The end of the Corsican question?

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The second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of substate nationalism in Western Europe. Particularly, since the late 70s different processes of accommodation have taken place in Scotland, Catalonia, the Basque Country or Flanders. Even in France, the paradigm of nation-state, the corsican question is to a great extent at the bottom of the territorial reform of the state. The accommodation of territorial diversity within multinational democracies have consequently become one of the main topics in contemporary political theory, and a controversial one. In my view, the reason is that the possible emergence of an accommodation scenario for national minorities within liberal democracies challenges the gellnerian principle of congruence that has traditionally underpinned nationalism as a normative project, summarised in the motto ‘one state, one nation, and one nation, one state’. Thus, the normative dimension of Gellner’s principle stills offer a balanced analysis of both state and nation without state nationalism in their contemporary forms as competitive projects and discourses. This is the case of France and Corsica, where a materialistic approach could understate the importance that corsican nationalism has posed to the french project of national identity. This is not to say that necessarily Corsica will finally reach a special status within the French state or even a state of her own. Actually, the principle of congruence as a normative principle also prevents from overstating contemporary politics as a scenario where national minorities claims flourish just because a crisis of the nation-state brings a new environment for such claims. On the contrary, it opens a wide range of possibilities as a result of competitive nationalist discourses, where despite the visibilisation of minority nationalism claims, the state has also the capacity to generate a powerful reformulation of its national identity project. This paper analyses the corsican question in contemporary France, since François Mitterrand became president of the republic until the referendum of 2003 in Corsica, that put an end to the so-called Matignon process launched by prime minister Lionel Jospin.

A new emerging scenario?

Contemporary interest in nationalism of nations without states completes in my view a second wave of efforts to address what Isaiah Berlin had called a ‘neglected issue’. After the first wave of classical contributions by figures such Gellner or Smith, a new generation of scholars have addressed a certain bias in the classical studies on nationalism that were mainly focused on the
state dimension of nationalism thus neglecting the importance of nations without states nationalism. This second wave does not override classical nationalist studies but it is rather built upon them. Nevertheless Smith had already identified the innovative sort of nationalism from nations without states that arises in the second half of the 20th century, and, as I mentioned earlier, the normative dimension of Gellner's principle of congruence is a fundamental starting point for the study of contemporary nationalism, whether state or nation without state (references).

From this eclectic vision of classical contributions, I sketch a scenario where on the one hand, nationalist claims from nations without state would not necessarily seek the creation of a state of their own, giving rise to a non-secessionist nationalism. On the other hand, state nationalism would address territorial diversity not by means of homogenisation into a single national identity but rather reformulating the identity project to accommodate internal diversity. Therefore, in an accommodation scenario the state would recognize territorial minorities providing them with some sort of self-government, while the national minorities would not aim necessarily at starting a secession process leading to the creation of an independent state. This scenario would involve that state and nation without state nationalism relax the principle of congruence, that normatively would lead either to homogenisation or secession, and it is important to focus on how both nationalism are reformulated and interact with each other. As a result of this competitive interaction, the institutional arrangements would tend to generate more or less stable equilibriums. To interpret this competitive interaction – the different debates and arrangements on the accommodation of territorial minorities- I propose two ideal types that take into account the processes and the actors involved. I call the first ideal type devolution to nations without states. Here, the process involves the recognition of a national minority as a political subject in terms of a legitimate demos. This quality involves the right to self-government, more or less explicitly, and tends to generate assymmetrical arrangements with a differentiated political structure within the state. Devolution, as I understand it here, refers to a political process by means of which a body recovers part of its former sovereignty. Furthermore, bilaterality is in my view a fundamental characteristic of devolution. I call the second ideal type decentralisation to regions. Here, the institutional reform is based on administrative and local
democracy grounds. This second type involves a delegation of powers from the central government to substate ties of administration based on a territorial dimension. The state eventually defines and controls the extent of the whole process and retains the capacity to reverse the arrangement, as it does not have constitutional protection or it relies on a centralised interpretation. This second ideal type does not recognise the right to self-government for the substate level – the region. It is based on an administrative, top-down approach, albeit some federalising elements can be present. Decentralisation is not necessarily a negotiated process but rather a technical and administrative dimension prevails, while devolution involves an open and public process including the participation of representatives, referendums or even constituent assemblies. Finally, decentralisation is usually a multilateral process, as the reform aims to affect the territorial structure of the state, while devolution is, as I have mentioned, a bilateral process between the state and the national minority.

