

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO PALERMO



Francesco Palermo is Director of the Institute for Studies on Federalism and Regionalism at the European Academy (EURAC) in Bolzano/Bozen, Italy. He also is an Associate Professor of Comparative Law at the University of Verona; a former Senior Legal Adviser to the OCSE High Commission on National Minorities; a member of the Italian Senate; a newspaper columnist for the daily Alto Adige/Trentino; the Interim President of the Advisory

Committee on the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; a member of the Board of Directors for the International Association of Centers for Federalism Studies; and Director of the book series, Studies in Territorial and Cultural Diversity Governance (Leiden/Boston)

TGCI: Thank you for doing this interview. Let's begin with you. How did you get interested and engaged in issues of federalism and governance?

Francesco Palermo: I was born in Bolzano, in South Tyrol, which is an autonomous province in northern Italy and is itself a fascinating case of federal governance. Perhaps because of where I was born I became interested in federalism, and the question of how different levels of government can interact in a cooperative and not a conflictive way. I pursued this interest by getting a PhD in University of Innsbruck, where my doctoral thesis focused on regionalism and the foreign relations of subnational entities. I then started as a researcher at EURAC, and over time came into my present position as Director of EURAC's Institute for Studies on Federalism and Regionalism. I also am a member of the Italian Parliament, having been elected as an independent Senator from South Tyrol.

TGCI: Can you tell a little more about EURAC?

Francesco Palermo: The European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC) lies in the heart of the Dolomite mountains in Northern Italy. Created in 1992 as an independent research center, EURAC is home to researchers from all over the world who work together on a wide range of interdisciplinary projects. Experts in law and natural sciences, linguists and geneticists collaborate with public and private agencies towards the resolution of the central issues of our day. Together they contribute to create a future-oriented Europe.

TGCI: How would you define federalism?

Francesco Palermo: The term "federalism" is used to describe a system of government in which sovereignty and power are constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and constituent political units (such as states or provinces). Federalism is a system based upon democratic rules and institutions in which the power to govern is shared between national and provincial/state governments, creating what is often called a federation As the late Daniel Elazar said: "Federalism is a mix of self-rule and shared rule."

TGCI: How many countries in the world today operate on a federalist model?

Francesco Palermo: It depends on how you define federalism. There are at least 25 federal countries in the world today representing 40 percent of the world's population. But many more countries show federal features, despite not defining themselves as "federal", such as Spain, Italy, the UK and many others.

TGCI: So federal governance seems quite applicable in today's world.

Francesco Palermo: yes, growing complexity in governance marks today's world. There are many different constituencies clamoring to participate in decision-making processes. Often the political response to such complexity is to call for the simplification of decision-making. However, in practice what's needed are tools that can help countries say "yes" to such complexity, and bring actors who otherwise would have been excluded into the governance decision-making process.

TGCI: Including citizens of course.

Francesco Palermo: Absolutely including citizens. In the final analysis those in positions of political power have the final word, they need to consult with citizen groups and other societal actors in order for their decisions to be perceived as legitimate.

TGCI: You make the point that there is no "one size fits all" model of federalism.

Francesco Palermo: Yes for example look at the difference in the federal governance systems that exist in countries such as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, the United States, Germany, and South Africa. All of these countries follow the principles of federal governance, though they apply them in different ways.

The origins of many federal states lies in unity governments, which made political decisions to decentralize. They did this so that power could be shared with sub-national units representing different constituencies. Such was the case in countries such as Belgium, the United Kingdom, India and lately South Sudan. On the other hand you have countries like Germany, Switzerland or the US, which joined together previously independent sovereign states to form a federal system

TGCI: Can you describe some of the tools that federal countries use to ensure power sharing between the state and its sub-national units of government?

