

Does decentralisation turn minority parties into secessionists? Insights from Eastern and Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Whereas Western European governments have devolved political authority to minority regions, governments in Eastern Europe have shied away from using decentralisation to accommodate national minorities. This article assesses how these differences affect the secessionism of minority parties. The theoretical section argues that both programmatic accommodation (i.e. when governments adopt positions in favour of decentralisation) and institutional accommodation (i.e. when governments create regions that correspond to the settlement areas of minority groups and transfer authority to the regional level) increase the likelihood that minority parties will adopt secessionist positions. Regression analyses of 83 European minority parties show that a higher level of programmatic and institutional accommodation is indeed associated with a higher likelihood of secessionism. However, increases in programmatic accommodation between 2011 and 2017 in fact decrease the likelihood that minority parties turn secessionist when using the method of first differences. Future research should therefore collect panel data on minority parties' positions.

KEYWORDS Secession; decentralisation; territorial autonomy; party politics; Eastern Europe; national minorities

One of the most controversial questions during the Spanish transition to democracy was the status of the Basque, Catalan and Galician minority nations. Franco had tried (and failed) to quash peripheral nationalism through centralisation and repression. The 1978 constitution embarked on the opposite path, initiating a process of decentralisation during which the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia swiftly adopted regional autonomy statutes and built regional institutions. Initially, this led to a moderation of both violent (Basque) and non-violent (Catalan) expressions of

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nationalism (Conversi 2002). Three decades later, however, Convergence and Union (CiU), the then governing alliance of Catalan nationalist parties joined its main competitor, the Republican Left of Catalonia in adopting an openly secessionist stance for the 2012 Catalan elections. Before 2012, CiU had never supported secession (Barrio 2013: 7–9). Now the party was presenting a road map towards an independent Catalan state and promoting a referendum on independence (CiU 2012: 8–16). When the referendum was eventually held in autumn 2017, the conflict between Catalonia and the Spanish state escalated. Was CiU's secessionist turn the result of long-standing decentralised institutions that increased the party's confidence that Catalonia could 'go it alone'? Or did the Catalan nationalists rather respond to recentralisation efforts of the conservative government that had successfully challenged the most recent Catalan statute of autonomy in the Spanish constitutional court?

The transition period following the break-down of the communist regime in Romania did not go hand in hand with a far-reaching decentralisation process aiming to accommodate the country's Hungarian minority. The main political party representing the Hungarian minority, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ), had already formulated its demand for regional autonomy in 1993 (RMDSZ 1993), but the party did not emphasise this goal in the various coalition governments it participated in after 1996. In the early 2000s, with the formation of two new Hungarian minority parties – the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania and the Hungarian Civic Party – competition has emerged for the political representation of the Hungarian minority. While this competition has revived the issue of regional autonomy, none of these Hungarian minority parties has demanded secession. In 2018, the Hungarian parties agreed to cooperate in advancing the territorial autonomy of Székely Land (RMDSZ, MPP, and EMNT 2018). Székely Land is the historical heartland of the Hungarian community, but is currently not recognised as a region¹ (Kiss 2018: 25). In response, Social Democrat Prime Minister Mihai Tudose stated that 'if they hang the Szekler flag on institutions in Szekler Land, the people who fly these flags will hang as well' (Harris 2018). In the same year, RMDSZ submitted a bill on the establishment of the territorial autonomy of Székely Land, which was rejected unanimously by all other parties. The other Romanian parties seem to perceive territorial autonomy as unconstitutional, and fear that it provides incentives for secession. Are these fears justified? Would the Hungarian minority parties radicalise and advocate secession if Székely Land became an official and powerful region like Catalonia?

The literature on decentralisation and secessionism is divided on this question. Two fields have investigated the relationship between

decentralisation and secessionism, the fields of ethnic conflict studies and territorial politics. The ethnic conflict literature has studied the relationship between regional autonomy and secessionist conflicts globally taking regions or ethnic groups as actors. Many studies argue that decentralisation along ethnic lines triggers secessionist conflict. According to these studies, ethnic federalism cannot resolve conflicts between ethnic groups because it institutionalises the division of societies along ethnic lines and provides proto-state institutions for a secessionist project (e.g. Brubaker 1996; Bunce 1997, 1999; Bunce and Watts 2005; Cornell 2002; Deiwiiks *et al.* 2012; Roeder 2007). Other scholars are more optimistic about the stabilising effect of decentralisation. In their view, such arrangements not only reduce grievances, but also function as effective modes of governance in ethnically divided societies (e.g. Gurr 2000; Hechter 2000; Lijphart 1977).

However, neither regions nor minority groups represent unified actors voicing coherent demands (Brubaker 2004). In the field of conflict studies, Brancati (2006) was among the first to call attention to the crucial role of *political parties* in moderating the relationship between decentralisation and secessionist conflict. She used the vote share of *regionalist* parties as an indicator for secessionism, but did so without measuring whether these parties were actually in favour of or against secession. However, not all regionalist parties are secessionists (Massetti and Schakel 2016: 59–60). More recent work has therefore used the vote shares of *separatist* parties as a dependent variable. While some authors found that the vote shares of separatist parties increase under decentralisation (Brancati 2014; Rode *et al.* 2018), Sorens (2004) did not find a significant relationship between changes in regional autonomy and the electoral success of secessionist parties.

In the field of territorial politics, scholars have traditionally emphasised two facts: (1) that multiple parties may aim to represent the interests of a territorially concentrated minority group and/or a peripheral region and (2) that these parties have varying positions. These positions fall on a continuum ranging from moderate demands for decentralisation to the radical goals of secession or irredentism (Alonso 2012; Massetti 2009; Massetti and Schakel 2016; Zuber and Szöcsik 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, only Massetti and Schakel (2016) have investigated whether decentralisation influences parties' positioning on secession. They found a positive association between decentralisation and secessionism in Western Europe. In Western Europe, the effects of regional authority are assessed on countries in which regional boundaries largely coincide with the settlement areas of minority groups. In contrast, most governments in Eastern Europe have shied away from using decentralisation to accommodate national minorities (Bochsler and Szöcsik 2013). Seeking to prevent

the mobilisation of territorial grievances, they have at times deliberately used decentralisation to split regions with strong historical or ethnic identities (Saarts 2019).