To complete the two ideal types I focus on the actors. I make a clear-cut distinction between regions and nations without states, which are controversial on their exact definition. Region refers to territoriality, understood as a part or division of a bigger body. In its modern conception, this sense refers paradigmatically to a subdivision of the nation-state (Anderson, 1994:6; Harvie, 1994:10). The term is widely used in social sciences, and its lack of definition actually becomes in my view the key to understand its success, though its character as a subdivision of the state is usually taken for granted. As a subdivision, the term features a wide range of dimensions to define the a region as a geographical space, with a particular climate or natural environment, an economical and industrial dimension, an intermediate tie of administration between the local and the central level, a particular set of cultural characteristics with a certain specific identity, or as a primary space for democratic participation (Anderson, 1994:8, Keating, 2000:10; Wagstaff, 1999:6, Rougemont, 1983:213, Harvie:6).

In my view, the key distinction between region and nation without state lies in the idea of demos. A nation has a political dimension linked to the will of self-government. This political will does not involve necessarily (for its definition as nation) to have nor seek a state of its own. Classical definitions of the nation presumed that a nation exists if and only if they took the
dimension is basic to define a nation, but not its existence as an independent state. Therefore, a
nation without state is a particular type of nation (as there exist nations with states) which does
not coincide with the state it belongs to, and do not perceive it as of its own (Guibernau,

Corsica, from Mitterrand to Jospin

One of the first decrees issued by the French Constituent Assembly in 1789 declared Corsica
as an integral part of France (Ramsay, 1983:7). In spite of integrating into the French republic
without any institutional specificity, Corsica has been often perceived as a different province, a
department ‘pas comme les autres’ (Pomponi, 1979:359). To a great extent this perception is
still valid to interpret the relations between France and Corsica, a province that is neither
continental France nor an overseas territory, and during the 1960s some authors even claimed
that the island suffered from ‘internal colonialism’ (Hechter, el que sigui).

After the failure of De Gaulle’s referendum in 1969, the next decade witnessed the emergence
of violent movements, either pro-corsican such the FLNC (Front de Liberation National Corse)
or pro-french such FRANCIA (Front...). The corsican question reached its highest peak with
the Aleria facts (faits d’Aléria), when a pacific occupation of a farm by corsican nationalists
ended with two deads and several injured and the later imprisionment of the nationalist leader
Edmond Simeoni. At the administrative level, the president of the Republic Giscard d’Estaing
introduced some measures of regionalisation, though they fell short of resulting in significant
results. The situation during the 1970s reinforced the idea that the failure of the 1969
referendum had prevented from addressing an issue that sooner or later would reemerge in the
french political agenda.

François Mitterrand brought back the territorial and particularly the corsican question to French
politics. In the presidential campaign of 1981, Mitterrand introduced the regionalisation of
France in his political manifesto, with a particular concern on the situation in the former colonies.
With regard to Corsica, he committed to provide the island with an ‘special statute’ (cita). Mitterrand had been traditionally reluctant to regionalisation, but the Socialist Party was shifting towards more favorable positions since the mid-sixties, when Michel Rocard presented a report titled “Decolonise the province” (Décoloniser la province) during the party’s convention held in 1966. Mitterrand embraced the party’s position due to tactical reasons. In his view, if the territorial reform of the state remained unaddressed, the nationalist demands would become more and more difficult to manage: ‘À 10% on peut encore empêcher les choses, à 15% c’est très difficile, à 20% vous n’arretez plus rien’ (quoted in Albertini & Torre, 2002:7). In an interview for the corsican magazine Kyrn, in 1977, Mitterrand acknowledged the corsicans had the ‘right to difference’ (droite a la différence).

