In Focus
Regions between Recentralisation and Independence

Benjamin Hennig and Igor Calzada look at the rapidly changing balance of power between states and their regions.

2014 will be remembered as the year in which two nation-states faced the debate around the relationship between regions and the centre within their borders in very different ways. The United Kingdom witnessed a closely fought pro-union outcome in a referendum on Scottish independence. In Catalonia, despite a consultation process showing a huge majority declare their desire for independence, the Spanish government refused to countenance a vote on Catalan secession.

The balance of power between the region and its nation state is changing. The City-Regions project (www.cityregions.org) looks at this process in terms of the tendency for either recentralisation or independence in the contexts of eight selected regions, primarily in Europe. Each of these 'city-regions' are defined either as distinctive regions within their respective nation-states or as areas crossing national borders that link sufficiently strongly to constitute a region. The eight regions are: Liverpool & Manchester (UK), Scotland (UK), Catalonia (Spain), the Basque Country (Spain/France), Oresund (Denmark/Sweden), Iceland, Dublin (Ireland) and Portland (Oregon State, USA).

The selected regions represent different geographical entities of different population and economic characters. On the map, the varying sizes of circles represent the total population for each region. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of each region is shown in the accompanying chart.

Of central importance is that each region is its own dynamic and emergent networked geo-political unit. It is this factor that is essentially transforming the nature of established nation-states. The dynamics involved occur through social innovation processes, which are building a new regional order. This order may be driven by a diverse range of political or economic factors, but these can also emphasise tensions in the relationship between nation-states and these regions, stemming from trends towards either greater recentralisation or greater devolution, with independence as an ultimate outcome. (The table illustrates the theoretical framework of these processes in the different case study areas.)
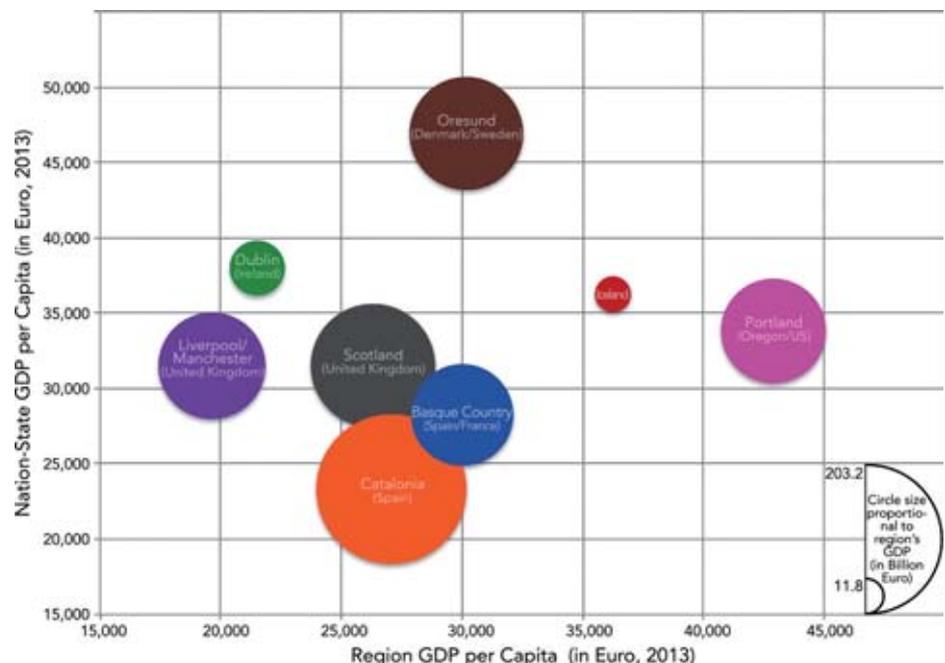
The regional order may be characterised in terms of either 'politically-nationalistic' strategies, which are fuelled by community-based national identity, or 'economically-non-nationalistic' strategies, which are motivated by competitiveness-based economic factors. Investigating the population and GDP contributions of the case-study regions to their nation-states helps to explain the source of these political tensions.
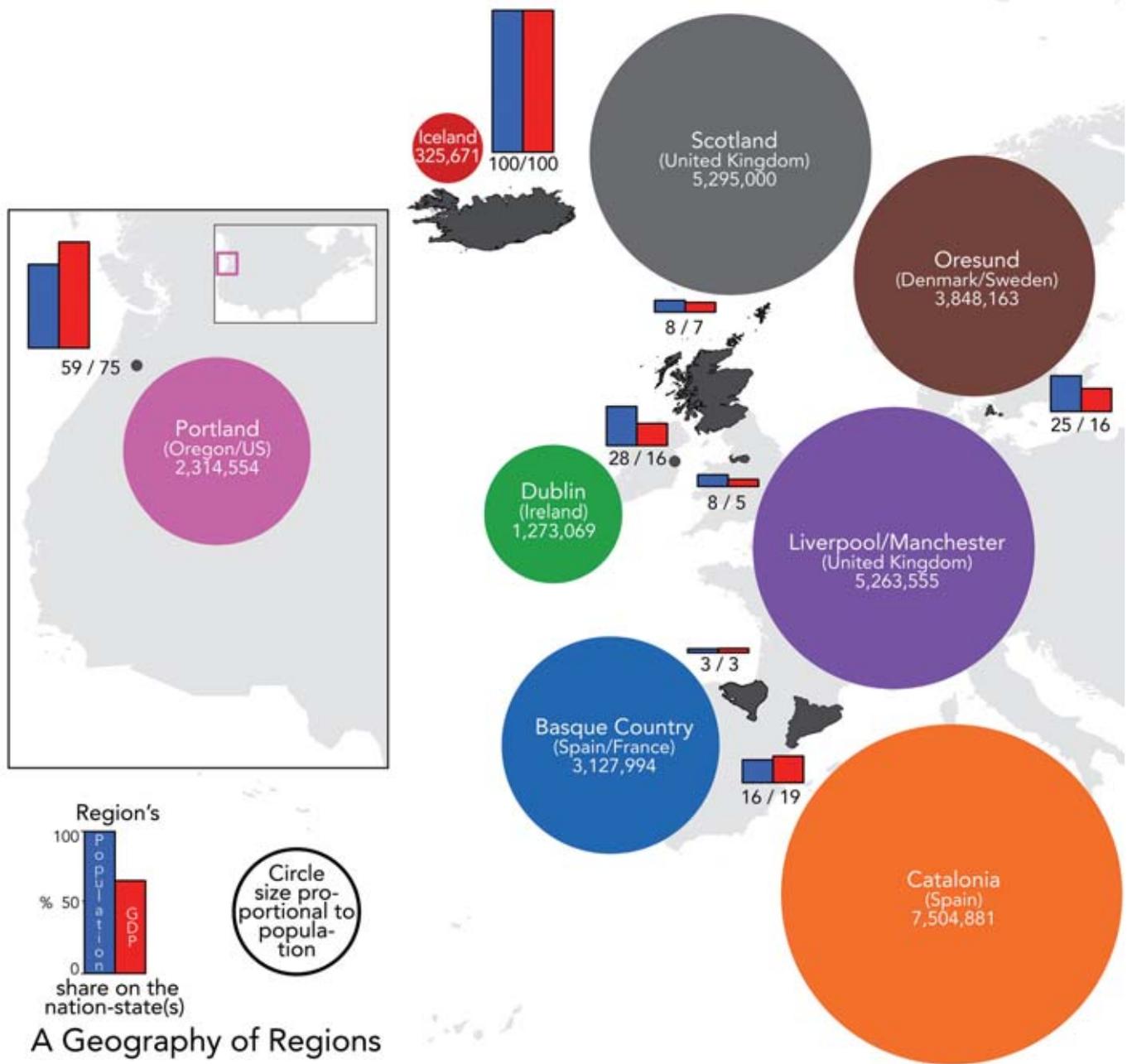
All of these city regions require a relative equivalence between their population and their GDP contribution to the nation-state to provoke a tension, and thereby a negotiation, that can lead either towards recentralisation or independence. An increase in the GDP and population contributions made by a region to its nation-state, sparks a flurry of consequences involving tensions around political and economic sovereignty, whether in favour of or in opposition to recentralisation or devolution/independence.