The original contribution of this article lies in studying the effects of different levels and modes of decentralisation on parties' secessionism in Eastern and Western European multinational states. We define secessionism as parties' positioning in favour of breaking up the current state, either in order to establish a new, independent state, or in order to join an already existing state.² We are interested in the secessionism of political parties aiming to represent ethnic minority groups with a homeland territory. In the following, we refer to these parties as ethnonational minority parties.³

Section two theorises the effect of decentralisation on secessionism. To this aim, we first differentiate between non-minority parties' programmatic stances in favour of decentralisation (*programmatic accommodation*) and actual institutional reforms shifting political and administrative authority to the regional level, and/or increasing the scope of regional authority (*institutional accommodation*). Second, we argue that institutional accommodation is not only about increasing the power of regions, but also about creating regions that reflect the settlement areas of minority groups. In addition to taking the level of regional authority into account, we therefore differentiate cases where institutionalised regions *coincide* with homelands of minority groups from cases where institutionalised regions *cross-cut* these homelands. We expect that both programmatic accommodation and institutional accommodation increase the likelihood that minority parties adopt secessionist positions. We then present our case selection, data, and empirical strategy in section three, including a descriptive comparison of decentralisation in Eastern and Western Europe. Section four presents the results of the empirical analysis. The analysis makes use of our Expert Survey on Ethnonationalism in Party Competition (EPAC) that covers party positions in six Western, 13 Eastern European democracies, and Turkey in 2011 and 2017 (Szöcsik and Zuber 2015; Zuber and Szöcsik 2019). Estimating logit regressions, we find that a higher *level* of programmatic and institutional territorial accommodation of minority groups is robustly associated with a higher likelihood of minority parties with secessionist positions. However, turning to first-difference estimation, the results highlight that *increases* in programmatic accommodation between 2011 and 2017 in fact *decrease* the likelihood that minority parties adopt secessionist positions. These findings underline the need to collect panel data on minority parties' positions to move from correlational to causal analysis of the effect of decentralisation on secessionism in party competition. Section five concludes the article.

Decentralisation and secessionism

Like the territorial politics literature, we assume that vote-seeking parties contest each other with different proposals for territorial solutions to the centre–periphery conflict in multinational states. In this field, some scholars have focussed on how minority parties respond to the *programmatic* positioning of mainstream or state-wide parties on decentralisation, while others have analysed how minority parties respond to the *institutional* incentives of decentralisation. In what follows, we argue that ethnonational minority parties take both the political context and the institutional status quo into account when choosing a position on secession.

Advancing an argument of *programmatic accommodation*, Meguid (2008) expects that if mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties move closer to the positions of regionalist parties on decentralisation, regionalists lose votes as they lose their unique selling point in the eyes of voters. In later work, Meguid (2015) showed that while this strategy works at the national level, decentralisation allows regionalist parties to grow at the regional level. These insights into the electoral logic of programmatic accommodation are important, yet they disregard parties' positions. Massetti and Schakel (2016) fill this gap when they argue that minority parties are more likely to become separatist the more state-wide parties embrace decentralisation, precisely to mark their distinctiveness from accommodative state-wide parties. In line with this argument, their results for Western Europe show that programmatic accommodation increases the likelihood that regionalist parties will be separatist. Furthermore, it is plausible that minority parties believe that a mainstream party with a decentralist position is more likely to make concessions to the minority than a mainstream party opposing decentralisation. The expected pay-off to be reaped from advocating secession is thus the higher, the more accommodative the positions of mainstream parties are.⁴ On the basis of these arguments, we expect that the more favourably non-nationalist parties position themselves on the issue of granting territorial autonomy to minorities, the more likely it is minority parties will adopt secessionist positions. We further expect that it matters whether the parties accommodating minority demands are included in the central government. Governing parties can transform their programmatic promises into policy change and initiate decentralisation reforms. Based on these arguments, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1a: Programmatic accommodation, non-nationalist parties: The more in favour of territorial autonomy for minorities non-nationalist parties in the national parliament are, the more likely it is that ethnonational minority parties demand secession.

H1b: Programmatic accommodation, governing parties: The more in favour of territorial autonomy for minorities the governing parties are, the more likely it is that ethnonational minority parties demand secession.

The long-standing argument behind *institutional accommodation* is that the establishment of representative and executive institutions at the regional level provides the resources for minority parties to seek independence (Brancati 2006). Regional institutions can serve as proto-state institutions, and therefore facilitate the creation of an independent state and make the secessionist project more viable (Bunce 1997). Minority parties and politicians are empowered by legislative and executive regional institutions, gain governing experience and can lay legitimate claim to the leadership of an independence movement (Roeder 2007). In this sense, territorial self-government can serve as a springboard for secessionist demands (Kymlicka 1998; Rode et al. 2018: 162). However, this argument has rarely been tested in a systematic manner. Massetti and Schakel (2016) again stand out for showing that decentralising institutional reforms increase the likelihood of secessionist positioning among regionalist parties in Western Europe. On this basis, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Level of autonomy: Higher levels of regional autonomy increase the likelihood that ethnonational minority parties demand secession.

The debate about institutional accommodation tends to centre around the question of whether and if so, how much authority is granted to a region. However, another important choice is whether the boundaries of the newly created territorial units correspond to the settlement areas of national minorities. As Kymlicka has argued, ‘federalism can only serve as a mechanism for self-government if the national minority forms a majority in one of the federal subunits, as the Québécois do in Quebec’ (1995: 29). The boundaries of regions have to be drawn in a way that turns state-wide minorities into regional majorities. This ensures that members of minority groups are represented by a regional government expected to take decisions in their interest.