In his political manifesto, 110 própositions du candidat Mitterrand, Mitterrand presented a series of proposals for the regionalisation of France, that would actually set the french political agenda for the next 20 years. The 54th proposal of the manifesto stated that ‘the decentralisation of the state will be a priority’, and it supported the democratic election of regional councils, eventually providing Corsica with a ‘particular statute’ (això és cita del manifesto?). Mitterrand’s proposals involved a significant change in the jacobine tradition. Yet rooted in the classical unitarian conception of state and nation, Mitterrand’s manifesto defended the promotion and respect towards regional identities and minority cultures, as included in the 56th proposal: ‘la promotion des identités régionales sera encouragée, les langues et cultures minoritaires respectées et enseignées’. A further relevant aspect included in the manifesto was the idea of assymmetry for the overseas territories, showing that even a centralised state like France could generate arrangements to accommodate territorial diversity. The 58th proposal mentioned the necessity to adapt the french legal system in order to respond to the special situation in the former colonies due to their geographical situation, adapting the french laws to their economical and cultural needs, thus acknowledging their particular identities. From a jacobine conception, to bring these proposals to continental France would have been perceived as a challenge for the unity of the republic, but for corsican nationalists they were soon considered as a likely horizon of accommodation within the state.
When Mitterrand became president, the Socialist government transformed the plans for Corsica into a regionalisation project for the whole state, limiting its reach (Vanina, 1995:12). The new minister of interior, Gaston Defferre, was the mayor of Marseille, a city with a big corsican community, and he was in charge to develop the process of decentralisation. Defferre’s project of decentralisation showed that for the french socialists, the corsican case was conceived as a pilot project for the regionalisation of the state, which, in words of Mitterrand, had “a besoin d’un pouvoir décentralisé pour ne pas se défaire” (Noer, 1988:8, Ramsay, 1983:203). One of the issues the reform was expected to adress was cultural policy. Jack Lang, the minister of culture, commissioned a study to the research officer of the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), Henri Giordan, about the situation of regional cultures in France. The final report, *Democratie culturel et droit a la différence*, was controversial. It suggested a reparation of the historical French policy towards regional cultures, the creation of a regional television channel and official documents to be bilingual wherever a regional languaged existed. Some of these suggestions were taken into account, but the conservative victory in the regional elections held in 1986 prevented most of the measures from being implemented (Noer, 1988:36).

In the case of Corsica, the process of regionalisation was expected to recognise at least the corsican language, culture and traditions. The new statute considered Corsica formally a region and included the creation of a regional assembly, with a proportional electoral system based in the two provinces (départements) of the island, *Haute Corse* and *Bais Corse*. The assembly would have an executive branch with a president and six vice-presidents, and consultive powers in a wide range of issues, but no financial autonomy or legislative powers. Under the consultive role, the Assembly could propose amendments to state legislation affecting Corsica, though the efectiveness would rely on the will of the French government to consult or attend the assembly demands. This arrangement differed strongly from the situation in the Overseas Territories, where the consults were compulsory (cita?). The statute also reduced the power of the the central government delegate, the controversial figure of the *prefet*, yet it still retained the capacity to propose the central government to disolve the assembly. At the executive level, several agencies were stablished, plus a regional council on culture education and media. The
statute represented an administrative and cultural recognition of Corsica, but under the traditional unitarian conception of the state (Ramsay, 1983:206).

In 1982 the corsican statute was aproved as an ordinary law. The statute defined Corsica as a Collectivité Territoriel, a concept that had been used in the 1970s when the island of Mayotte in the Comoro islands first rejected independence and later the status of Overseas Territory. In the case of Corsica the term was also a halfway solution. The French state was reluctant to accept the expression ‘corsican people’ in the statute to define the island, because it challenged the idea that in France there is only one people, the French. The term would become since then a simbolic demand for corsican nationalists.

The reform took some elements from the Overseas Territories and Departments, but eventually the most relevant innovation was the creation of the elected regional assembly. For the first time in modern France, Corsica was visible not only as a geographical but also as a space of decision, yet the limited powers made this recognition rather symbolical than material. As a result of the 1982 statute the corsican institutional system would be complex and conflictive.

Corsica under the Deferre statute

The first regional elections shown a further element of unstability. Due to the relevance of the historical clans in Corsica, several parties run in the elections. Fourteen groups were represented in the assembly, often divided due to personal rather than ideological reasons. The conservatives groups obtained 29 seats and 45% of the votes. The biggest group in the right was the RPR-UDF, with 19 seats. The left parties won 23 seats and 35.5% of the votes, being the MRG with 11 seats and the PCF with 7 the biggest parties. The Socialist Party traditionally underperforms in the island, and obtained just 2 seats. The nationalist and autonomist movements obtained a 15% of the votes and 9 seats. The elected assembly lasted less than two years. In the second elections of 1984 the nationalist movements in the assembly lost half of supports and 6 seats, and only the Union di u Populu Corsu obtained representatives.

