

“We are not masters in our own house.”

An interview with Jean-Guy Talamoni, President of the Assembly of Corsica (Assemblée de Corse) – Bastia, 4 September 2020



Benedikter: Since 1 January 2018 Corsica is just one Collectivity, which has united and replaced the two Départements and the previous Territorial Collectivity. The regional elections of December 2017 have resulted in a victory of the nationalist parties. The majority of the Corsican population supports your autonomy project. Is the French state ready to enter in talks and negotiations with Corsica's institutions?

Talamoni: There is no political opening up by the French government. Now we have got just one unitary Collectivity of Corsica, which has taken over all responsibilities and resources of the predecessors. Until the middle of 2018 we have talked about the statute of the new Collectivity after the fusion of the three previous institutions. Starting from our electoral success in December 2017 and from our fundamental proposals, we have invited the government to open up a dialogue with us.

How has the government reacted? Have there been some constructive talks?

Talamoni: It has been extremely difficult. We were discussing about autonomy issues already with President Hollande since 2015. He made some first concessions but was not empowered to amend the French constitution to establish the autonomy of Corsica as he had no majority of three fifths in the national parliament. Addressing the Corsican Assembly, Hollande said that Corsica could not obtain a new autonomy statute. President Macron, in a first stage, was very open minded, but since his first visit on the island all these promises have been forgotten. So far, since December 2017 nothing has changed, although now as nationalist parties we are backed by a large absolute majority of the voters. We have got a strong democratic legitimacy

for our proposals and claim the formal start of negotiations with the French government. Based on our geographical, historical, cultural and linguistic peculiarity we reiterated our proposal to amend the Constitution inserting a new article referring to the autonomy of Corsica. But Paris, on this issue, remains inaccessible. A new autonomy statute for now, is not on the programme. No progress can be reported neither on the issue of the real estate market, nor of the prisoners, nor of the financial autonomy nor of the co-officiality of the Corsican language. On contrary, the State has retaken some powers. Recently, the prefect has launched a new council of mayors, which will be in direct competition with the existing council of Corsica's municipalities.

Besides these basic claims of the Corsican nationalist parties do you already have a detailed draft of an autonomy statute, perhaps drawing from the proposal of legal adviser Wanda Mastor?

Talamoni: I myself as president of the Assembly of Corsica have appointed Mrs Mastor with working out this proposal. What she proposes is an amendment of the Constitution similar to the art. 74 Constitution referring to the ancient statute of New Caledonia, today an autonomous territory on the way to independence. We claim a similar article, but Paris rejects that. Also *Femu a Corsica*, our allied partner in the majority, fully agrees on that proposal for a territorial autonomy. My party *Corsica libera* is committed to autonomy as an intermediate step, but later on we should go beyond that. Wanda Mastor's report shows the legal way to achieve this goal.

In which policy area Corsica's nationalist parties perceive the major need of self-government, thus the need of more autonomous legislative and executive powers?

Talamoni: The control of the real estate market is very urgent for us, as the Corsican people are literally expelled out of their homeland by wealthy people from outside. Almost 40% of all houses on Corsica are used as second homes. Due to the market dynamics the prices of real estates are growing relentlessly, and poorer Corsican families are unable to keep the pace with. The prices of real estate assets directly affect the rents of apartments. Thus, many Corsicans cannot any more find some flats at affordable prices. A growing number of Corsicans leave the island to find a job and live somewhere else in France and abroad. We need special powers to control the real estate market as the price level grows more than in similar regions of the mainland. Thus, some restrictions must be adopted for accessing real estate property in Corsica. For example, whoever wants to buy a real estate should prove to have been legally residing on Corsica for at least 5 years.

Which other political legislative powers in the hand of the Collectivity of Corsica do you miss most?

Talamoni: As Collectivity we are already responsible for a number of public duties, but we want more, in compliance with the principle of subsidiarity. The education system is not doing so well, social inequalities are high as reported by the PISA assessments. But lacking autonomy, we cannot intervene substantially. There are some more reasons why social inequality keeps on growing in Corsica. Thus, I made the proposal to establish a general basic social allowance for all families, but not without prerequisites. In the health sector, the urban

planning, the labour policy and the environmental protection we need more autonomous powers. We should be in the position to legislate in all such policy areas.