In the case of Eastern Europe, the question of boundaries has been of particular importance. In the ethno-federal system of Yugoslavia, the boundaries of the autonomous republics had ensured the dominance of each of the countries’ constituent nations in one republic. The violent break-up, however, disqualified the territorial accommodation of minority demands in the eyes of the governments of the Yugoslav successor states. Apart from the federal intermezzo of the Union of Serbia and Montenegro that came to an end when Montenegro declared independence in 2006, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the international community pushed for a complex federal model to end civil war, the

Yugoslav successor states turned away from creating ethno-territorial autonomies. The break-up of ethno-federal Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia was peaceful, but similarly centralised political authority. The other countries of Eastern Europe emerged from communism with highly centralised structures of government already in place. The Baltic countries and Bulgaria subsequently decentralised at the local level, but never introduced institutions of regional self-government. The remaining countries introduced regional institutions, however, not to accommodate minorities' demands for territorial self-government (Brusis 2002; Saarts 2019; Schakel 2017: 311–5). To the contrary, regional boundaries were in some cases deliberately drawn to split up historical, or ethnic homeland regions.⁵ For example, in Slovakia, the nationalist Mečiar government created regional boundaries that split up the historical homeland of the Hungarian minority in 1996. This initial choice as well as the 2001 reform disregarded Hungarian parties' demands for a coinciding region in the country's South-West (Rybář and Spáč 2017: 241–4). In addition to the strategic splitting of minority regions, European integration and the possibility to access EU cohesion funds have been a major catalyst for reforms creating meso-level political and administrative institutions across Eastern Europe (Brusis 2002). In most Eastern European countries, the boundaries of regions have therefore been designed neither according to historic regions nor with respect to ethnic affiliations (Brusis 2002: 551; see also Saarts 2019; Schakel 2017: 311–5).

Eastern European realities thus necessitate theorising the incentives that coinciding and non-coinciding regions offer for the strategic choices of ethnonational minority parties. While it certainly matters how much authority a region receives, it is also relevant whether an institutionalised region overlaps with or cross-cuts the minority group's homeland. It is only in the case of overlap that decentralisation provides institutional resources for secession. We argue that for this overlap to exist, two conditions need to be fulfilled: (1) the majority of the institutionalised region's population identifies with an ethnic minority group; (2) the majority of individuals identifying with this minority group in the country lives in that same institutionalised region. If neither or only one of these conditions applies, granting more authority to the region does not increase incentives for secessionist positioning of minority parties. If the first condition fails to apply, even if the share of a minority group is significant in a region, the parties representing the minority will need to cooperate with parties representing the majority or other minorities. In particular, in such a case, the formation of a regional government uniquely representing the minority group is highly unlikely. Parties representing the minority will be in the opposition unless they try to attract votes from other

groups. In such a scenario, secessionism becomes less attractive as an electoral strategy. If the second condition fails to apply, institutionalised region and minority homeland cross-cut each other. In this case, regional institutions do not support the emergence of a unified political leadership of the ethnic minority (Roeder 2007). Therefore, in this case regional institutions do not facilitate secessionist demands. The following hypothesis takes this reasoning into account:

H3: Coinciding vs. non-coinciding region: Ethnonational minority parties representing groups settled in a coinciding institutionalized region are more likely to demand secession than ethnonational minority parties representing groups settled in non-coinciding institutionalized regions.

Case selection, data and method

To compile a set of ethnonational minority parties, we draw on the second round of the Ethnonationalism in Party Competition (EPAC) expert survey that covers ethnonational minority parties' stances on secession in 2017 (Zuber and Szöcsik 2019). The dataset covers parties in all European democracies where at least one ethnic group is considered to be politically relevant by the Ethnic Power Relations dataset project (EPR-ETH) (Vogt et al. 2015).⁶ Minority parties were included in the expert survey if desk research provided initial evidence that they appeal to a group included in the EPR-ETH project, and if they had gained at least one seat in the national parliament in the most recent parliamentary elections, or at least one seat and at least 3% of the subnational votes in at least one region in the last regional elections (as of September 2016).⁷ In addition, the survey covered non-minority parties that gained at least 7% of the vote in the most recent state-wide parliamentary election. Party position estimates were obtained from between 4 and 19 experts per country. The initial classification of parties as minority parties was validated by asking experts whether each of the included parties aimed to represent an (ethno)national group in politics. Parties were only selected for the analysis if a qualified majority of experts answered this question in the affirmative. This led to a sample consisting of 83 parties aiming to represent 43 groups in 22 countries.

To measure *secessionism*, the dependent variable, we use a question that asks experts for a party's preferred territorial model:

In multinational states, parties may have different positions on which territorial model best suits a multinational society. Please indicate whether any of the parties explicitly support any of the following territorial models (1–7), or tick 'other' if a party explicitly supports any other territorial model not included in the list.

1. unitary state
2. decentralisation
3. decentralisation on ethnic basis
4. symmetrical federalism, where all regions have equal rights
5. asymmetrical federalism, where a national minority region has more rights than other regions
6. independence for a national minority region
7. annexation of the national minority region by another state.

The dummy variable *secessionism* takes the value 1 if a majority of experts ticked ‘independence’ (6) or ‘annexation’ (7). In cases where there was more than one most frequent answer category, and categories 6 or 7 were among them, we also coded the party as secessionist. The reasoning was that secessionist parties may present ambiguous positions to the public for strategic reasons (Masseti and Schakel 2016: 63). This may lead experts to be divided on whether the party is in favour of secession or not.

Table 1 shows which minority parties had secessionist positions in 2017 and provides information on their electoral strength at the national and regional level in the latest election prior to 2017. Out of the total of 83 ethnonational minority parties, 22 had a secessionist position in 2017. Out of these, 7 are located in Eastern, and 15 in Western Europe.

Turning to the independent variables, *programmatic accommodation* is measured with two variables, allowing us to test whether minority parties’ positions are related to the party system as a whole, or instead to the parties in government that could also deliver on institutional reform.⁸ *Party system accommodation* is the average position of parties represented in the national parliament that were neither identified as minority nationalist, nor as majority nationalist on the question of whether territorial autonomy should be granted to national minorities, with positions of parties weighted by seat share. *Government accommodation* is the average position of parties governing at the national level on the same question, with positions of parties weighted by their share of government seats. The scale ranges from 0 (strongly against territorial autonomy) to 10 (strongly in favour of territorial autonomy). We draw on the 2011 edition of EPAC to calculate these measures, assuming that minority parties’ positions in 2017 reflect their strategic responses to programmatic accommodation at an earlier point in time.