1 A further outcome affected the island; Corsica became the region with the highest numbers of representatives per capita (Daftary, 2000:12).
However, a new nationalist group entered in the assembly. Linked to the *Front de Libération National Corse*, the list *Movimentu Corsu per l’Autodeterminazione* (MCA) won 3 seats. The FLNC had emerged in 1976 with a series of violent actions, claiming for the recognition of the national rights of Corsica. The group demanded from the French state ‘la reconnaissances des droits nationaux du peuple corse (et) la destruction de tous les instruments du colonialisme français’ (Bernabeu-Casanova, 1997:117). The left parties won 25 seats and 40% of the votes, three ahead of the conservatives. Nonetheless, the *Front National* had run for the first time in the corsican elections winning 6 seats and 9% of the votes, and supported the RPR’s candidate JP. Rocca-Serra, allowing the conservatives to stay in office (Bernabeu-Casanova, 1997:163).

The development of the corsican statute soon showed the limits of the reform. The French government vetoed the initiatives of the corsican assembly on issues affecting the island, and the corsican nationalists denounced the statute as a ‘*chiffon de papier*’ (Bernabeu-Casanova, 1997:166). The situation became more complicated as the FLNC returned to violence. As a result, pro-french movements also emerged, emphasizing the frenchness of Corsica, finding support in the traditional clans of the island (Bernabeu-Casanova, 1997:161). Despite the loss of electoral supports suffered by the nationalists, the corsican society agreed increasingly with their demands. In a survey conducted in 1990, only 8% of corsicans opted for independence, but a 41% felt sympathy for the nationalist movements and their claims (*La Corse, vue de l’île et du continent. L’état d’opinion*. Quoted in Bernabeu-Casanova, 1997:184).

The reform did not redefine the French strategy to decentralisation. First, it was an arrangement that had been previously implemented in the region of *Ille-de-France* and the overseas territories during the 1970s. Second, it did not change the approach of french decentralisation, which had traditionally aimed at splitting the historical territories of the state into different regions and departments. Thus, it can be argued that the reform of 1982, as it was designed, did not make a serious bid to situate the regions as relevant political arenas, but rather as a new tie of policy-making between the local and the central level. Neither had it as a central goal to recognise the territorial diversity of the state but rather to introduce an element of administrative rationalisation due to the requirements of the EU’s regional policy (Douence, 1995:13). Not only
the state kept control over the political agenda, but also limited the political dimension of the regions by establishing the simultaneous election of the assemblies, enhancing the national dimension of the reform as the regional elections were a sort of test for general elections. With this strategy the Socialist Party also expected to improve its electoral performance in the less pro-socialist regions. However, this strategy only brought them the possibility to form office in two of the twenty-one regions after the first regional elections of 1986.

The regions were expected to play a relevant role in territorial development policy-making, becoming the reference for departments and municipalities, with capacity to influence and implement the state territorial policies. However, the model would show the regional capacity was limited both from above and below. At the state level, the governmental agencies kept managing the definition of territorial policies (Douence, 1995:15). From below, departments and comunes retained the financial capacity to implement their own policies without the intervention of the region. Furthermore, the subregional structures remained the political reference at the local level. The departments were established as the electoral constituencies of regional elections and their own political dynamic weakened the consolidation of the regions as a political arena, which suffered from a lack of legitimacy and effectiveness. In Corsica, the situation made soon a case for further decentralisation by means of a new statute (Douence, 1995:17).

Within this institutional context, in 1988 starts the process that eventually would lead to a new charter for Corsica. The FLNC declared a ceasefire as the French prime minister Michel Rocard committed to ‘traiter de façon particulière le cas particulier de la Corse’ with the condition of no violent actions by terrorist groups. In that year the corsican assembly approved a resolution stating ‘l’existence d’une communauté historique et culturelle vivante, regroupant les Corses d’origin et d’adoption: le peuple corse’ (CITA). The recognition of Corsica as a people went back to the agenda, only with the opposition of the PCF and the MRG (Vanina, 1995:25). Meanwhile, the different factions of nationalist and autonomist corsican movements agreed to present unified lists for the regional elections. The coalition was first tested in the local elections with good results. However, few months later, one of the coalition members, the autonomist Unione
*di u Populu Corsu*, joint the corsican committe –along with the RPR, UDF and PS- appointed to participate in the negotiations with the french government representative, the minister of interior Pierre Joxe (Vanina, 1995:33). As a result of the UPC’s decision to take part in the committee, the nationalist coalition went into a crisis and finally split. Within the radical nationalist movement FLNC also a crisis arised, due to divergent strategical options. The FLNC-canal historique and *A Cuncolta* held pragmatical positions towards the process, while the FLNC-canal habituel and the Movimentu per l’Autodeterminazione were sheptical about the possible results do the reform (Vanina, 1995:36).