Currently the Collectivity is only allowed to formulate some proposals to be submitted to the government in Paris. What happens if this does not agree?

Talamoni: This possibility exists already since 1981, when president Mitterand granted some few powers to our Assembly. Most of such proposals have been advanced since the 1980ies, but never with success. Regularly such proposals ended up as wastepaper. It did not work. For that reason, we do not recur to this opportunity anymore.

Is the Corsican Assembly allowed to approve regulations to adapt national legislation to Corsica's requirements?

Talamoni: What we talk about in this regard are French national acts which affect Corsica. According to art. 24 of the Constitution only the French Parliament in Paris is entitled to take decisions respecting some rights of consultation of Corsica's institutions within the scope of our powers. But in the French legal system there is such a hybrid form of regional acts applied in New Caledonia and termed "act of the country" (*loi du pays*). There is some legal debate whether such acts are real acts. From my point of view as a lawyer these acts are no legal acts, but just decisions in application of their powers as a Collectivity *sui generis*.

Now, our Assembly has got more powers than a common assembly of French regions. Looking on our agenda, we discuss much more truly political issues rather than just administrative questions. If serious political problems arise, we, the President of the executive board Gilles Simeoni and I, are the first politicians to be addressed by the people, even before the prefect as the real responsible for law and order on the island. But, as Collectivity we do not have any responsibility neither for the police nor for the judiciary. In the perception of the common public unfortunately we are overestimated in our powers. This is risky, as a politician can only be held accountable for what he can rule to a minimum extent. But we Corsicans are not the masters in our own house! The most powerful man on the island is the Prefect representing the French government.

If this blockade by Paris will last and no progress in the autonomy issue can be achieved, do you risk a new radicalisation in parts of Corsica's society and politics?

Talamoni: The armed struggle for self-determination in 2014 has definitely ceased. The FLNC's decision to end the violence is an irrevocable and fundamental change in the political strategy. I am convinced of that. But we cannot rule out new political problems and single acts of political violence forever. On the other hand the political pressure of the nationalist movement and the vote of the electorate hasn't triggered any reaction so far. We have been elected by 56% of Corsica's voters with a clear political program, but the French state has rejected all our proposals. These is an affront. We have played by their rules of the game, by rules set by the State as the electoral law issued by Paris. We won and are now in charge of applying our political project.

What should we do in such a situation? We have to rule out any return to armed resistance which is out of discussion. I am in solidarity with the FLNC's renouncement on armed struggle in 2014. On the other hand, based on our strength in terms of votes and seats in the Assembly,

we should enter in negotiations with Paris. We are also backed by many mayors of Corsica. Personally, in my party *Corsica libera* I am committed to go even further on. This means that our political representatives should commit some acts of civil disobedience to push the State to a dialogue and serious negotiations. The message what we convey today is this one: it does not matter whether having 56% of the votes of Corsicans backing our request of autonomy or maybe 95% tomorrow. We simply have got the right to be heard today.

The Corsican language so far has not been recognized as Corsica's second official language. Moreover, it is spoken always less in daily life. The transmission rate of the Corsican language in families continues to decrease. What can you do to step up this recognition?

Talamoni: Without co-officiality, the use of the language will further decrease, in both daily life, politics and media. The Corsican Assembly already in 2005 committed an inquiry to the University of Corte to check the state of the Corsican language. The result of this report was very clear: whenever Corsican would not be declared co-official language soon, it is bound to disappear. This is a conclusion drawn by social scientists based on facts and data. On the one hand, the daily use of Corsican is declining, on the other hand, the awareness about the necessity to cherish our language recently is growing. Thus, today we have a high linguistic awareness, but a weak practice. As a young man in the 1970ies, I had much more conversation partners in Corsican as I have today. Unfortunately, since the 1960ies and 1970ies a large part of the Corsican ceased to use the language as they retained it useless. Today, when we put on vote the issue of recognizing Corsican as second official language, all are in favour no matter from the right or from the left-wing parties. In Corsica there is a large consensus on the recognition of Corsican as co-official language of our homeland.