Figure 1 displays programmatic accommodation for Eastern and Western European cases. The box plots show that Eastern European party systems and governments are less accommodative when it comes to the question of whether national minorities should receive self-governing rights on a territorial basis. The only Eastern European countries where governments had a position in favour of territorial autonomy for

Table 1. Secessionist ethnonational minority parties in 2017.

Party name	Party name in English	Group	Country	National vote share	Year national election	Regional vote share	Year regional election
Vlaams Belang	Flemish Interest	Flemings	Belgium	3.7	2014	5.9	2014
Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie	New Flemish Alliance	Flemings	Belgium	20.2	2014	31.9	2014
Corsica Libera	Free Corsica	Corsicans	France	–	2012	7.8	2015
Süd-Tiroler Freiheit	South Tyrolean Freedom	South Tyroleans	Italy	–	2013	7.2	2013
BürgerUnion	Union for South Tyrol	South Tyroleans	Italy	–	2013	2.1	2013
Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC)	Democratic Convergence of Catalonia	Catalans	Spain	2.3	2015	39.6 (with ERC)	2015
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)	Republican Left of Catalonia	Catalans	Spain	2.4	2015	39.6 (with CDC)	2015
Candidatura d'Unitat Popular	Popular Unity Candidacy	Catalans	Spain	–	2015	8.2	2015
Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència	Catalan Solidarity for Independence	Catalans	Spain	–	2015	–	
Alternativa Galega de Esquerda	Galician Alternative of the Left	Galicians	Spain	–	2015	14.3	2012
Bloque Nacionalista Galego	Galician Nationalist Block	Galicians	Spain	–	2015	7	2012
Euskal Herria Bildu	Basque Country Unite	Basques	Spain	0.9	2015	25	2012
Sinn Fein	Sinn Fein	Catholic Irish	UK	0.6	2015	24	2016
Social Democratic & Labour Party	Social Democratic & Labour Party	Catholic Irish	UK	0.3	2015	12	2016
Plaid Cymru	The Party of Wales	Welsh	UK	0.6	2015	20.5	2016
Scottish National Party	Scottish National Party	Scots	UK	4.7	2015	46.5	2016
Hrvatska stranka prava BiH	Croatian Party of Rights of BiH	Croats	BiH	0.6	2014	0.7	2014
Srpska demokratska stranka (SDS)	Serbian Democratic Party	Serbs	BiH	32.7	2014	26.3 (with PUP-SRS)	2014
Srpska Radikalna Stranka RS (SRS)	Serb Radical Party of RS	Serbs	BiH	5.7	2014	26.3 (with SDS-PUP)	2014
Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata	Alliance of Independent Socialist Party	Serbs	BiH	38.5	2014	32.2	2014
Socijalistička partija	Socialist Party	Serbs	BiH	2.9	2014	5.1	2014

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Party name	Party name in English	Group	Country	National vote share	Year national election	Regional vote share	Year regional election
Partia Demokratike Shqiptare	Democratic Party of Albanians	Albanians	Serbia	–	–	–	–
Srpska Lista	Serbian List	Serbs	Kosovo	5.2	2014	–	–

Notes:

Regional election results for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) refer to the entity level. Results for the Croat party are for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the relevant entity for the Serb parties is Republika Srpska.

There are no directly elected regional assemblies in Kosovo.

The Democratic Party of Albanians (Serbia) and Catalan Solidarity for Independence (Spain) are included despite not fulfilling the criterion of relevance in 2017 because they had been included in the 2011 expert survey.

If elections were contested in an electoral alliance with another party also included in the expert survey, the result is the joint result and the alliance partner is indicated in brackets.

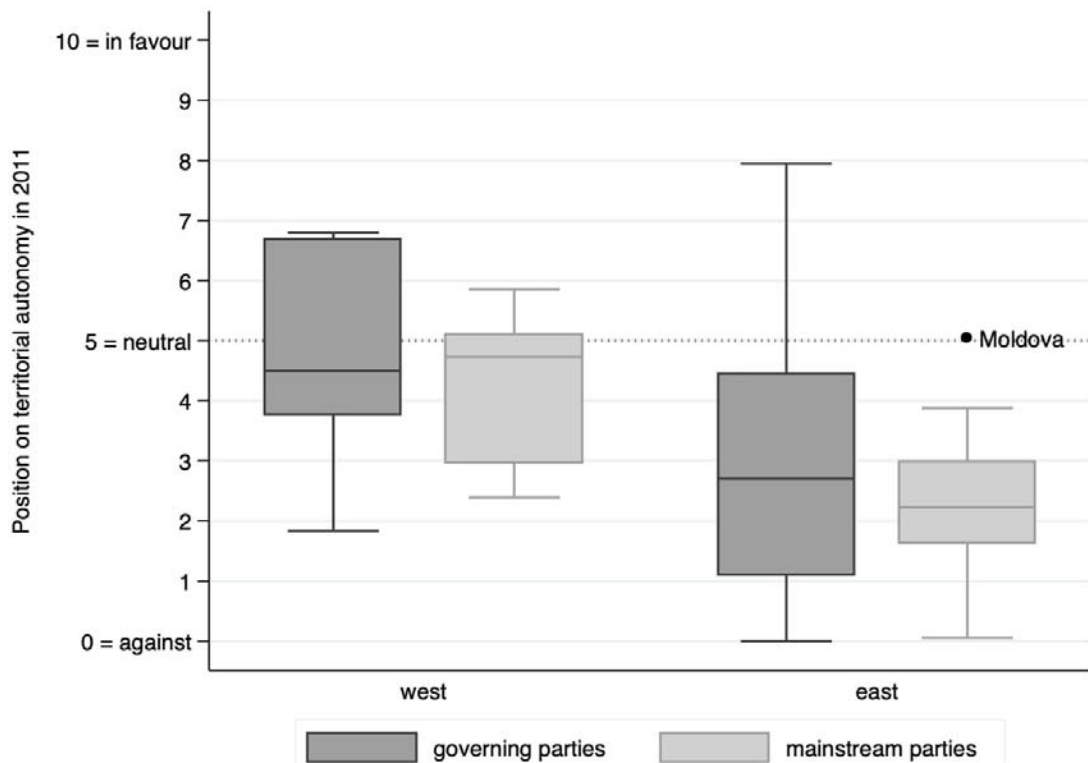


Figure 1. Programmatic accommodation in Eastern and Western Europe.

minorities were Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine. Governments in Estonia and Bulgaria were maximally opposed to territorial autonomy.

