voters to call the DC back into government in 1989. The political climate of frustration with the local political classes, their patronage, clientelistic networks, lack of vision and failure to improve the welfare of the Sard people, would soon hit crisis point, though for extra-Sardinian reasons.

### *Electoral System Change*

In the early 1990s, the Italian political system underwent a meltdown. A group of judges in Milan uncovered widespread corruption amongst the highest-ranking members of government in the DC and Socialist Parties, a phenomenon since called *Tangentopoli* ('bribesville'). The Christian Democrats and Socialist Party were dissolved, which was followed by the break up of the Communist Party after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The PCI was succeeded by handful of smaller parties divided along complex ideological lines. Following the collapse of the old political system, a mixed majoritarian-PR electoral system was introduced in 1993, designed to reduce fragmentation. The result was a less fractionalised and bi-polar party system, based around competition between a centre-left coalition and a centre-right one (see Table 3). This has put Sardinian nationalist and regionalist parties in a precarious situation: unless they join one of the two ideological alliances dominating Italian politics – Romani Prodi's centre-left Olive/Union coalition (becoming the 'Democratic Party' in 2007) or Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right House/Pole of Liberty (becoming the 'People of Freedom' party in 2009) – they are squeezed out of the elections (see Table 3 for electoral results 1994-2009). However, the response of Sardinia's nationalist and regionalist parties to the creation of bipolar politics in Italy has differed greatly. Whilst the Psd'Az has continued its tradition of seeking accommodation within the left or right Italian party families (by joining Prodi's Olive coalition in 1996, and Berlusconi's People of Liberty party in an electoral alliance in 2009), the smaller parties have refused to offer any support to parties that appear to be directly or indirectly controlled from Rome.

**Table 3: Regional Electoral Performance of Sardinian Parties, 1994-2009 (% of votes)**

	<b>1994</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>
<b>Centre-Right*</b>	32.2	29.6	22.3	30.2
<b>Centre-Left**</b>	18.1	14.2	31.8	24.8
<b>Psd'Az</b>	5.1	4.5	3.8	4.3
<b>Other Regionalists***</b>	3.4	1.77	1.13	4.9

Source: Istituto Cattaneo and Roux (2006)

\*Centre-right: Forza Italia/Msi-Dn/AN/People of Freedom

\*\*Centre-left: Pds/DS/Margherita/Progetto Sardegna/Democratic Party

\*\*\*Other regionalists: Sardinia Nazione/ Lega Nord/Lega Sarda/ IRS/Movement for Autonomy

Being small 'non-ideological' parties, the Pds'Az and SN were damaged by the reform of the electoral law in 1993. On the eve of the decision to create a majoritarian political system in Italy, following the report of the Bicameral Commission charged with electoral reform, members of *Sardigna Nazione* travelled to Rome to demonstrate against what they perceived to be a deliberate attempt to destroy the smaller parties in Italy. As their demands went unheard, the SN was forced to develop an alternative strategy to deal with the restrictions that the new system imposed on them: the creation of a 'nationalist pole' in Sardinian party politics that countered the centre-left and centre-right alliances. The SN was committed to a 'principle of non-collaboration' with any local or national political party that was under Italian control. Instead, its main collaborators were local civic groups and nationalist and regionalist parties elsewhere in Europe, particularly in Corsica. Yet the introduction of the majoritarian political system in Italy forced the SN to look for new electoral partners. At first, the party eschewed any partnership with the Pds'Az, the most obvious candidate, due to the latter's tendency to ally itself to statewide parties. In the 1999 regional elections, the SN formed a coalition with the tiny Sardinian Pastoral Movement and the Sardinian Nationalist Movement which was called *Mesa de sos sardos liberos*. The coalition gained 1.9% in the provincial election of 1999. This poor result caused the party to wonder whether it should form a broader 'nationalist bloc' with the Pds'Az, which would have gained the list 10% in the provincial list. The SN believed that the nationalist project would be strengthened if the parties demanding national self-determination came together to form a strategic alliance.

