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Regional

Secessionist movements take many forms

There are a number of secessionist movements across Europe. Eastern Ukraine, Catalonia, Flanders and Lombardy are among those lands where many of the people want independence from a larger nation. One such country even had a recent referendum on the matter – Scotland. People behind these movements believe in the rebirth of small independent states characterized by cultural homogeneity. Their claim is that such independence would give them economic success and social justice.

Now that we know that the independentist movement in Scotland lost, I spoke with a panel to discuss these issues. They were: Wendy Shaw, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and a native of England; Sophia Wilson, an assistant professor in the department of political science and a native of Ukraine; Elza Ibroscheva, an associate professor in the department of mass communications and an expert on media and nationalism, all of them at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and Mark Sutherland, chief commercial officer of Elasticity, a marketing and public relations agency in St. Louis, and a Scottish national.

One way that some media characterized the results of the Scotland vote was the victory of fear over pride. For Sutherland that is only partly correct.

“I think that pride and nationalism was a part of the campaign, but I think also self-determination was a big factor,” said Sutherland. “Since 1707 (when the United Kingdom was established) a lot of the decisions as seen by the Scots were made in the British parliament. So I think for a lot of people they went to the polls because they wanted to make their own decisions.”

For Shaw there is a great diversity of opinions in England itself about this issue.

“There is a real division of opinion I think in England,” she said. “One that is geographic in nature. I think in Southern England this was not viewed very positively. But in Northern England they have many of the same feelings that the people of Scotland have. And underpinning all this, as it does in the United Kingdom and England, is issues of class.”

She said that she believes that in the Northern England lower class areas they were watching the referendum with a great deal of interest and a great deal of sympathy.



SIUE College of Arts and Sciences

From left: Dr. Wendy Shaw, Dr. Sophia Wilson, Dr. Elza Ibroscheva, Mr. Mark Sutherland, and Dean Aldemaro Romero Jr.

“But if you go to Southern England where the power is sort of centered in London, there are upper class values where I think the Scottish vote did not get much support, not much sympathy,” she added.

Another troubled area of the world is eastern Ukraine. For Wilson, there is also a geographic dimension on how this problem is viewed.

“Most people in Ukraine do feel a threat,” she said. “Most of the movement of defending the land was defending it from Russia.

Eighty percent of the people in Eastern Ukraine saw it as a possibility to separate and join Russia, while the majority was not sure about it. So again the question there is very different from Scotland because in Scotland it is a question of self-determination, where the question in Ukraine is whether or not that part would or would not become part of Russia.” For Ibroscheva the public perception of these issues also varies.

“In Eastern Europe I think we can probably quickly point to one of the most recent

and violent disintegrations of a nation state in history. In Yugoslavia a resurgence of ethnic nationalism led to an extremely aggressive and extremely problematic way of grabbing power,” she explained. “This, of course, mixed up with a fight for national identity and to establish a sense of identity in the post-communist environment, created a lot of tension.” She said that she sees a lot of differences regarding the case of Scotland.

“This tension ended up causing a war in the Balkan region that was an excellent

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example of what is wrong with nationalistic tendencies,” Ibroscheva said. “In the post-communist climate all over Eastern Europe people have always found that this idea of independence is an extremely intoxicating concept because of the long and often very oppressive way in which monolithic identities were imposed upon the socialist block.

“Ethnic nationalism has a drive towards exclusion based on racial purity and ethnic purity,” she added. “Civic nationalism is the one that points toward self-determination and inclusion in governance. What we are seeing here is a very different way in which nationalism can play out.”

An interesting issue is that the referendum in Scotland was a defeat for the secessionist movement despite the fact that the majority of Scots are supporters of the Scottish nationalist party. Sutherland has a way to explain that apparent contradiction.

“That actually goes back to Margaret Thatcher, who to a lot of people was a great hero, but a lot of her policies had a very negative economic impact on Scotland,” explained Sutherland. “And people have a long memory. The Scottish government has actually figured out how to run a national healthcare service that is not bankrupt, which is amazing. It’s one of the few countries that have been able to figure that out. But they look at it and they say that they consistently vote for the Scottish party or for the Labor but, yet there is a conservative government in London that, they feel, doesn’t represent them. I think for a lot of people that was definitely a motivating factor in wanting to vote yes.”

Regardless of the outcome, all on the panel agreed that the United Kingdom will never be the same.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.