**The Joxe Statute**

Despite the difficulties, in 1991 the new charter was finally approved. It provided Corsica with enhanced powers and introduced a potential element of assymmetry within the french institutional framework. One of the relevant questions the new statute introduced was the reference to the ‘corsican people’, as demanded by the corsican assembly in 1988. The final draft of the statute amended the term by stating that the corsicans were part of the french people as well (‘le peuple corse, composant du peuple français’). The issue was controversial and the bill passed in the Assemblée National with a narrow majority. However, the statute would not be definitively approved until the Conséil Constitutionnel assessed it was in accordance with the constitution. The constitutional court finally declared that the expression ‘corsican people’ was not constitutional as in France there is only one people ‘le peuple français’ as there is only one language, the ‘langue français’, rejecting any symbolical recognition of the corsican identity (Laughlin, 2000:1999).

The statute kept the administrative approach in the reforms. First, it suppressed the control *a priori* by the *prefet* over the activities of the Assembly, though the state kept the control over the regional activity in order to ensure the ‘national interest’, as stated in the article 47 of the charter. Therefore, the state’s representative in the island still retained some discretionnal powers over the assembly, though more limited than in the 1982 model. Second, it equaled the legal status of the region to *departments* and *communes*, improving the situation of 1982 but not situating the regions as the central actors at the substate level, that is, they would be rather
beside than above the local levels of administration (Verseaux (1999:3-11). Third, the regional executive council was now responsible to lead the activity of the territorial colectivity in the three main areas where the region had competences; economical development, culture and education, and territorial management (amenagement), but the new statute neither added significant competences nor deepened the regional capacity beyond an administrative dimension.

The Joxe statute can be regarded as the natural ‘next step’ of the territorial reform launched in 1982. Actually, the corsican nationalists felt that the process aimed to weaken peripheral identities, and, on the other hand, it virtually completed the territorial reform necessary to fulfill the EU’s regional policy requirements (Vanina, 1995:51). Focusing on administrative efficiency, the rationale for decentralisation was reduced to the insularity of Corsica to better adapt state-defined policies to the particular characteristics of the island. Therefore, the administrative approach of the new statute did not bring elements of recognition for the corsican identity.

The road to Matignon

The first elections to be held under the new charter were in 1992. The new scenario brought together again the nationalist and autonomist corsican movements under the coalition Corsica Nazione. The coalition’s manifesto claimed ‘the right of the corsican people to freely choose her destiny to recover her sovereignty and the control of her development’² (CITA). This claim for self-determination was intimately linked to culture and language, where cultural recognition must involve ‘cultural decolonisation, avec notamment l’offitlisation et l’enseignement obligatoire de la langue corse de la maternelle à l’université et à la mise en place de la coofficialité’ (Vanina, 1995:78). The strategy turned out successful; the coalition won 9 seats reaching 17% of the votes. The more radical MPA also obtained 4 seats and 8% of the votes. Thus, the nationalists movements were represented in the assembly with 13 seats and 25% of the votes. The RPR won 16 seats and 24% of the votes, the UDF 8 seats and 16%, and the leftist MRG 5 seats and 10% of the votes. The nationalist groups became relevant and an object of concern by traditional parties. In this context, JP. Rocca-Serra was elected president of the assembly.

² ‘le droit du peuple corse à choisir démocratiquement son destin en vue de la réappropriation de sa souverainité et de la maîtrise de son développement’.
supported by right and left parties, such the RPR and the MRG. Corsican nationalism had shown that a unified political strategy brought positive results, but soon the internal conflicts would arise again within Corsica Nazione the year after the elections (Vanina, 1995: 60).

The situation remained under these terms until 1998. In that year, the prefet of Corsica Claude Erignac was assassinated, and the crime represented the beginning of a new era for the corsican question in French politics. The prefet was killed by a dissident group from the FLNC, and the action strongly shocked the French and the Corsican society. The nationalist groups were severely affected by this situation in the elections of 1998. Only Corsica Nazione obtained representation, losing nearly half of electoral support down to a 10.8% of the votes. However, few months later another case shocked the corsican society. The new prefet, Pasqual Bonnet, was accused of illegal actions against corsican nationalists. From a political standpoint, these events showed that both French and Corsican nationalism must respect political fairplay (Daftary, 2000:30). On the one hand, the corsican society rejected violence as a mean to achieve nationalist claims, but on the other hand, the state’s response to the political demands of Corsica must also follow a democratic path. In the new regional elections of 1999, the corsican society supported this strategical option, and Corsica Nazione went back to the figures of the early nineties, with 8 seats and 17% of the votes. (I el MPA???)