As a result, Sardinia's principal nationalist and regionalist parties attempted a strategy of 'depolarisation' – that is, their self-exclusion from a particular ideological stance, and their creation of a third 'autonomist pole' in Sardinian politics to compete with the Italian centre-left and centre-right coalitions. The Psd'Az and SN entered a 'strategic relationship' in 2001 by forming a coalition called '*Indipendentzia*' to contest the regional elections. This was the first nationalist alliance of its kind in Sardinia. In the '*Indipendentzia*' list, the parties compromised on a number of issues, though they found common ground on others. The parties rejected what it perceived to be the 'false federalism' being pushed by the *Lega Nord*. Instead they endorsed the idea of creating a Europe of the Peoples, but agreed that this should be only as a stepping stone to the independence of Sardinia within a European federal or confederal construct (Indipendentzia, 2001). They also reinforced their commitment to working within the Conference of Nations without States and the European Free Alliance (EFA) to lobby the draft European constitution to include recognition of 'the right to independence by stateless nations' (Indipendentzia, 2001: 1). On policy matters, the Indipendentzia programme called for fiscal autonomy, territorial control and recognition of the Sard language. In the run-up to the election, Giacomo Sanno, Secretary of the Psd'Az said that 'The Independence list represents the real novelty in the elections. It is an historic moment that has united two spirits, one that is young and another that is old, that have found unity. Through coming together, they channel the desire of the nationalist force to bring the nation to independence. The way it has developed so far, autonomy no longer makes any sense' (*L'Unione Sarda*, 22 April 2001). However, the decision of the Psd'Az and SN party leaders to join forces was not as enthusiastically welcomed by the Sardinian electorate: whilst in 1996, the parties, taken separately, had obtained 6.1% of the Sardinian vote in Italian statewide elections, in the 2001 statewide elections, the Indipendentzia list won only 3.4% of the vote (whilst during the 1999 regional elections, the Psd'Az – standing alone – was able to take a more significant 4.5% of the vote).

Soon thereafter, the parties decided to break their alliance and hopes for the creation of a 'nationalist pole' dwindled. The socialist wing of SN broke away to form a new party – the IRS – due to the failed collaboration with what it considered to be the 'traitorous' Psd'Az. Since then, the IRS has flatly refused to engage in any type of alliance with the other nationalist or statewide parties, as this might compromise its radical goals for the creation of an independent republic of Sardinia. Meanwhile, Antonio Delitalia, Vice-Secretary of the Psd'Az, admitted that it had been 'an error not joining the Olive coalition' (*La Nuova Sardegna*, 17 May 2001). Following the disastrous result, the Psd'Az did indeed join the

Union alliance, and later, an electoral list with the Sardinian Project. However, this left-nationalist alliance was not to last, and in the 2009 regional elections the Psd'Az abandoned any leftist pretence by entering a pre-electoral alliance and then a coalition government at the regional level, with the right-wing *Forza Italia Sarda* and *Alleanza Nazionale (L'Unione Sarda*, 9 January 2009). This caused serious reverberations throughout the party, with one group of leftist members forming a splinter group *Rosso mori*. Ideological incoherence has always been the 'achilles heel' of the Psd'Az (Hepburn, 2009).