An official language has to be established in its standardized version. What's about the written form of Corsican?

Talamoni: The written Corsican has been developed in the 20th century only. Until the 19th century Corsicans wrote in Italian. There was a diglossia. Italian was used as official language in public life and in literature, and Corsican was the vernacular language of daily life. There were almost no Corsican authors who wrote in Corsican. We had a diglossia with two languages belonging to the same language family. Today we have got a diglossia with French as dominant and only official language, but no equal bilingualism. Different languages are used for different purposes.

Today we Corsicans claim a new public commitment for the protection of our language. Unfortunately the French language policy is still marked by the same guiding principles in the times of the French Revolution. The political class of France just speaks one language: French. The revolutionary France even strived to eliminate all forms of *patois*, the dialects and minority languages. The position of French as the state's only official language has become a dogma. Thus, all our requests for co-officiality are currently blocked.

In 2007 the Corsican Assembly has decided to strengthen the bilingual teaching in the schools. According to most recent available data just 16,2% of the pupils of primary and secondary level of the colleges are enrolled in such schools. What can be done to strengthen the role of Corsican in the education system?

Talamoni: Indeed, there are too few pupils enrolled in the bilingual schools. What we could do as first step is to establish Corsican as a compulsory subject and language of the education for everybody in our schools, in the framework of a new autonomy statute, as usual for all officially recognized minority languages in other countries. Today Corsican is only optional, whereas all subjects throughout France are taught in French medium language. What does it mean for the school? If ever the school would be an optional, for sure not all children would attend it. By law there is a compulsory education and in the same way the people's own language should also be compulsory in the public schools. It is not enough to teach Corsican just as an optional subject, although this is of utmost importance, but Corsican should be a compulsory medium language. For that purpose we need many more teachers in Corsican language.

Would such a provision change the overall importance of the Corsican language in the society and public life?

Talamoni: For sure this is not sufficient. We have to think about the use of the language in the society at large. In many regions with ethnic minorities the members of such minority communities do not keep their mother tongue in high esteem. The century long cultural colonization has produced a kind of self-disdain, which is not easy to tackle. We Corsicans should appreciate our language more. To be an official language means that the language is accepted also as a part of professional skills and career, as a means for social promotion, first of all in public service. In Corsica still we have got a significant number of migrants from both France and other countries, whose children do not learn Corsican at all as they do not deem it useful in any sense. But migrants in Catalonia learn Catalan, as only Catalan will ensure their social promotion. What about us?

As the president of Corsica's Assembly you have inaugurated the new session with a speech fully in Corsican. This in official France has been depicted as scandal. But in which extent the Corsican language is used in political life in Corsica? In the municipalities for instance?

Talamoni: Although everybody understands Corsican, in our Assembly, the dominant language is French. On the road, by far not all people understand Corsican. Even not all elected representatives are able to speak and write it. The nationalist of course speak it, but probably not all members at the grassroots level. I held my speech in Corsican to raise the issue, and I did it to address our core problems and claims towards Paris. This is what counts most, but Paris just took account of the fact that in the Corsican Assembly the president held a speech in a language different from the language of the Republic. This has been perceived as a sacrilege. This is the current situation in France. I am an elected member of the French electoral system, but above all I have been elected by Corsicans and to represent Corsican requests.

Also in French Polynesia there has been a similar case, which proved the perversion of France's policy in this regard. There has been an amendment of the French constitution to establish French as the only official State language. But this effort was done in defence of French against foreign languages, English first of all, not for fighting against small minority languages as it is for Corsican. But exactly this article has been used to challenge the use of Tahitian in institutions in Polynesia. Unbelievable. Today you have got high-school and university courses

in English in Paris, in contradiction with the constitution, and even in the stock exchange in Paris the use of English is allowed, but no Corsican in our own Assembly.