Within this new context, some representatives in the corsican assembly started to cooperate creating a working group in the chamber. The group quickly reached an agreement on two fundamental demands regarding corsican autonomy. First, to update and reelaborate the statute of 1991, and second, to suppress the two departments of the island. By the end of the year, the prime minister Lionel Jospin announced his plan to meet with members of the corsican assembly. Jospin’s approach to the corsican question was not merely tactical. In an interview held in 1996 for Le Figaro, Jospin considered that the Joxe statute had reached its limits, and that the time had come for Corsica to receive an ‘original’ statute with ‘autonomous powers within the Republic’ on ‘efficiency and democracy’ grounds (Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004:636). The meetings and negotiations between corsican and french representatives that Lionel Jospin launched would be known as the Matignon process. As a result, a series of six rapports dealing
with different aspects of corsican decentralisation were issued, and they were the base for the agreements of july 20th 2000, and the later approval, in july 28th 2000, by the Corsican assembly with a wide majority of 44 of the 51 elected representatives.

The two basic demands of the corsican assembly were included in the proposals. First, the suppression of the corsican departments and to provide the region with the capacity to amend central government decisions affecting Corsica. Furthermore, the proposals included an innovation within the French institutional system. Under the term *éxperimentation* the Corsican assembly would receive legislative powers for a limited period of time, an arrangement to be revised at the end of the period as it would probably involve a constitutional revision to entrench it in the french legal system. Some controversial issues were not adressed in this first round of negotiations to increase the feasibility of the proposals. It was the case of the expression ‘corsican people’, that the constitutional court had rejected in the Joxe Statute and was postponed to a further round of negotiations after the presidential elections of 2002.

The Matignon process brought in my view a significant innovation in the french political system. First, the absence of violence in the island was a *sine qua non* condition to start the process, but it did not limit the scope of the possible agreements, thus reinforcing a political perspective over the process (Albertini & Torre, 2002:35). Second, the process was designed as a bilateral conversation between corsican and french representatives, an attempt that could overcome the classical approach of regional decentralisation introducing elements of what I have called ‘devolution to nations without states’. Third, the process aimed to bring opposed conceptions into a public debate, from radical jacobinism to corsican secessionism. Fourth, the process was designed to increase the feasibility of an agreement between such diverse positions addressing the reforms gradually, following the so-called *méthode caledonienne*.

**Matignon: confronting visions**

As I have already mentioned, the Matignon process can be regarded as the first formal meeting between Corsican and French elected representatives and the central government. Opposed to the top-down, unilateral, non-negotiated and mainly administrative approach of the Defferre and
Joxe statute, the Matignon process was a unique opportunity to confront the French national project with the demands of Corsican nationalist movements, exploring possible arrangements for the accommodation of Corsica within the French state.

The Corsican nationalist claims seemed to become more flexible and accept some kind of asymmetrical arrangement within the Republic that would recognise and provide Corsica with the necessary powers to preserve and promote her identity and to manage her own affairs. The nationalist discourse introduced elements of modernization such as a civic dimension to the traditionally ethnic-based Corsican identity, or the distinction between citizenship and nationality in the EU’s framework, seeking an asymmetrical arrangement for Corsica within France. The republican discourse seemed to split back into the classical distinction between Jacobines and Girondins. Beyond the reluctant vision towards decentralisation by the Jacobine republicanism, a more favourable approach arose, taking into account the need to adapt the territorial organisation of the state to the geographical, cultural and economical characteristics of the regions, though the final goal for this ‘neo-girondine’ position was not to recognise politically the island as much as to entrench it to the state. Ultimately, the controversy between the two positions lied in the extent to which an asymmetrical reform would threaten the unity of the Republic as a unnational state.