### *A Centre Left—Nationalist Fusion? The Birth of the Sardinian Project*

The advent of a broad centre-left autonomist alliance in 2002, headed by the media communications baron Renato Soru, marked an important change in Sardinian territorial politics. The Sardinia Project (*Il Progetto Sardegna*) began its life not as a 'party' but as a coalition, including representatives from outside politics – predominantly from academia, industry and civil society – as well as centre-left parties. Its party members included *Sinistra Federalista Sarda* (DS), *La Margherita*, *Udeur*, *Italia dei Valori*, *Socialisti Democratici Italiani*, *Partito Comunista Rifondazione* (RC), *Comunisti Italiani* (PCI) and *i Verdi* (Greens). Whilst the Psd'Az was not an official member of the coalition, it stood as part of the PS list in the regional elections in 2004. That year, the PS entered office in Cagliari, becoming at first a parliamentary group, and then transforming itself into a political party called the *Partito Democratico Sardo* (Sardinian Democratic Party) in 2007. The creation of the PS was a result of both statewide and regional factors. At the statewide level, the creation of a more bipolar electoral system forced parties on the left and right to form alliances – and in Sardinia this took a particularly regionalist guise, as one of the main goals of the Project was to secure greater autonomy for Sardinia. The Project also followed the Italian trend of giving a strong leadership role to someone who was not a professional politician. Renato Soru, the media communications baron and multi-millionaire, in many ways had much in common with *Forza Italia's* Silvio Berlusconi, though they came from different sides of the political spectrum. There were also regional factors at play too. The success of the Sardinia Project may largely be interpreted as a reaction to the old regional political class, which, in the eyes of many Sardinians, has permeated the corruption of the pre-Tangentopoli era through clientelism and patronage, and has deliberately maintained the stagnation of the Sardinian economy in order to protect personal business interests.

As a solution, the Project called for an end to the old political class in Sardinia, the 'valorisation' of the Sardinian nation, and the strengthening of its identity, language and

culture as a means of building self-confidence (Sardegna Insieme, 2004: 1). Its initial programme sought to link 'innovation with the preservation of the environment and identity, claiming an ethnic revival of regional politics and increasingly restive with national decisions over the regional territory' (Casula, 2005: 15). The PS also sought to construct a sense of nationhood that was integrated into its socioeconomic programme. The Project's plans included 'saving the coasts' (*Salvacosta*) to increase the potential of tourism, to 'export not emigrate', to protect the environment, cut down on regional government bureaucracy, and underlying all of this, to bolster the Sardinian identity through plans for bilingualism and other cultural initiatives that 'stimulate communications with the outside world' (PS, 2005). These proposals won the support of a large section of the population, as well as the approval of other nationalist and regionalist parties such as *Sardignia Natzione*, which had long battled to protect the island's language.

Indeed, when the Sardinian Project was in office from 2004-9, there was something of a revival of cultural nationalism in Sardinia. This was largely related to the passing of a regional law that makes the Sardinian language official, called 'sa limba sarda comune' (a communal Sardinian language) in 2006. In justifying the law, President Soru argued that 'we are the largest linguistic minority in Italy, however we are the only one that has still not decided to make its language official' (*Il Manifesto*, 26 April 2006). The recognition of Sardinia's most powerful cultural characteristic – its language – encouraged a renaissance in traditional Sardinian dancing, singing and cultural festivals. The renewed pride in *Sardità* (the Sard identity) indicates that the *neo-sardismo* movement of the 1960s, though greatly absorbed over the years, never entirely disappeared. This has forced regional branches of statewide parties to alter their position on nationality-related issues accordingly.

After joining Soru's centre-left coalition in 2002, there were noticeable changes within the Sardinian branches of statewide parties. The Democrats of the Left (DS) more openly favoured the creation of a cooperative federal state in Italy whilst the Sardinian Refounded Communist Party (RC) became an enthusiastic supporter of increased autonomy for the island. On the other side of Italy's political divide, within the Pole of Liberty (renamed House of Liberty in 1996), both *Forza Italia Sarda* and *Alleanza Nazionale* proclaimed to be pro-federalist parties and acknowledged the specificity of Sardinian language, culture and identity. *Forza Italia Sarda*, which came to power as part of a new centre-right 'People of Freedom' party (*Popolo della Libertà*) in coalition with the Psd'Az in the Sardinian regional elections of February 2009 (see Table 3), even perceives Sardinia to constitute a cultural nation. The party has argued that Sardinia's distinct cultural identity should be recognised in

the re-writing of the Sardinian Special Statute, in which they want: 'a restatement of the instruments that strengthen the Sardinian culture, which is an ancient culture, with some particularities in particular in its language, and that could be used as a resource, not only on the social level but also on the economic level'.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, both of the major statewide alliances-turned-parties have moved to the centre ground on the territorial question: endorsing federalism, increased powers for the regions, and the acknowledgement of regional identities.

