

EUROPE | MEMO FROM LOMBARDY

First Scotland, Then Catalonia. And Now? Milan and Venice

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO OCT. 17, 2017

MILAN — Catalonia has been racked by sound and fury over a drive to secede from Spain, but on a recent morning in Lombardy, which will vote on Sunday on whether to demand greater autonomy from Italy, the mood was distinctly more laid back.

Men and women who looked as though they had just stepped out of a fashion store display perused stylish goods. Tourists snapped selfies in front of the richly sculpted facade of the Duomo, the colossal cathedral of Milan, the capital of Lombardy. Members of the sharp-suited Milanese business class gobbled down panini in the countless new eateries that have sprung up in the city center.

If it weren't for the occasional taxicab door displaying a reminder for citizens to cast their ballots this month, or the odd billboard here or there, a casual visitor might not even know a vote was about to take place.

The one-question query that will be put to voters in this prosperous northern region of Italy on Sunday is whether they want their representatives to negotiate with the central government in Rome on “particular conditions of autonomy,” and on getting greater return on their taxes. Veneto, the northeast region that includes Venice, is voting in a similar poll the same day.

In contrast to Catalonia — where tens of thousands of Catalans took to the streets for the independence referendum held there, in some cases clashing violently with the police — the mood in Italy is much calmer.

Less is at stake; the referendum results will not be binding. But the regional governments are counting on a robust showing at the polls to strengthen their hand in bartering with Rome.

“The more people vote, the greater bargaining power I will have,” said Roberto Maroni, the president of Lombardy, whose party, the Northern League, once embraced a secessionist mantra. He now calls that a “revolutionary phase” that did not work out.

Coming on the heels of the Catalan vote, the Lombardy and Veneto referendums are yet another signal of the homegrown conflicts that persist in many of the European Union’s member states. Separatist movements are also simmering in Britain — where voters in Scotland rejected independence in a 2014 referendum but continue to debate the issue — as well as France, Germany, Belgium and Romania.

Even though the vote has not elicited much reaction here in Milan, political parties see opportunity before national elections that are expected early next year.

Italy’s governing Democratic Party, which is in the opposition in Lombardy, is not openly endorsing either side in the referendum. But many of the party’s regional mayors have established a committee in favor of the initiative — a move many see as politically calculated given that the “yes” side is expected to win by a wide margin.

Mr. Maroni’s government has singled out 23 sectors that it wants to control, including those related to security and immigration, education, scientific research and environmental protection. The regional government calculates that it sends 54 billion euros more in taxes to Rome than it gets in return, an equation it hopes to change.

“In an era of globalization, when Lombardy’s industries are competing

against China and India, it has to reinvest its resources in its territory,” said the Northern League’s regional secretary, Paolo Grimoldi. “It’s economic good sense.”

Though control of those sectors would give Lombardy substantial autonomy and resources, Mr. Maroni has been careful to say that the vote would not undermine Italian unity.

“Like the Catalans, we have decided to give voice to the people,” he said. “The difference is that what we ask for is allowed by the Italian Constitution.”

The Catalan movement has reverberated in a number of places in Italy. A Veneto group, Plebiscito.eu, issued a statement comparing its impact to “the collapse of the Berlin Wall for Eastern Europe.” The South-Tyrolean Freedom Movement gave play-by-play details on the Oct. 1 balloting. And the social media sites of some Sicilian and Veneto groups supported the Catalan vote.

“In Italy, there has been a resurgence of separatist energies,” said Antonio Rapisarda, who has been tracking separatist movements for the daily newspaper *Il Tempo*. “From the South Tyrol to Sicily, passing through Rome, there are separatist movements throughout Italy that are rooted among some of the people who live there.”

Though Italy was formally unified 156 years ago, “it remains a complex nation,” Mr. Rapisarda added.

Mr. Maroni said he was “interested in seeing what will happen in Catalonia,” which like Lombardy is “one of the economic motors of Europe.” (For now, the national government in Madrid and leaders in Barcelona appear to be at a stalemate.)

“I think Catalonia could be a spark that lights a useful fire for renewal in Europe, which isn’t functioning,” he said. He said his model is the Pan-Alpine macro region established last year, which allows 48 regions in seven countries to negotiate directly with the European Union on some matters.

“This is new and very interesting — going beyond nation states,” he said.

Some observers see a potential for the referendum to boomerang. Roberto D’Alimonte, a professor of political science at Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome, said the vote could curtail the Northern League’s ambitions to transform itself from a regional powerhouse into a national party in keeping with the agenda of its brash young leader, Matteo Salvini.

“It’s not a national message to tell the rest of Italy: We want to keep more money up north. Southerners are not going to respond well,” he said.

Others questioned the practical effect of the referendum. Giorgio Bernasconi, a Milanese shopkeeper, shrugged and sighed when asked whether he would vote. “What’s the point? Nothing will change,” he said.

The cost of the vote — estimated at €40 million to €50 million — has also come under scrutiny.

“Considering the needs of Lombardy right now, I don’t understand why they went ahead with such an exorbitant expense,” said Paolo Mondini, a security guard in Milan. “They talk about saving money, then spend millions.”

Calling it a “poll of the people,” Mr. Maroni has defended the cost, including some €24 million for electronic tablets that will be used for the vote — a first in Italy — and then donated to schools. Past demands for autonomy from Rome fell on deaf ears, he said, but a popular mandate will have a different effect.

The Emilia-Romagna region, which is governed by the Democratic Party, recently initiated its own autonomy talks with Rome, though without resorting to a referendum.

In a telephone interview, Stefano Bonaccini, president of the region, said of the Lombardy and Veneto votes: “A referendum carried out a few months before national elections that asks voters whether they want

autonomy is like asking them whether they like their mothers — because it is a legitimate and just request.”

But he added that those votes were “clearly an attempt” to drum up support for the Northern League.

“After the vote,” he said, “they are still going to have to go to Rome and ask the government to pass a law for autonomy. It’s still a complicated process.”

Mr. Bonaccini said he expected to meet with Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni to begin discussing greater autonomy.

“The hard work will begin then,” he said.

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