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State making or state breaking?' Crisis, COVID-19 and the constitution in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom

Paul Anderson[1] | **Coree Brown Swan**[2] | **Carles Ferreira**[3] | **Judith Sijstermans**[4]

[1]School of Humanities and Social Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

[2]School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

[3]School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

[4]The School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Correspondence
Paul Anderson, School of Humanities and Social Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.
Email: p.d.anderson@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

As the first cases of COVID-19 emerged in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom, they did so against a backdrop of heightened constitutional contestation. Capturing the period January 2020 to December 2021 which included three waves of the pandemic in each state and the delivery of vaccines, this article examines how state and sub-state nationalists articulated their constitutional preferences and territorial claims in the pandemic period. We particularly explore whether the crisis changed state and sub-state nationalists' territorial demands and how it was used to advance or bolster their territorial aspirations. We find that whilst the pandemic entailed an amplification of extant frames in favour of state dissolution and state integrity, the frames remained, broadly, similar between the pre-pandemic and pandemic period, suggesting that sub-state and state nationalist actors stick to a similar playbook, even at moments of profound crisis.

KEYWORDS
Catalonia, COVID-19, Flanders, Scotland, state nationalism, sub-state nationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, even before the chaos and disruption wrought by the global spread of a highly infectious virus, Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) were in the midst of severe political crises. Belgium was wrangling with another government formation period, one further complicated by the electoral success of the far right independentist *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest, VB). In the aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum and imprisonment of several Catalan politicians, relations between the Spanish and Catalan governments remained tense. Meanwhile in the UK, the Scottish government's calls for the transfer of powers necessary to hold a second referendum on Scottish independence were repeatedly rebuffed by the UK government. In January 2020, Boris Johnson formally rejected another request made by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. As the first cases of COVID-19 (hereafter, COVID) emerged, requiring coordinated action internationally and domestically, it did so against a backdrop of heightened constitutional contestation in all three countries.

Although the pandemic posed a challenge to governments throughout the world, the crisis was particularly complex in multilevel systems where territorial contestation was salient (Benton, 2020; Lecours et al., 2021; Paquet & Schertzer, 2020). A swift and coherent response at the national level necessitated coordination with sub-national and local governments. In multilevel states, policy competences over public health and safety are distributed across national, regional and local levels. Political coordination, however, is no easy task when different parties are in government at different levels, making it 'hard to share information, organise a rapid response and speak with one voice' (Boin et al., 2014: 421).

Using the COVID crisis as a case study and capturing the period January 2020 to December 2021, which included three waves of the pandemic and the rollout of vaccinations, this article examines how state and sub-state nationalists articulated their constitutional preferences and territorial claims in the pandemic period. We particularly explore whether the crisis changed state and sub-state nationalists' territorial demands and how it was used to advance or bolster their territorial aspirations. In doing so, we provide a thick description of the nature of territorial conflict in these countries during the pandemic and compare them to consider whether country-specific contextual differences condition the effect of crisis on territorial dynamics.

Contrary to expectations that *sub-state* actors are more likely to exploit crises to advance their territorial goals, we find that *both* sides of territorial conflicts try to make use of crisis moments to bolster their territorial preferences. Sub-state and state nationalists may ratchet up tensions, as was the case in Spain and the UK, or sideline them, such as in Belgium. However, across all countries, instrumental uses of crisis tend to follow similar strands of argumentation as used previously in the UK, Spain and Belgium and do not change the overall dialogue or tensions between state and sub-state nationalists.

This article makes two contributions to the literature on territorial politics and nationalism. We build on recent scholarship which highlights the growing prominence of state nationalism in plurinational states (Cetrà & Brown Swan, 2020; Gagnon, 2020). Our analysis illuminates how the pandemic became a catalyst for more explicit state nationalism across our three cases, in interaction with the discourse of sub-state nationalists. The crisis, by requiring coordinated and urgent action, was thus an opportunity for state nationalists to articulate their case for state unity more boldly.