Due the territorialisation of the statewide parties, and their adoption of a more explicitly 'regionalist' mantle, the Psd'Az was rendered politically insignificant. The party's 'unique selling point' – the demand for self-determination – was no longer unique: it has come to be endorsed by every single other party in Sardinia (though autonomist demands range from devolution to federalism or independence). The Psd'Az no longer 'owned' the issue of territory in party competition, and was forced to compete on this dimension with regional branches of the Italian statewide parties (as well as several other nationalist parties). This is comparable to the fate of the regionalist parties in Belgium, whose worth was spent following the regionalisation of the mainstream parties (Deschouwer, 2009).

### *The challenges of multilevel politics*

As we have seen, statewide parties have adapted to multi-level politics by developing programmes and policies that acknowledge Sardinia's claim to nationhood. This has enabled statewide parties to compete with the nationalists on the territorial dimension. For some parties, such as the Democrats of the Left (DS), this has entailed the adoption of a federal constitution in 2005 and the decentralisation of organisational functions to regional branches, such as internal decision-making, candidate selection, and control over campaigns and policy (Detterbeck and Hepburn, 2009). In Sardinia, the DS joined the Sardinia Project in 2002, which became the Sardinian Democratic Party in 2007. More centralised party organisations, such as the *Allenza Nazionale* and *Forza Italia*, have also devolved a degree of policy autonomy to the Sardinian branches. This indicates that Sardinian branches of Italian parties have adapted their internal organisations and policy goals to multi-level politics. Statewide parties are no longer able to pursue a common political objective across the entire territory of Italy – instead, they have differentiated their strategies to the regional context.

But how have Sardinian nationalist and regionalist parties reacted to the development of multi-level politics, the creation of different playing fields, and the adaptation of statewide party strategies to new territorial configurations? Historically, the Psd'Az has concentrated on both the Sardinian and Italian political levels as part of its vision of creating a federal Italy.

Hence the *Partito Sardo* engaged in coalitions with the Christian Democrats and the Left during the postwar period as part of a strategy of trying to influence these parties to adopt more pro-autonomy positions on the Italian and Sardinian levels. The Psd'Az also dabbled in alliances with other nationalist and regionalist parties at the Italian level. Despite twenty years of consistently allying itself to centre-left parties and alliances, in 2006 the Psd'Az generated surprise by entering a coalition with the populist right-wing *Lega Nord* and the Sicilian-based *Movimento per l'Autonomia* in the 2006 national elections, called the 'Pact for the Autonomies' (*Patto per le autonomie*). This strategy was in part motivated by the failure of the Psd'Az to successfully align itself with *Sardignia Natzione* in 2001, and its refusal to become part of Renato Soru's Sardinian Democratic Party in 2007. Instead, the Psd'Az had hoped to elect a member to the Senate by creating an Italian 'autonomist pole' that transcended ideological divisions. This plan backfired and the party's electoral support dwindled, forcing the party to go back to the drawing board to figure out how to survive bipolar politics. As mentioned above, this resulted in a pre-electoral deal with the right-wing *Forza Italia Sarda* in 2009.

Aside from this failed endeavour at the statewide level, the Psd'Az since the early 1980s has been firmly committed to engagement at the European level. As we saw earlier, the party was successful in electing Mario Melis to the European Parliament in the 1980s, it was a founding member of the European Free Alliance, and the Psd'Az also established a number of formal and informal linkages with other nationalist and regionalist parties in Europe. However, the Psd'Az has also encountered some problems in playing the multi-level game. For instance, in the early 1990s the Psd'Az had again sought to create links with the *Lega Nord* in an attempt to create a nationalist opposition to Roman centralism and 'partitocrazia' (Accardo 1998: 134). In 1993, representatives of the two parties met to discuss tactics. However, this alliance did not last long, in part because the LN had developed such a Eurosceptical and xenophobic position that it was banned from the European Free Alliance in 1994 – an organisation that the Psd'Az held in high regard. Yet although the Psd'Az was careful to distance itself from the fiasco, and from the *Lega* itself, in order to protect its civic nationalist reputation in Europe, the Psd'Az in fact renewed its links with Bossi in a statewide electoral alliance in 2006, which cast into doubt its pro-European credentials and undermined its platform as a socially progressive party. Furthermore, by boycotting the European elections in 2009 in order to raise awareness of the serious issue of Sardinia's lack of direct representation in the European parliament, the Psd'Az has also risked being seen as an anti-European party.

