

The Goals of the Friesian National Party: a New Form of Separatism?

Separatist movements have arguably become more prominent in recent years, as the power of the national governments has dwindled in the face of a European Union (EU) that seems to less readily meet national demands (Lazar 2017). These movements use these ideas of low governmental power to highlight why their strive for independence is important, in an attempt to gain autonomy. One characteristic that is often associated with separatism is populism, a form of discourse that assumes an ‘us against them’ narrative. However, as can be seen in the case of the Friesian National Party in the Netherlands, separatism may be manifesting itself in more nuanced ways, one which can be described as liberal. While the party uses identity as a means of persuasion, as many separatist groups do, it is used in a way that generates autonomy for its agricultural sector, while this utilization also ensures congenial relations towards other separatist movements. The Friesian case will be discussed to understand key aspects of this movement, while also understanding how a shift towards a ‘liberal’ form of separatism may be taking place. In the following sections, a conceptualization of separatism and an overview of the case will be laid out, before moving on to two facets of Friesian identity, namely their identity as an agricultural powerhouse and as a separatist movement, to answer the question “how has the Friesian National Party used identity as a means to gain autonomy?”.

While the conceptualization of a separatist movement is often contested, there are some main characteristics that most movements share. The case of Friesland and the Friesian National Party (FNP), however, stray away from some of these characteristics. The first key characteristic of separatist movements is that they are groups that have lost autonomy, the form of internal self-determination which allows groups to govern themselves within a state, or never had it in the first place (Siroky and Cuffe 2014). While there may be varying degrees of autonomy which a

group may have, it is important to understand the relativity of self-determination that groups presently have. These groups strive for the “legally entrenched power of territorially-delimited entities within the internationally recognized boundaries of existing states to exercise public policy functions independently of other sources of authority in this state, but subject to its overall legal order” (Weller and Wolff 2005: 29). Furthermore, these groups feel alienated from the country they reside in and feel the need to create a self-governing nation-state (Ryabinin 2017). This leads to the group feeling as though they are inherently different from the “other”, meaning identity plays a key role in the discourse that separatist groups use. Another characteristic that most separatist groups share is that there are both internal and external factors that are at play in determining the urge to leave, as many assume that separatist groups are reactionary only to internal processes (Wolff 2013: 8). Hence, these characteristics are important to conceptualizing what a separatist movement may look like, however, there can be exceptions.

The Friesian case is one which meets some of the aforementioned characteristics but presents academia with a new trend of separatism. Frisia was conquered by the Dutch in the fifteenth century during the conquest for West Frisia, a part of Frisia which was consequently made into the Dutch province of Friesland (Vučković 2020). The people of the province consolidated their identity as a northern Germanic tribe over the several years that they were granted autonomy, thus their identity was inherently different to the one which the Dutch had (ibid). Friesians are therefore a Germanic ethnic group from the northwest part of the Netherlands and Germany. Through this, the two northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen have a long-standing history and speak their own language, Friesian. Today, however, it seems the Friesian National Party is attempting to gain more sovereignty, but instead of aiming this sovereignty at the Friesian territory, they strive for sovereignty in their industry and politics. This

is done through using their constructed identity as the agricultural backbone of the Netherlands, and by identifying themselves as a separatist movement (Feddemma 2022; Knol 2022).

By constructing an identity that is inherently different from the Dutch one, the FNP is able to create a European minority group and use their identity as the agricultural backbone of the Netherlands in their policy interests to increase their autonomy. The construction of the Friesian state as inherently different from the Netherlands has meant that the FNP have offered support to other movements for minority groups, including other separatist movements. The Friesians are considered a spearhead actor in the creation of the European Free Alliance (EFA), a European political party consisting of separatist movements that operates at the supranational level, which has helped augment their position as a minority separatist group in international politics. Furthermore, their identity is also visible in the importance they place on agriculture, as the FNP refer to Friesian farmland as “their gold” (Feddemma 2022). This has translated into throughout their policies as well, as they have promoted environmental policies that would aid their position in policy discussions. Policies such as the safety of shipping around the Wadden Islands have allowed the FNP to have a foothold in environmental discussions around the Friesian province (Knol 2022).

The Friesian case highlights a new form of separatism, one which promotes transnational values and attempts to gain autonomy through the ratification of policies. By creating and enforcing an identity which distinguishes them from the Dutch, the FNP is able to pursue policies which they feel affect them most as a separatist group and use those policies to gain autonomy. Through the creation of strong relations with other separatist groups, they are able to gain more recognition, not only internationally but also domestically. These aspects allow the

Friesian National Party to gain more autonomy as a separatist movement in a manner that departs from the conventional, populist methods associated with most separatist initiatives.

References

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