Second, our findings speak not just to the experience of COVID, but more broadly to the reaction of state and sub-state nationalist narratives to exogenous moments of crisis. Hitherto, economic crisis, notably the 2008 global financial crash, has been a principal area of research, with empirical analysis highlighting the secessionist-triggering capacity of economic crisis in cases such as Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland (Béland & Lecours 2021; Dowling, 2018; Duerr, 2016). In addition, more recent scholarship has identified the increasing prominence of 'green nationalism' among sub-state nationalist movements whereby nationalist actors link the omnipresent crisis of climate change with their wider policy agendas and territorial strategies (Conversi & Hau, 2021; Kerr, 2023). Existing analyses of how sub-state nationalists frame their territorial aspirations have thus identified an instrumental case for independence, whereby non-territorial issues are framed in territorial terms (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias, 2019). In this

paper, we build on this existing literature and contribute to ongoing conversations on the impact of exogenous crises on sub-state nationalism as well as extending this analysis to state nationalist projects.

Given the description of the COVID pandemic as a 'mega-crisis' (Boin et al., 2021), we argue that the pandemic represents a unique form of non-territorial crisis, impacting cultural, economic, political and social life and, as such, likely to influence both state and sub-state nationalist territorial narratives and strategies. Our analysis shows that whilst COVID became a new domain for territorial contestation, it was, in some respects, *the same old song*. In all three cases, both state and sub-state actors subsumed the COVID crisis into their existing narratives.

2 | STATE AND SUB-STATE NATIONALISM AT A MOMENT OF CRISIS

In this article, we take forward recent work arguing that plurinational states provide an ideal space in which to explore the interaction between state nationalism and sub-state nationalism. In recent years, a growing body of literature has attempted to explore state nationalism in a variety of contexts, both in response to demands from below (Brown Swan & Cetrà, 2020; Cetrà & Brown Swan, 2020; Cetrà & Swenden, 2021) and in theoretical and empirical accounts seeking to untangle the relationship between nationalism and populism (Brubaker, 2020; Custodi, 2021; Lobera & Roch, 2022; Varshney, 2021).

State nationalism refers to the 'constant reproduction and promotion of the nation by state elites and institutions' (Cetrà & Brown Swan, 2020: 3).[i] In the political sphere, this includes parties in favour of territorial unity in which state nationalism is 'a form of political rhetoric by political elites making the case for state integrity' (Brown Swan & Cetrà, 2020: 46). Linking nationalist ideology with the territorial borders of the state, state nationalism thus seeks to maintain state sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the state (Girvin, 2020). Given the propensity of state nationalisms to be largely invisible and in the parlance of Billig (1995), 'banal', state nationalist parties are unlikely to self-identify in this way. Indeed, as Williams (2003: 329) contends, 'it is as if a really secure nationalism, already in possession of its nation-state, can fail to see itself as "nationalist" at all'. Gagnon (2020: 90) argues that this is largely the result of 'mistaking state nationalism for patriotism', whereby 'state nationalists make the argument that while they disapprove of nationalist sentiments they proudly rally behind "constitutional" patriotism'. This is evident in the case of Spain (see, Sáinz, 2020) and also the UK in which attempts to 'distinguish' unionism from nationalism entailed 'the ironical outcome … that in so doing it has not only made itself into a form of nationalism but has claimed exactly the same normative foundations as its "nationalist" opponents' (Keating, 2021: 123). In promoting the state and thus 'arguments about the political union … [and] … strategies for its continuation' (Cetrà & Brown Swan, 2020: 3), pro-state unity parties are the central actors in the advance of state nationalism in plurinational contexts (Lecours et al., 2021: 9). By treating state actors as equally engaged in the construction/ perpetuation of a nationalist project, in conversation with sub-state nationalists, we can identify the ways in which each *uses* the pandemic to further these aims.

Although the study of state nationalism is an emergent field, sub-state nationalism is well documented in the literature as a force which 'challenges and confronts an existing political, institutional and constitutional order' (Lecours, 2012: 271). Stateless Nationalist and Regionalist Parties (SNRPs) contest the territorial status quo and seek 'territorial empowerment, whereby empowerment involves seeking to represent and advance the particular interest of the stateless territory' (Hepburn, 2009: 482). Discursively, sub-state nationalists make claims for self-government and build a case for their preferred territorial outcome. As Lecours et al. (2021: 9) highlight, such preferences vary and 'can involve the ability to develop a distinct political system and political class, the formulation and implementation of public policies applying only to the minority nation as well as specific forms and forums of political representation and participation, or it may be about seceding from the state altogether'. Although state nationalism seeks to reinforce the notion of the state and its territorial integrity, sub-state nationalism explicitly challenges these assumptions. In plurinational states, state and sub-state nationalisms are thus often framed in opposition to one another, reflected in processes of competitive nation-building and contested constitutional visions.