The other nationalist and regionalist parties have also made efforts to adapt to multi-level politics by including a European dimension in their constitutional goals, though they continue to denounce any involvement in Italian politics. The SN and IRS have viewed Sardinia's participation in an integrating Europe as a way of lessening, if not outright severing, the island's relations with (and dependence on) the Italian state. *Sardignia Natzione* is active at the European level, although it prefers working outside the 'official' institutions of the EU. For instance, the SN has developed bilateral contacts with other nationalist and regionalist parties in the Mediterranean, in particular with *Corsica Natzione*. However, the SN has also experienced problems in playing the multi-level game. The SN has been involved in an alliance with the Basque party *Herri Batasuna* – a radical Europhobic party with a terrorist wing fighting for the national independence of the Basque Country. *Herri Batasuna* agreed to 'represent' the SN in the European Parliament in 1999-2004 when Sardinia did not have a representative. This relationship indicates a certain naivety on the part of the SN, which does not endorse violence in its struggle for self-determination, and which sees the EU as an imperfectly formed but potentially beneficial structure for Sardinian territorial claims. Meanwhile, the newest nationalist party, *Indipendentzia Republica de Sardigna*, is also involved in European activities but works outside the 'mainstream' networks, such as organising demonstrations and meetings of the European Social Forum. Like the SN, it subscribes to the doctrine of independence in Europe and has made alliances with the Scottish Socialist Party, the Catalan ERC, *Corsica Natzione* and also *Herri Batsuna*.

The development of multi-level governance has therefore created a number of challenges and opportunities for parties in Sardinia. Whilst the Italian statewide parties have all 'levelled-down' their strategies by strengthening the regional branch to enable them to compete with the nationalist parties and to endorse a stronger form of autonomy, the nationalist parties have 'levelled-up' their strategies by pursuing their constitutional goals in the European sphere. This has created some problems for the parties in trying to integrate their regionalist, state and European goals and rhetoric. For instance, the Psd'Az' leftist pro-European credentials did not sit well with a statewide alliance with the Europhobic right-wing populist Lega Nord. Also, the SN's commitment to peaceful resistance to capitalism was contradicted by its European alliance with the pro-violence *Herri Batasuna*. There are also some strategic differences within the nationalist movement. Whilst the Psd'Az has pursued opportunities to have an impact at the Italian statewide level (through its strategic partnerships with statewide parties and other nationalist and regionalist parties in Italy), the SN and IRS eschew participation in Italian statewide politics altogether. As the smaller nationalist parties

both reject any alliances with Italian parties, Europe has provided a welcome arena in which to pursue a common cause with like-minded socialist-republican nationalist and regionalist parties.

## Conclusion

This contribution has explored the rise and fall of Sardinian nationalism, and the failure of the Psd'Az to become a relevant political player at the regional, state or European levels. It has argued that understanding the *failure* of regional mobilization tells us a great deal about the structural factors, and strategic choices, that are required for success. In the case of Sardinia, several factors were identified that led to the decline of the Psd'Az. These included the party's inability to firmly position itself on the left-right divide, its failure to compete with rival nationalist and regionalist parties and regional branches of statewide parties on the centre-periphery dimension (which resulted in its territorial goals being adopted elsewhere), its highly erratic choice of coalition partners at the regional, state and European levels (whereby an association with the *Lega Nord* in particular undermined its pro-European and progressive credentials), and its inability to manoeuvre successfully in a bipolar party system. These strategic factors are rarely addressed as conditions for success in regionalist mobilisation in the literature, which has tended to focus on structural constraints and opportunities (see Müller-Rommel, 1998). As such, there is a great deal of scope for developing future research agendas based on these factors to determine the success or failure of regionalist mobilisation in a comparative context. For instance, these factors – ideological incoherence, intra-nationalist competition, territorialisation of statewide parties, bipolar party politics and coalition-making in a multi-level system – could be used to generate testable hypotheses to be evaluated in other cases.