Dublin, Portland and Iceland have all been driven by a recentralisation principle, while Oresund and Liverpool/Manchester seem more likely to evolve gradually to become more concerned with devolution. Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country, however, already exhibit a continuous tension that is clearly tilted towards greater devolution or, indeed, even independence.

Further reading:

Calzada, I. (2015), PostIndependence, TransLoKal – Academic Entrepreneurship for Policy Making – Publishing, Donostia.

A Geography of Regions

Map labels:
- Iceland 325,671 — 100/100
- Scotland (United Kingdom) 5,295,000 — 8 / 7
- Oresund (Denmark/Sweden) 3,848,163 — 25 / 16
- Portland (Oregon/US) 2,314,554 — 59 / 75
- Dublin (Ireland) 1,273,069 — 28 / 16
- Liverpool/Manchester (United Kingdom) 5,263,555 — 8 / 5
- Basque Country (Spain/France) 3,127,994 — 3 / 3
- Catalonia (Spain) 7,504,881 — 16 / 19

Legend:
Region's Population / GDP — 100, 50, 0 %
share on the nation-state(s)

Circle size proportional to population

Region	Basque Country	Portland	Dublin	Oresund	Iceland	Liverpool/ Manchester	Scotland	Catalonia
Nation-States	Spain and France	United States	Ireland	Sweden and Denmark	Iceland	United Kingdom		Spain
Driver	Nation-state devolution processes	Socio-economic renewal		Global flows of migration and flows	Internal democratic regeneration	Nation-state devolution processes		
Taxonomy	Small nation	Nation-state economic-political hub		Cross-border transnational region	Small state	Separated city-regions	Small nation	
Profile	Cross-border polycentrism	Sustainable monocentrism	Connected monocentrism	Cross-border regional hub	Smallness *glocal* resilience	Rivalry	Rationalised Dialectic	Antagonistic Dialectic
Strategies	Politically driven nationalistic	Economically driven non-nationalistic		Cross-border regional hub	Politically driven nationalistic	Economically driven non-nationalistic	Politically driven nationalistic	