COVID, as a significant moment of crisis, provides an opportunity to examine the dialogue between state and sub-state nationalist parties. Crises in general are understood to be 'urgent threats to core community values and structures' (Boin et al., 2009: 83). Crisis politics literature focusses on the political responses to large-scale crises, such as the so-called Eurozone crisis, refugee crisis and Brexit crisis, among others. These cases, Davis Cross (2017) found, enabled politicians to 'speak frankly' or confrontationally. This frank rhetoric is possible because of the 'economic and social dislocation' highlighted by Stavrakakis et al. (2018). This dislocation disrupts hegemonic discourses.

Given the intensity of threat and disruption, crises can be critical opportunities for structural reform and political contestation. Boin et al. (2009: 82) argue that crisis engenders 'framing contests': 'a contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future'. In plurinational states, crisis may provide an opportunity particularly for those who want to apportion blame and attack the status quo. We contend, however, that in plurinational states with strong regional autonomy and secessionists movements, state nationalist strategies will also capitalise on a crisis moment to promote their territorial agendas. Put simply, crises are likely to be incorporated into the two competing nationalisms in plurinational states.

Early analyses of the COVID crisis have found that it could have a catalytic effect in heightening nationalist sentiment. At state level, this may relate to the 'rally around the flag' effect reflected in an increased sense of solidarity and patriotism within a national community (Bol et al., 2021) or the mobilisation of an exclusionary ethnonationalist discourse of 'us' and 'them' (Woods et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly during crises, citizens look to political leaders for advice, guidance and ultimately a pathway out of the crisis (Boin et al., 2009).

On the other hand, sub-state nationalists' critique of the status quo may be more suited to the type of disruption engendered by crisis. In their 2020 symposium, Woods et al. (2020: 822), highlighted how sub-state nationalist movements could *particularly* capitalise on the COVID crisis to further their territorial agendas. Lecours and Kerr (2021: 261) offer a similar line of argumentation, noting that the pandemic afforded nationalist governments in minority nations an opportunity 'to make the case for the importance of more significant decentralisation or even independence'. In terms of intergovernmental relations, the crisis could engender rhetorical conflict and material conflict (in terms of refusal to collaborate) between the state and the sub-state (Lecours et al., 2021: 514; Schnabel et al., 2023).

Bringing together these findings, we posit that several different types of changes to political parties' articulations of state and sub-state nationalism are possible. First, nationalism (state and sub-state) might change in intensity, with crisis leading to more or less contestation. We expect the former—that contestation increases, given the early analyses highlighted above. Second, crisis, particularly a large exogenous shock such as COVID, might change the nature of contestation. Nationalist actors may engage in credit taking and blame shifting around the crisis. We might also identify changes in the content of the nationalist narratives, that is, a reframing of arguments around the political benefits of constitutional change or the status quo or a change in political demands.

Finally, crisis might affect state nationalists and sub-state nationalists differently. Sub-state nationalists may continue or intensify their case for change from the status quo. In this vein, crisis becomes part of the instrumental arguments employed by political actors to advocate their territorial preference. Focussing on instrumental arguments vis-à-vis calls for secession, Dalle Mulle and Serrano (2019: 644) note that these arguments frame autonomy more 'as a political tool for social well-being, economic prosperity and democratic improvement'. On the other hand, the disruption of crisis might force state nationalists to move beyond traditionally banal forms of nationalism associated with the centre or dominant nationalism towards more explicit articulations.

In line with the previous literature on crisis and the preliminary analyses of COVID and nationalism, we explore how the crisis impacted the territorial projects of state and sub-state political parties in Belgium, Spain and the UK. We expect that sub-state nationalists will employ more instrumental arguments, contending that with more powers they would have dealt with the crisis better and, in doing so, shift blame to the state. We expect that state nationalists on the other hand will seek to limit the room for sub-state nationalist manoeuvre by drawing on and making explicit more symbolic arguments for state unity.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To understand how a moment of crisis became an arena for the articulation of competing territorial strategies and visions, we analysed the territorial contestation which took place between state and sub-state actors during the pandemic. The objects of our analysis are the dominant political parties operating in plurinational states with significant territorial demands (see Table 1). Dominant political party actors are defined by several dynamics: electoral support, governing roles and the importance of territorial politics in their political discourse.[ii] A leading and public facing position in central government is central to our case selections as this ensures similar levels of engagement with the pandemic response and the question of state unity. Importantly, our case selection aims to identify who speaks for the state or sub-state nation politically and who engages in nationalist dialogue in each state/sub-state pairing.