The division between girondinism and jacobinism was more an intra-party cleavage than a right-left issue. In fact, the strongest opposition to Jospin’s girondinisme would emerge within the Socialist Party, and specially from Jean-Pierre Chévenement, the minister of interior with the responsibility to implement the possible reforms. Chévenement opposition to the reform shows in my view how the accommodation of Corsica within France is not just an administrative matter but rather a challenge to the French national identity project based on the idea of ‘community of citizens’ (Schnapper). Any institutional reform beyond an administrative dimension, whether the recognition of the ‘corsican people’ or the possibility of legislative powers for the Corsican assembly is seen as a threat weakening the Republic externally and internally. Externally, as the horizon of a Europe of the Regions is an opportunity for Corsican nationalism, it becomes a menace for French Jacobinism. To provide Corsica with legislative powers, a status similar to the
overseas territories and the supression of the corsican departments would be a failure for France and a success for the secessionist movements (Chévenement, 2001:11). Even though the project aimed explicitly ‘to finish with violence and ensure peace, to strengthen Corsica entrenchment to the Republic, and to clarify responsibility in the management of the island affairs’, for Chévenement these reforms would bring ‘dreadful consequences’, worsening ‘the crise of France as a political nation, as a community of citizens, doomed by post-national prophets to be dissolved into the Europe of the Regions’ (Chévenement, 2001:13). Due to his frontal opposition to the Matignon process, Chévenement finally resigned. Jospin appointed a new minister, Daniel Vaillant, who would support the project. He acknowledged the corsican specificity, not only in geographical terms but also in cultural and historical. In contrast with Chevénement positions, the new minister declared that the reforms could not be developed “as though Corsica were not a particular region by her history, by her culture. As though she were not an island” (Journal Officiel 16-23rd May, 2002, quoted in Pellegrenetti & Rovere, 2004:639). This is one of the most pluralist conceptions of the state an particularly of Corsica that can be found in french contemporary politics. This vision of the territorial diversity in France does not challenge traditional concepts such the nation or the citizenship, and it can be argued that the bid for the regionalisation aims at strengthening and improving the structures of the state. Nonetheless, the incipient elements within this approach added a girondine element to the classical french jacobinism.

To sum up the different visions I have dealt with in this section, it could be said that the corsican nationalism tried to accommodate its discourse to an institutional horizon that the french institutions could accept. First, the reference to self-determination shifts towards a more flexible position. Second, the institutional form for the case of Corsica fits with the status held by the overseas territories, a institutional framework that the French state could legally accept. Third, the political recognition of Corsica is rooted in her geographical context, mainly the Mediterranean, where most of the islands enjoy some sort of special status if not a state of their own, and the European Union, specially adhering to the idea of the Europe of the Regions. In this context Corsica could have a significant voice in this interdependent network. With regard to the republican approach to the corsican question, in my view it is based on two assumptions.
First, there is only one nation, France, and the French project of national identity appeals to Corsica as an undistinctive part of the nation. Second, the possible territorial reform of the state must limit the recognition of internal identities on regional or geographical grounds. Any step beyond an administrative dimension is perceived as a threat to the unity of the Republic.

After Matignon

Despite Jospin’s implication, or maybe because of it, his defeat in the presidential elections of 2002 abruptly ruined the process and shifted down expectations. Jospin’s defeat was something more than a personal political failure; it was the failure of a more pluralistic approach to the French territorial diversity. The administrative approach to the Corsican question arose again. The possible reforms to be developed would not go beyond a functional and administrative dimension, let alone any sort of political recognition of Corsica. The asymmetry both in contents and process was rejected by the reelected president of the Republic Jacques Chirac. In his view, it was not feasible to provide a region with particular legislative powers, any significant reform must be extended to all the regions, via referendum and reforming the constitution in order that the state could keep control over the system (Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004:61).