Of particular note, this contribution has emphasized the importance of nationalist and regionalist party competition on the left/right ideological dimension as a determinant of success or failure. The *Partito Sardo d'Azione*, and later the SN and IRS, have pursued several strategies to prioritise territorial demands over the left-right dimension, but none of them have generated any lasting success. The first broad strategy resulted in the 'ideological polarisation' of the nationalist movement whereby the Psd'Az split into left-right ideological camps in 1923 and 1948. A second strategy saw the *Partito Sardo's* ideological re-positioning from one polarity to another in line with its coalition partners – the Christian Democrats, then the Left, and currently the Right. A third strategy was adopted in response to bipolar politics, which represented 'ideological de-polarisation', or an attempt to prioritise the territorial

dimension over ideology as the primary cleavage of party competition. In competition with the centre-left and centre-right camps, the Psd'Az and SN excluded themselves from left-right party competition, instead seeking to create a 'nationalist pole' in Sardinia.

However, this strategy failed due to a number of reasons. First, the nationalist parties were themselves divided (internally and between parties) on a number of key issues – such as constitutional aims, attitudes towards coalitions, and political methods. Second, the statewide parties had outmanoeuvred the nationalists by endorsing an autonomist position across the ideological spectrum. Third, in an era of bipolar politics, the Psd'Az's ideological 'wooliness' became a drawback rather than an advantage in elections. The experience of the Psd'Az therefore largely confirms Freedén's (1998) argument that nationalist parties have to complement their core business – territorial demands – with a clear position on the left-right dimension in order to compete successfully in political systems divided along left-right lines.

The Psd'Az continues to call itself a broad church in which all nationalists are welcome. However, the 'church' has been stretched so far that it has, on more than one occasion, near collapsed. Furthermore, the party's reluctance to develop a comprehensive socioeconomic programme ignores the fact that, in Sardinia, demands for autonomy have been constantly focused, not on greater constitutional rights, but rather on the need to develop the tools necessary to achieve social change and economic modernisation. By refusing to articulate a clear set of social values, Sardinian nationalists have excluded themselves from the ongoing dialogue on the future of Sardinia in Italy and Europe, and by this, have relegated themselves to playing only a minor role in Sardinian political life in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Although there was strong regionalist feeling everywhere in Italy, other autonomist movements were not established until after the Second World War, in Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Venetia and Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol).

<sup>2</sup> From 1718 until 1847, Sardinia had its own separate Kingdom, which was ruled by the House of Savoy. Although the island's autonomy was compromised during the 'political fusion' between Sardinia and the mainland territories in 1847 (Mattone, 1982: 20), Sardinia played an instrumental role in creating the new Italian nation-state in 1861, providing a king to stand as a figurehead of a united Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the four nationalist parties already discussed, there are also another two right-wing nationalist parties in Sardinia: Fortza Paris, which allies itself with the centre-right in elections, and Unione dei Sardi (UDS), headed by ex-President of Sardinia and Leader of the Sardinian DC, Mario Floris. However, these parties are too small, and have too insignificant an impact on Sardinian politics, to merit examination here.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, Cagliari, 23 May 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author, 20 May 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Although the Italian DC was later reluctant to give more powers to the Communist-controlled regional governments of the central Italian 'red belt' (Clark, 1984), in principle the party supported a type of administrative decentralisation.

<sup>7</sup> 'Che Cosa non e la regione', in *Riscossa* 28 August 1944, cited in Clark (1989: 423).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Giorgio La Spisa, Vice-President of Forza Italia Sarda, 23 May 2005.