These criteria align in Spain (Republican Left of Catalonia/Together for Catalonia/Spanish Socialist Worker's Party) and the UK (Scottish National Party/Conservative and Unionist Party) where electorally successful parties also govern at state and sub-state level. On the other hand, Belgium provides a challenge. Belgian 2019 elections showed federal fragmentation and Flemish nationalist dominance at regional level. Although the far right *Vlaams Belang* is excluded from governing power, the party is active and competes with the N-VA in the Flemish nationalist discursive space (Maly, 2016; Van Haute et al., 2018). At state level, there is a de-alignment among electoral success, government leadership roles and engagement in territorial discourse.[iii] We sought to study parties who speak *to* Flemish nationalists and *for* the Belgian state. We thus chose parties that held the role of Prime Minister through the period of study: the Mouvement Reformateur (MR) and Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD). We considered that, in a fragmented system, those parties were most likely to give voice to the Belgian state and political narratives surrounding the COVID crisis.

To examine state and sub-state nationalist discourses, we analysed key speeches and public statements, editorials, party press releases and manifestos, and parliamentary debates which spoke to the crisis and territorial dynamics surrounding the response. We gathered data over a two-year period, from January 2020 to December 2021, which captured the height of several waves of the pandemic and the initial stages of vaccine rollout. These documents were identified by broad keyword searches looking for mention of COVID and the territorial dimension, as well as more targeted documentary analysis, including key parliamentary debates, speeches, and campaign publications.[iv] Each member of the research team carried out a close reading and gathered data on their respective cases, ensuring specific contextual and linguistic differences were considered. Relevant extracts were gathered to form the basis of a collaborative analysis.

Rather than apply a strict classification schema to these extracts, which might overlook the nuances of each case, we adopted an inductive approach, examining how the pandemic was articulated through the territorial lens. Although each case is presented in turn, a collaborative process of analysis allowed us to interrogate our findings, draw connections and properly contextualise the emergent themes. This comparative analysis is presented in the article's discussion. Analytically, we draw a distinction between the pre-vaccine period and the period following the first vaccinations with the expectation that the nature of the discourse might have changed as the urgency of

TABLE 1 Case selection.

	Sub-state nationalist parties	State nationalist parties
Belgium	*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance) *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest)	*Mouvement Reformateur* (Reformist Movement) *Open VLD* (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats)
Spain	*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Republican Left of Catalonia) *Junts per Catalunya* (Together for Catalonia)	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)
UK	Scottish National Party	Conservative and Unionist Party

the crisis receded and a solution delivered by various governments emerged. This also captures any early attempts to attribute blame or take credit as the pandemic continued.

Belgium, Spain and the UK are each plurinational states with significant decentralisation of powers. Politically, these three states have ongoing territorial conflicts with strong party-political supporters of both state integrity and secession. In Spain and the UK, parties espousing state nationalism are in power in Madrid and London, whereas pro-independence, sub-state nationalist parties lead governments in Catalonia and Scotland. Similarly, the Flemish government is led by sub-state nationalists (the N-VA) whereas the federal government is led by a unionist coalition. However, Belgium has one of the most fragmented party systems in Western Europe. Following the 2019 election, Belgium entered a protracted period of government formation, and this process was ongoing when the first cases of COVID emerged. When the scale of the pandemic became clear, a caretaker government was agreed. During the period of study, in October 2020, a new coalition government was finally formed at federal level, led by the Open VLD. As such, in the case of Flanders/Belgium, a more fragmented picture of 'state nationalism' occurs and two state nationalist parties are analysed in different stages of the pandemic (first MR, then Open VLD). This difference with the UK and Spain, where a more stable opposition politics between the governing unionist party and governing sub-state nationalist party occurs, is one of the dynamics we analyse in this article.

4 | STATE MAKING AND STATE BREAKING: COVID AND THE CONSTITUTION

Belgium, Spain and the UK registered their first cases of COVID in late January and early February 2020. In each system, health services are decentralised, but the scale and urgency of the crisis necessitated close cooperation between different levels of government. This, however, took different forms in the three states. In Belgium, federal and regional authorities closely cooperated, with the federal government playing an important role in decision-making processes (Sinardet & Pieters, 2021). In the UK, the Westminster and devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also worked closely together with regular interaction and a largely uniform policy response in the early stage of the pandemic. This, however, disintegrated in late Spring 2020 as the UK Government eased measures in England, a move criticised by the devolved governments (Anderson, 2022). By contrast, the Spanish response was characterised by a top-down centralised approach, triggered by the government's enactment of a state of alarm,[v] conferring full responsibility on the Spanish government to manage the health crisis. The centralised approach, however, ultimately gave way to a more collaborative response between the Spanish governments and the Autonomous Communities (ACs) (Erkoreka et al., 2022).