The legislative elections were held few weeks later after Chirac won the reelection. Nicolas Sarkzy became the minister of interior, and as soon as July 27th he visited Ajaccio, recentering the question on administrative grounds addressing the possible reforms in Corsica as a pilot programme to be later extended to all the regions. In his view, the corsican specificity relies in the fact that “they (the corsicans) will be in the front of this (new step of) decentralisation” (Pellegrinetti & Rovere, 2004:642). Actually, in January 2002, the constitutional court had rejected the possibility of legislative powers for Corsica, even in the form of ‘expérimentation’. Once again, both the constitutional and the political system excluded the possibility of an asymmetrical arrangement for Corsica. The reforms were limited to the modification of the article 72 of the French constitution, providing the regions with the constitutional protection of departments and municipalities. The reform fell short of the Matignon scheme, and it actually reinforced the state control over the process keeping the power to hold regional referendums to
approve the new charters. The referendums were finally the most significant political recognition of the regions as a space of collective decision included in the reform. The referendum in Corsica was scheduled for the summer of 2003. The most relevant question addressed was the suppression of the corsican departments. Despite the efforts taken by Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the prime minister, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the minister of interior, to recenter the corsican question on administrative grounds, the referendum found a strong opposition in those sectors who had previously been against the Matignon process. As I mentioned earlier, the reluctancy towards corsican autonomy was present in all the parties, and the referendum of 2002 found the opposition of wide sectors within both conservative and left parties. Only one party showed a unified position towards the referendum: the Communist Party clearly rejected it. The reasons were also diverse, but deeply rooted in the jacobine tradition, from those still perceiving any regionalisation proposal as the first step towards the independence of Corsica, to those regarding it at an attempt to transform France into a federal state to be dissolved in the Europe of the regions. The French government argued that the reform would be a new step in the modernisation and rationalisation of the administration, advancing towards subsidiarity. The corsican nationalists had an ambiguous feeling about the referendum. On the one hand, the proposal fell short to fulfill their demands of autonomy, but on the other hand the reform was seen as the maximum level of decentralisation that the central government would offer (Pellegrenetti & Rovere, 2004:645). Finally, the referendum was celebrated: with a low turnout the electorate rejected the proposals.

Conclusions

Despite the failure of Matignon, the process put into question to what extent the republican project could adapt its discourse to accommodate territorial demands of recognition by Corsica. However, in the political discourse of the french government and political parties there is hardly anything beyond a general reference to the Corsican specificity or to the French diversity. These references are made from a functional approach, to improve the administration, to enhance local democracy, to strenghten the Republic, but they do not affect the unitarian conception of the state and the nation, the so-called community of citizens. For a wide range of political parties any institutional reform providing the Corsican assembly with political powers, whether
legislative capacity, symbolical recognition or corsican language in school, is regarded as a threat to the unity of the Republic. I have argued that the Matignon process have been an innovation in the way the Republic face territorial demands for recognition, but it have not resulted in a new model but rather in deepening the functional regionalisation of the state, let alone a political enhancement of Corsica as a space of political decision.

In front of the modernisation of the corsican nationalist discourse, the french national project hesitated between the immobilism and the reformulation of the republican project. Traditional republicanism regards any step towards regionalisation as a threat for the republic, even if it only affects the functional structure of the state and not the ideal of national unity, assimilating centralisation with homogenisation. Reformists argue that the reforms are necessary to modernise and strengthen the republican project, but they also rely on the unitarian conception of the ‘community of citizens’. Even though this debate may remind of the classical positions between girondinism and jacobinism, or, as Loughlin points out, between pluralists and sovereignists, in my view both share a fundamental view over the unitarian concept of frenchness, with no room for the recognition of minority nations within the state such as the corsican nationalists claim (Loughlin, 2006:11). Furthermore, the failure of the 2003 referendum reinforce this argument, representing the success of the more traditional conception of the state. In 2007 presidential campaign, the leading candidates Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolene Royal kept decentralisation in their political agenda, stressing the administrative and local democracy improvement as the main arguments for the reform. Sarkozy regarded the corsican question as a matter of administrative organisation which is in fact an overall issue for the whole state, as his actions during his office had shown, while Royal’s position could seem more flexible towards Corsica, but beyond some gestures her position share the classical features of republicanism. In an visit to Corsica in 2006, for instance, she stated that ‘l’ordre républican doit s’appliquer partout’ as the island must receive the same treatment as any other part of France, adding that ‘tout changement aux institutions de la Corse serait déraisonnable’.

To summarise, it can be argued that despite some innovative elements such the limited constitutional reform or the modernisation of the corsican nationalism, the possibility of a stable
accommodation for Corsica enjoying a special status within France is at the moment out of reach. In my view the question is now to what extent we are witnessing the ‘end’ of the corsican question as it seems the French state does not consider the possibility to explore assymmetrical arrangements in continental France. To what extent the corsican issue can be out of the french political agenda without weakening corsican nationalism and the social support in Corsica for its claims is in my view the key point to argue that the corsican ‘problem’ is more and more considered a matter of administrative rationalisation due to geographical reasons and less a political problem of recognising a minority nation within the state. The 2008 elections in the regional assembly will test the strenght of the nationalist groups that experience cyclical internal conflicts of leadership and strategy. They were able to run together in the last elections of 2004 winning 8 out of 51 seats in the assembly, in the aftermath of the referendum of 2003, so the question will be whether the nationalist discourse will appeal the corsican society enough to support their claims and situate the corsican question again in the french political agenda.