The *level of regional authority* is measured by the level of self-rule that the central government guarantees a region. We rely on the measurement of regional self-rule from the regional authority index (RAI) dataset (Hooghe *et al.* 2016).⁹ The self-rule index has five components: institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy, borrow autonomy, and representation, and it ranges from 0 to 18.¹⁰ We measure the variable in 2010, the latest year for which RAI data is available.

Figure 2 displays box plots for the level of self-rule. The plots show that the level of self-rule enjoyed by regions is much lower in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina defies this Eastern European pattern, with a value of 16 (for Republika Srpska), and exceeds all Western European countries on regional self-rule.

To measure whether regions coincide with or cross-cut the settlement areas of the national minorities the selected parties seek to represent, we defined two necessary conditions. The variable *coinciding* takes the value 1 if both of these conditions are met and 0 otherwise. First, more than 50% of an institutionalised region's population identifies as belonging to the minority group. Second, at least 50% of the total number of people identifying with that national minority group in a given country live in that same institutionalised region. An institutionalised region can only serve as a springboard for secession if both conditions are fulfilled.

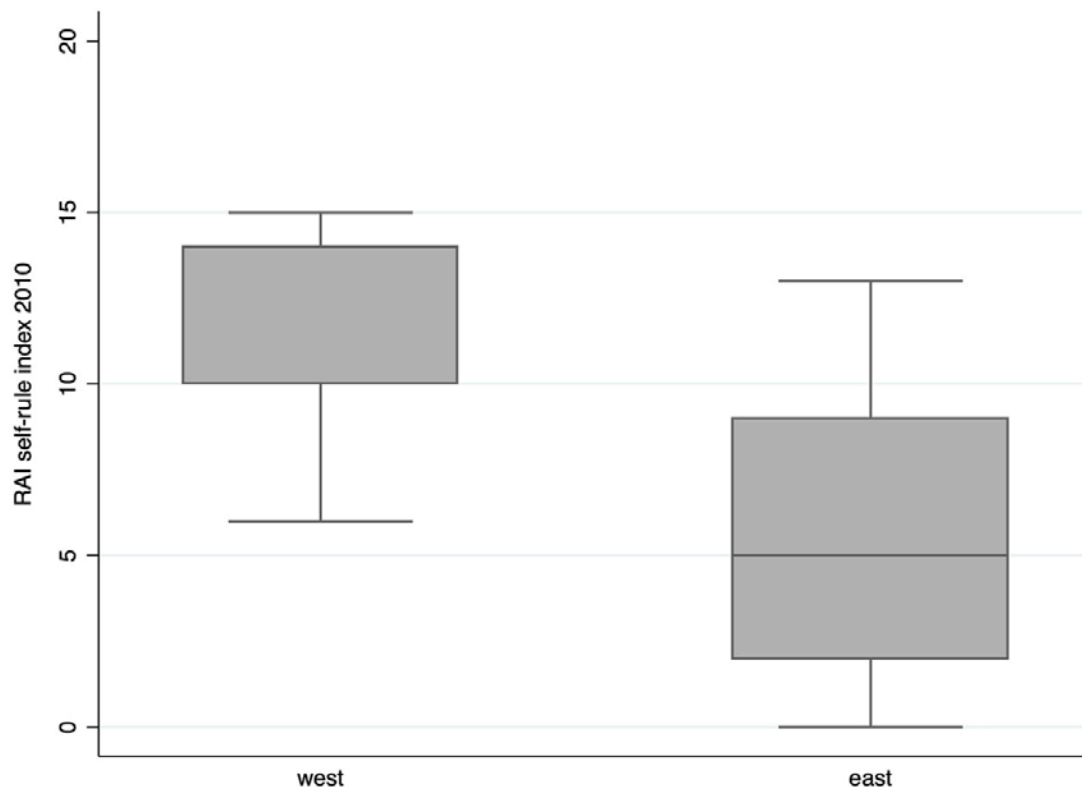


Figure 2. Institutional accommodation in Eastern and Western Europe.

Returning to our introductory examples, in the case of Catalonia both conditions are met. Hungarians in Romania satisfy only the first condition. While the Hungarians represent the majority in two counties – in Harghita and Covasna – the majority of Hungarians in Romania lives outside of these two regions.

To identify relevant institutionalised regions, we rely again on the regional authority index (Hooghe *et al.* 2016). To measure the share of the minority population inside and outside an institutionalised region, we rely on the following data sources in descending order, depending on availability: (1) ethnic or national identification using census data, (2) ethnic or national identification using survey data, (3) census data on language use, (4) expert knowledge, (5) secondary literature and (6) Wikipedia (see [Supplementary material](#), Appendix B).¹¹

Table 2 shows that in Western Europe, minority groups have often successfully fought to have autonomy granted to a region that coincides with their settlement patterns and/or their historical autonomies. Only Swedes on the Finnish mainland do not predominantly live in one institutionalised region where they represent the regional majority, and Aostans (French speakers) do not constitute the majority of the regional population in Italy's Aosta Valley. In all the other multinational Western European countries, the boundaries of institutionalised regions correspond to the settlement areas of the national minorities.

Table 2. Groups settling in coinciding vs. non-coinciding regions in Eastern and Western Europe.

	Coinciding regions	Non-coinciding regions
Eastern Europe	Serbs/BiH Serbs/Kosovo	Croats/BiH Turkish/Bulgaria Serbs/Croatia Bosniaks/Croatia Bosniaks/Kosovo Gorani/Kosovo Turks/Kosovo Russians/Latvia Poles/Lithuania Russians/Lithuania Albanians/Macedonia Serbs/Macedonia Turks/Macedonia Albanians/Montenegro Bosniaks/Montenegro Serbs/Montenegro Hungarians/Romania Germans/Romania Albanians/Serbia Bosniaks/Serbia Hungarians/Slovakia
Western Europe	Flemings/Belgium German-speakers/Italy Catalans/Spain Galicians/Spain Scots/UK Welsh/UK	Swedish speakers/Mainland Finland Aostans (French speakers)/Italy

Note: Data on the number of Corsican and Basque speakers living outside the Basque Country and Corsica and data for the number of Northern Irish Catholics outside Northern Ireland could not be found (see [Supplementary material](#), Appendix B). As a consequence, the variable 'coinciding' could not be coded for Basques, Corsicans, and Northern Irish Catholics.