Francesco Palermo: The most common used tool is the device of having dual legislative chambers, one based on population and one based on giving representation to a sub-national unit, such as the US Senate. Another tool are inter-governmental relations among executives of different tiers of government in several matters, from financial resources to the environment. There also are tools focused on participatory procedures that enable individual states or citizens to engage in the drafting of legislation.

TGCI: Federalism is widely viewed as an effective governance system for the protection of minority rights. Can you speak to this point?

Francesco Palermo: There is a delicate balance that needs to be achieved when constructing a federal state composed of various minorities. If you have a distinct ethnic group, the more self-government they can achieve the less interest they have in establishing their own state. For example, had Scotland been given broader autonomy from the United Kingdom an independence referendum would most likely not have been needed. Catalonia in Spain is another example of an opportunity foregone. Had Spain not refused to adopt more of a true federal system, in response to requests from Catalonia to do so, the prospect of Catalonia seceding from Spain would not have occurred.

TGCI: Are there governance debates in other parts of the world that can draw on successful lessons learned about how federalism works from elsewhere?

Francesco Palermo: In many countries you find regions or municipalities asking for greater autonomy; for example in Flanders in Belgium or parts of the former Soviet Union or South Tyrol here in Italy. If the central state listens to these requests and is able to be flexible and grant these regions a certain degree of autonomy, then federalism can help keep these countries together. If the central state is stubborn and unresponsive to these requests, in all likelihood the regions will end up seceding. Secession reflects a failure in the federal system. It proves that something went wrong

TGCI: Can you give an example of a state that failed to respond to the needs of its regions for more autonomy?

Francesco Palermo: Ukraine is a good example. Over the past two decades successive governments in Kiev failed to recognize Crimea's interest in having genuine autonomy. Ukraine is a very diverse country but it has been ruled as a centralized state. Had the central government in Kiev been able to grant more political autonomy to the regional government in Crimea, it probably would have averted the recent Russian takeover of that region. Russia took advantage of

Ukraine's political neglect of the Crimea. The same dynamic is at play in the Eastern part of Ukraine where military intervention now makes it more difficult for a solution that grants more autonomy to Ukraine's eastern provinces and forestalls the prospect of the regions seceding.

TGCI: What are the potential drawbacks of a federalist system?

Francesco Palermo: Federalist systems respond to changes in the political environment. When you have a conflictive political system, as you have at the moment in the US, the system exerts its control and blocks decisions that are too unilateral.

TGCI: What about the relationship between federalism and democracy?

Francesco Palermo: Federalism and democracy need to go together. An essential part of federalism is for a country's citizens to be able to have control over the exercise of political power, and ensure that its leaders are accountable to the people they serve.

TGCI: Is it possible to have federalism without democracy?

Francesco Palermo: On paper you can have a constitutional design that has all the elements of federalism except democracy; see for example the former USSR, some countries in Latin America, or Ethiopia, which has a federal system but only one political party so there are no opportunities for reciprocal political control. In practice, however, federalism cannot operate without democracy

TGCI: Does federalism have a role to play in global governance?

Francesco Palermo: The need for more effective global governance systems is widely recognized. The question is how feasible is it to have stronger global governance? Is the world too geographically and culturally diverse? Are the global differences between rich countries and poor countries too great? Can federalism work without a minimum level of homogeneity among its constituent parts? Even in Europe you have this problem. Look at the differences between Finland and Greece. Do they have something in common other than the Euro? I am morally convinced that we need to work towards better global governance but we have to move slowly given the differences that exist between countries.

TGCI: What are your views on global citizenship? Do you consider yourself a global citizen?

Francesco Palermo: If being a global citizen means being an aware person who fits his or her actions into different governance contexts, then I can identify with this term. In terms of citizenship I always try to reflect the roots that I come from. But this changes depending on the context in which I'm operating. If I am in Italy I see

myself as a South Tyrolean; if in Europe I am an Italian; on a larger stage perhaps a European or a global citizen. I am not sure.

TGCI: Thank you very much.

Federalist experiment only 300 years old