Which role has the Corsican language got in the media?

Talamoni: The Collectivity of Corsica supports the public radio and TV in Corsican language in financial terms. There is Radio Corse Frequenza Mora RCFM which is broadcasting a range of programs in Corsican language. The current majority in the Corsican Assembly wants to enlarge the media supply in Corsican language. For this purpose today we need a much stronger presence of Corsican language and programs in the media, in particular in TV and digital media at large. Just symbolic political acts are not enough. We definitely need more resources.

What's about the newspapers in Corsican language? Do you plan additional support for the press to get a Corsican newspaper published?

Talamoni: We should do more in this regard. In the 2000's I myself founded a newspaper in Corsican "A Nazione". Today we have just got one local newspaper, *Corse Matin*, with some articles in Corsican language, but they are very rare. Of course it would be ideal to publish a Corsican daily newspaper, but in economic terms this is extremely difficult. Even regional newspapers in French language are currently facing huge problems to survive. Some time ago in Corsica we had even two daily newspapers in French. But today, it would be a big economic challenge to release a daily newspaper in Corsican language only.

Are there some forms of cross-border cooperation between the Collectivity of Corsica and foreign regions, first of all with Italy?

Talamoni: Yes, such a cooperation is working since longer times within the limits of our "regional" powers. 4 years ago together with the president of the Regional Council of Sardinia, Gianfranco Ganau, I have founded the permanent Corsican-Sardinian Council. The chairpersons of all political groups of both assemblies are members of that council. The new president of Sardinia is close to the Lega, but our cooperation continues on institutional level, especially with regard to cultural affairs. We have got some cooperation on university level, but also we established a common award for literature. Furthermore, there are some projects of economic cooperation. So we have got a quite good relationship with Sardinia. Generally speaking, the relations between Corsica and Italy since World War II have been deeply compromised for decades. Italy's occupation of the island in 1942/43 has been very brutal and left deep traces. Afterwards the generation of the war did not want to anything anymore with Italy. The younger generation today is more open minded and more interested in an exchange with Italy.

Thus it seem unconceivable to think about Italy as a protector state with regard to Corsica as a part of France, in the same way as Austria is acting on behalf of South Tyrol, actively committed for its autonomy. But even France in the first years has been acting in this way on behalf of the Aosta Valley.

Talamoni: In the period between the world wars among Corsican intellectuals there have been, a few *Irredenta* clubs voicing up for a "Corsica Italiana", an Italian Corsica. But such groups, due to Mussolini's plans to annex Corsica and due to the occupation during the World

War II, have been fully discredited. Today there aren't any such *Irredenta*-friendly groups any more. In France, such groups for a while served to discredit all activists claiming self-determination and autonomy of Corsica. But in the interwar period there has been another Corsican movement committed just for autonomy or independence, whereas only very few people claimed the annexation to Italy. The official politics of France later on utilized has lumped ha them all together discrediting the whole movement for self-government of Corsica. We have got a cultural relationship with Italy, and we share a common cultural heritage and history. Thus, I am favouring new partnerships with Italy's region. But seeking Italy's political support for our claims of autonomy could not be advocated here in Corsica.

The French state in its public expenditures seems to be quite generous with Corsica compared with similar regions of Southern France. Of course, we have to keep in mind the much bigger scope of administrative powers run by the Collectivity of Corsica. Nevertheless, are there financial privileges of Corsica?

Talamoni: Corsica in its history has been suffering a lot since the annexation to France. Throughout the 19th century there has been a French law imposing customs duties on exports from Corsica to mainland France, but conversely the imports from France to Corsica were duty free. During World War I masses of Corsicans have been recruited to the French army and about 12.000 young men died on the frontline. The human loss in those times was enormous. Then we suffered the fascist occupation and the island has been bombed severely. After World War II the industrial development of France almost bypassed Corsica, our economy has been neglected for decades. So we suffered a strong emigration and still today the social situation is quite critical. All together there are good reasons for France to keep on with a major financial commitment in Corsica.

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