In Eastern Europe, only the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are settled predominantly in an institutionalised region where they represent the regional majority. None of the other ethnic minority groups in Eastern Europe have a coinciding institutionalised region. Territorially concentrated minorities in Eastern Europe either lack a regional level of political representation (e.g. the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries or the Turkish minority in Bulgaria), or regional divisions cut across their settlements. Not even Macedonia, where relations between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority came under great strain in 2001, opted for ethnic regionalisation. The Ohrid Agreement of August 2001 settled the conflict by striking a compromise between Macedonian preferences for centralisation and Albanian demands for territorial autonomy, and decentralised authority to the local, but not the regional level (Walsh 2019).

Looking at the distribution of our four variables measuring programmatic and institutional accommodation, marked differences thus appear

when comparing Eastern with Western Europe. In multinational countries in Eastern Europe, the programmatic discourses of non-minority parties are less supportive of territorial accommodation, and this corresponds to an institutional context that is much less decentralised than in Western Europe, and in which regions almost never reflect the settlement patterns of national minorities.

A challenge for any empirical test of the effect of decentralisation on secessionism is that decentralisation is not distributed randomly across minority regions. Territorial autonomy can be endogenous to secessionism: credible threats to secession and nationalist mobilisation have been identified as causes of territorial accommodation in multinational states (Grigoryan 2012; Zuber 2011). Ideally, we would observe minority parties over an extended period of time during which some of the groups the parties seek to represent gain territorial autonomy, while others do not, and see whether parties adapt their positions accordingly. However, to the best of our knowledge, time series data on parties' positions on territorial autonomy and secession are not available beyond Western Europe. The EPAC data is the first dataset to systematically cover parties' secessionism in Western and Eastern Europe for two time points, thereby helping to handle the endogeneity problem.

We therefore calculate two sets of models. The first set assesses the relationship between *levels* of accommodation and the probability of secessionist positioning through logistic regressions. For these models, we lag the accommodation variables and measure programmatic accommodation based on the 2011 expert survey data, and institutional accommodation based on the 2010 RAI data to predict secessionist positioning in 2017. The dependent variable in these cross-sectional models with lagged independent variables is the secessionism dummy, indicating whether a party does or does not hold a secessionist position in 2017.

The second set of models assesses first differences, regressing minority parties' *shift* towards a secessionist position between 2011 and 2017 on *changes* in accommodation. First differences account for time-invariant omitted variables, such as structural and historical causes of accommodation and secessionism, or earlier episodes of secessionist mobilisation preceding initial accommodation (Wooldridge 2012: 459–63). A shift towards a secessionist position is coded as given (variable *secessionist shift* = 1) if a minority party that was deemed non-secessionist by a majority of experts in 2011 is deemed secessionist by a majority of experts in 2017, or if a party with a secessionist platform split from a previously non-secessionist party between 2011 and 2017. Only six out of the 83 parties included in the analysis either shifted towards secessionism or were born as secessionist splinters between 2011 and 2017. We therefore use penalised

Maximum Likelihood Estimation, a method suggested by Firth (1993) for rare events data.¹²

The advantage of being able to circumvent omitted variable bias through first differences estimation comes at the prize of only being able to estimate the effect of independent variables that changed between 2011 and 2017. Since there is very little change in territorial self-rule, and no change at all in whether groups have coinciding regions or not, we limit the analysis of first differences to changes in programmatic accommodation.¹³ The variables Δ *party system accommodation* and Δ *government accommodation* are measured subtracting programmatic accommodation in 2011 from programmatic accommodation in 2017. Negative values therefore indicate shifts towards more restrictive positions while positive values denote shifts towards more accommodative positions.

In addition, we control for three factors that might confound the relationship between decentralisation and secessionism in the cross-sectional models, namely the design of the electoral system, minority parties' participation in the central government, and the existence of a kin state. The electoral system affects the overall logic of party competition and therefore non-minority parties' choice whether to position themselves in favour of decentralising reforms, but it may also affect our dependent variable. Proportional representation may mitigate the extremism of ethnic elites by providing more possibilities to participate in parliament and to articulate minority interests therein (Cohen 1997). Proportional representation and eased conditions for minority parties might also lead to the proliferation of intra-ethnic competitors (Bochsler 2012), which increases the chances of ethnic outbidding and secessionist claims. We account for electoral system effects using the index of electability developed by Bochsler *et al.* (2018). Unlike simple measures of disproportionality or minority quotas, the index of electability takes into account that the inclusiveness of electoral systems towards minorities results from the interaction of electoral rules, group size, and electoral geography. The index starts from a basic 'threshold of exclusion', defined as the vote share a political party needs in order to be represented in parliament. The threshold of exclusion equals $1/2$ for simple plurality or majority systems and equals $1/(m + 1)$ for proportional representation in a district with m seats. This formula is then extended to account for territorial concentration and size of minority groups, as well as special minority provisions of the electoral system (the formulas used to calculate the index can be found in [Supplementary material](#), Appendix D). The index is coded by election for the years 1990–2013. We take the most recent election for each country in our sample and apply the natural logarithm to the index to normalise its skewed distribution. The resulting variable *electability* ranges from

–1.10 to 4.82. Second, we control for whether minority parties are participating in coalition governments at the national level which might allow them to bargain more successfully for territorial autonomy than other parties, while at the same time potentially leading them to present more moderate stances in the centre-periphery conflict as the price for inclusion in the national government. The dummy variable *government participation* indicates whether a party is a member of the national governing coalition.¹⁴ Third, the presence of a kindred group in a dominant political position in a neighbouring country could affect both the radicalism of minority parties and host governments' responses (Jenne *et al.* 2007; Saideman and Ayres 2000). The dummy variable *kin state* takes the value 1 if the group a given minority party appeals to has a kindred group that holds the dominant position in a government coalition in another state. We measure this variable based on the variable 'kindred groups in power' (GC11) from the dataset of the Minorities at Risk Project (Minorities at Risk Project 2009: 8). In case groups were missing from the minorities at risk data, we coded the variable *kin state* based on our own research.

Results

Table 3 presents the results of logit regression models predicting minority parties' secessionism. The models draw on 83 ethnonational minority parties from 21 European multinational countries and Turkey. As the independent variables measuring territorial accommodation are highly correlated with each other, we estimate a separate model for each independent variable. In each of these models we include the same set of controls, *electability*, *government participation*, and *kin state*.

Model 1 and model 2 assess the hypotheses on *programmatic accommodation* (H1a and H1b). Model 1 includes the average position on territorial autonomy of parliamentary, non-ethnonational parties, while model 2 includes the average position on territorial autonomy of the national government in 2011. The results show that both variables are positively and significantly associated with minority parties' secessionism in 2017. The next two models (models 3 and 4) test the hypotheses on the different types of *institutional accommodation* (H2 and H3). The results of model 3 confirm that the more power is granted to regions, the higher the likelihood of minority parties occupying secessionist positions (H2). Minority parties are also more likely to demand secession if the central government has created regions that coincide with the boundaries of the homeland of the minority a given party seeks to represent (H3). Among the controls, only *electability* shows a significant (positive) association with secessionism.

Table 3. Results of logit regression models of ethnonational minority parties' secessionism (maximum likelihood estimation).

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Party system accommodation	0.586* (0.27)			
Government accommodation		0.420* (0.20)		
Regional self-rule			0.239** (0.08)	
Coinciding				3.564*** (0.94)
Electability	0.666* (0.31)	0.474 (0.29)	0.461 (0.30)	0.215 (0.44)
Government participation	0.181 (0.91)	-1.277 (0.94)	-1.599 (0.98)	-1.592 (1.01)
Kin state	-1.407 (1.03)	-1.289 (0.81)	-1.316 (0.82)	-1.146 (1.11)
Constant	-3.249 (1.74)	-2.709 (1.46)	-3.053* (1.42)	-2.380 (1.71)
N	78	83	80	78
Pseudo R ²	0.32	0.29	0.38	0.48

Dependent variable: Parties' stance on secession; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, Standard errors in parentheses.

Model fit measured by McFadden's pseudo R-squared is a bit higher for party system (Pseudo R² = 0.32) than government accommodation (Pseudo R² = 0.29). Model fit is better when including the dummy variable coinciding region (Pseudo R² = 0.48) than when including the level of self-rule (Pseudo R² = 0.38). Taken together, model fit is higher for institutional than for programmatic accommodation, which suggests that the institutional context matters more than parties' discourses for predicting the positions of minority parties on secession.

To illustrate the effect sizes, Table 4 turns to the cases discussed in the introduction and compares the probability of secessionism of Hungarian parties in Romania and Catalan parties in Spain based on the results of the regression analyses. In addition, we calculate the probability of secessionist positioning of the Hungarian parties in a hypothetical scenario in which the Hungarian parties would be placed in a context of territorial accommodation resembling the Spanish model. The results suggest that if the Hungarian minority in Romania was accommodated in the same way as the Catalans in Spain, the probability that the Hungarian parties would embrace secessionist positions would rise to levels comparable to those characterising the Catalans.¹⁵

Models 5 and 6 in Table 5 show the results of the estimation of a first differences model for programmatic accommodation, the predictor that changed sufficiently between 2011 and 2017 to allow for a meaningful analysis. The first-differenced estimators of party system and government accommodation are now negative: as non-nationalist parliamentarian and

Table 4. Comparing the probability of secessionist Hungarian parties in Romania with Catalan parties in Spain.

	Probability of secessionist position			
	Status quo in 2017		Hypothetical scenario	
	Hungarians in Romania	Catalans in Spain	Hungarians in Romania	
Party system accommodation (M1)	0.25	0.95	0.78	If Romanian parliamentary parties had the same position as Spanish parliamentary parties on territorial autonomy
Government accommodation (M2)	0.32	0.895	0.65	If the Romanian government had the same position as the Spanish government on territorial autonomy
Regional self-rule (M3)	0.43	0.98	0.91	If regional self-rule in Romania was at the same level as in Catalonia
Coinciding (M4)	0.06	0.89	0.7	If the Hungarian minority received a coinciding institutionalised region

governing parties shift towards more accommodative positions on the issue of territorial autonomy for national minorities, the likelihood that minority parties become secessionist *decreases*. However, only the change of governing parties' position is significantly associated with minority parties' positional change towards secessionism. These findings show that when accounting for time-invariant, common causes of accommodation and secessionism, minority-friendly positions – at least when adopted by the national government – in fact *reduce* incentives for secessionism.

We conducted three robustness checks (see [Supplementary material](#), Appendix F). First, we estimated two-level random intercept models, as our data is hierarchically structured with 83 parties nested in 22 countries (see models 7 to 14 in [Supplementary material](#), Table F1). The results of the cross-sectional two-level models show that programmatic accommodation is now only significantly associated with minority parties' secessionism when excluding the three control variables, while the results for institutional accommodation remain significant when including controls also in the two-level models. The results of the first-differences models remain fully robust in the two-level models (models 15 and 16 in [Supplementary material](#), Table F2). Second, we repeated the first differences estimation accounting for decline in the quality of democracy in Ukraine and Turkey, which yielded no change in the results (models 17 and 18 in [Supplementary material](#), Table F3). Third, we included a dummy variable for Bosnia and Hercegovina in the cross-sectional (models 19 to 22 in [Supplementary material](#), Table F4) and the first differences

Table 5. Results of first differences logit regression models of ethnonational minority parties' shift to secessionism (penalized maximum likelihood estimation).

	M5	M6
Δ party system accommodation	-0.430 (0.42)	
Δ government accommodation		-0.631** (0.24)
Constant	-2.269*** (0.41)	-3.191*** (0.62)
N	77	82

Dependent variable: Parties' shift to a secessionist stance; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, Standard errors in parentheses.

models (models 23 and 24 in [Supplementary material, Table F5](#)). Bosnia and Herzegovina can be seen as a special case for two reasons: first, a high number of secessionist minority parties in our sample are located in Bosnia, second, international influence (as institutionalised in the role of the High Representative) plays a more significant role in Bosnia than in our other cases. Except for the fact that the coefficient of government accommodation is no longer significant in the cross-sectional models, our results remain robust to the exclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the impact of decentralisation on secessionist positioning of minority parties from a comparative European perspective. Today, multinational Western European countries are strongly decentralised and grant authority to minorities' core settlement areas, while Eastern European countries only underwent a weak decentralisation process in the aftermath of their democratic transition. Importantly, the governments of Eastern European countries only used decentralisation to accommodate national minorities' territorial demands when the international community intervened after an ethnic conflict, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the Serbs enjoy a degree of regional self-rule in Republika Srpska that exceeds even the highest levels found in Western Europe. At the same time, secessionism is mainly a phenomenon of the western part of the European continent.

We have argued that decentralisation increases the chances that minority parties will demand secession. Differentiating between different modes of decentralisation to capture the differences between Eastern and Western Europe, we introduced the debate about the benefits and pitfalls of ethno-federal solutions from conflict studies to the literature on territorial party politics. Following this debate, we have argued that institutional accommodation is not only about granting more power to regions

or increasing the scope of regional autonomy. It is also about creating regions that correspond with the settlement areas of minority groups. Yet at the same time these regions provide the strongest institutional resources for secessionism (Cornell 2002; Roeder 2007).

The empirical analysis proceeded in two steps. First, our cross-sectional logistic regression models showed that all types of decentralisation have strong predictive power for secessionism. Programmatic and institutional accommodation, as well as coinciding regions are all strongly and significantly associated with a higher likelihood of secessionist demands. However, analysing minority parties' secessionism in a cross-sectional setting cannot control for the endogenous relationship between decentralisation and parties' secessionism. The positive association between accommodation and secessionism could result from earlier processes of secessionist mobilisation and accommodation. Many of Central and Eastern Europe's secessionists already achieved their goals following the fall of communism; meanwhile long-standing sub-state nationalist mobilisation in Western Europe brought about coinciding autonomous regions in the first place. To account for such prior causal histories of accommodation and secessionism, we further analysed whether *changes* in programmatic accommodation between 2011 and 2017 influence the likelihood that minority parties adopt secessionist positions during that same time period. The results of these first difference models indeed point to a moderating, rather than a radicalising effect of accommodation: as governing parties move towards minority parties, the latter become *less* likely to advocate secession. However, there is still room for one alternative causal interpretation: non-minority parties might strategically anticipate minority parties' response and therefore *only* adopt positions in favour of territorial autonomy if they expect minority parties to remain cooperative in the future.¹⁶ Further research should now collect longer panel data on minority parties' positions to account for strategic interaction between parties over time, and to estimate the causal effect of changes in the design of regional institutions and in the degree of regional autonomy that are less frequent than parties' programmatic shifts.

In addition, our analysis focussed on the impact of territorial autonomy on secessionism. Eastern European countries score low on territorial autonomy, but many of them have introduced forms of national-cultural (also called non-territorial) autonomy, allowing minorities to decide on matters such as education and information in the minority language, and the preservation of the minority's cultural heritage (Dobos 2020). Future research should investigate whether such forms of non-territorial accommodation provide a valuable alternative to territorial solutions.

Notes

1. Counties (județe) are the equivalents of regions in Romania. Székely Land includes the counties of Covasna/Kovászna, Harghita/Hargita, and the eastern and central part of Mureș/Maros county.
2. Accordingly, we include cases of irredentism in our definition of secessionism. We use the terms secessionist and separatist interchangeably.
3. The selection of groups and parties is explained in more detail in section three.
4. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this further strategic consideration.
5. It is worth noting that during the 19th century, Western European states (prominently France and Spain) have also sought to avoid integrating regions by splitting national minorities' homelands or by integrating them into larger territorial units (Kymlicka 2001: 75–6).
6. The EPR-ETH project categorises 'an ethnic group as politically relevant if at least one political organization claims to represent it in national politics, or if its members are subjected to state-led political discrimination' (Cederman *et al.* 2010: 99). Countries were classified as democratic if rated 'free' or 'partly free' on the Freedom House index and classified as a 'democracy' by the Polity IV project. The initial selection of countries was done in 2011 and was maintained for the second round of the expert survey, even though democracy had deteriorated in Turkey and Ukraine. The selected countries are: Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, UK and Ukraine.
7. Minority parties that had been included in 2011 were included in 2017 even if they no longer passed this criterion of relevance.
8. Appendix A ([Supplementary material](#)) presents an overview of the variables.
9. The regional authority dataset does not cover Moldova and the Ukraine and we lose three parties when estimating the impact of regional self-rule on the likelihood of secession.
10. The five dimensions measure the following: '(1) Institutional depth: the extent to which a regional government is autonomous rather than deconcentrated (0–3); (2) Policy scope: the range of policies for which a regional government is responsible (0–4); (3) Fiscal autonomy: the extent to which a regional government can independently tax its population (0–4); (4) Borrow autonomy: The extent to which a regional government can borrow (0–3); (5) Representation: the extent to which a region is endowed with an independent legislature and executive (0–4)' (Codebook Regional Authority Index (RAI) 2015: 3–4).
11. The variable *coinciding* is missing for Corsicans in France, Basques in Spain and Catholics in Northern Ireland because we lack data on whether a majority of group members is concentrated in an institutionalized region. We therefore lose five parties when estimating the impact of coinciding region on the likelihood of secession.
12. The following parties became secessionist: Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, Bloque Nacionalista Galego and Alternativa Galega de Esquerda in Spain, Hrvatska stranka prava Bosne i

Hercegovine in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Demokratska Partija Albanaca/Partia Demokratike Shqiptare in Serbia. The variable secessionist shift is missing for Socijalistička partija (Bosnia) because the party was not included in the EPAC 2011 edition and it did not split from any of the parties previously included, so we cannot assess whether the party shifted its position.

13. Figure C1 in Appendix C ([Supplementary material](#)) displays changes in programmatic accommodation between 2011 and 2017 by country.
14. Appendix E ([Supplementary material](#)) presents the summary statistics.
15. Predicted probabilities in [Table 4](#) were calculated by the command `prvalue` from the `SPost` package in Stata (Long and Freese 2006).
16. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing us to this possible interpretation.

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