The crisis played out against the backdrop of tense partisan and territorial dynamics in each state. These came to bear on the crisis response and the narratives surrounding the response. Partisan dynamics shaped both coordination in response to the crisis and the *instrumentalisation* of the crisis by state and sub-state nationalist actors.

5 | BELGIUM: CONSTRAINED COMPETING NATIONALISMS

As the first cases of COVID emerged in Belgium, a federal government had not yet been formed following the May 2019 election. This election highlighted the political disconnect between Flanders, where conservative sub-state nationalist parties, the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) and the *Vlaams Belang* (VB) won, and Wallonia, where the *Parti Socialiste* emerged victorious. In March 2020, *Mouvement Reformateur*'s Sophie Wilmès formed an emergency minority government to provide leadership during the crisis. Government negotiations resumed in May 2020, and a government led by Open VLD formed in October 2020.

The exclusion of both Flemish nationalist parties from this new government drove calls from the VB for a united 'Flemish front' opposition, bringing the communal issue to the fore (*Brussels Times* 11 October 2020). This period of

Flemish nationalist mobilisation was brief in the context of a long dormant period for the Belgian constitutional issue which has low salience among Belgian voters (Deschouwer, 2013). The N-VA and VB typically compete on issues of migration and populism although Flemish autonomism is fundamental to both parties' platforms (Adam & Deschouwer, 2016).

The N-VA and VB used COVID as an *example* of the 'crisis' of the Belgian state but, given the low salience of the constitutional issue, this sub-state nationalist response was instrumental rather than changing the dominant narratives around or demands for independence. The need for unified working provided an opportunity for Belgian state nationalists but there was no clear Belgian state nationalist voice. Belgian state nationalist narratives were thus limited, symbolic, and diffuse.

5.1 | From caretaker to coalition: pre-vaccine stage

In the early days of the pandemic, Belgium showed the signs of a 'rally around the flag' effect with an unusually united response. However, a series of scandals made this unity comparatively short-lived, and Flemish nationalist parties strategically pushed back against perceived Belgian government failures.

As part of a united front, PM Wilmès led press conferences announcing COVID regulations alongside sub-state leaders. The presence of Flemish, Walloon and Belgian leaders in one press conference was remarkable. However, by May, protests and blundered press conferences disrupted the image of state nationalist unity (Moens & Gijs, 2020). To sidestep political tensions, Wilmès relied on experts, using the National Security Council during press conferences (Sinardet & Pieters, 2021: 316). However, depoliticisation meant press conferences were not spaces for explicit state nationalist promotion of the Belgian state.

State nationalism was further hindered by scandals: the government's failure to restock emergency medical equipment before the pandemic, the rushed purchase of fraudulent face masks and alleged human rights abuses in care homes during the first lockdown. The early days of the pandemic were hardly an overriding government success. Open VLD Minister of Health Maggie de Block further depoliticised the government's response to failures, noting: 'Of course, Belgium was not perfect...As in many countries, this resulted in a high proportion of elderly people among our COVID-19 victims. These are human tragedies we should seriously investigate and learn from' (De Block, 2020). The government sought to sidestep political critiques by arguing that the exogenous shock of the pandemic posed impossible to answer challenges for 'many countries'.

On the other hand, sub-state nationalist opposition was politicised. In the media, a common refrain was that the country had 'nine health ministers', pointing out the bureaucratic blockages of such a system (Desson et al., 2020; Van Overbeke & Stadig, 2020: 306). From a populist sub-state nationalist perspective, the VB capitalised on this perception of state incompetence. By July 2020, the party produced a Coronavirus 'Blunder Book', an 'archive' of the 'mess and poor communication' of the Belgian government (VB magazine July 2020: 14). The party conflated the COVID crisis with the crisis of the Belgian state, arguing: 'Flanders not only needs a well-considered exit plan from the corona crisis, but Flanders also needs an exit plan from the Wilmès minority government, and even more: an exit plan from Belgium!' (VB magazine June 2020: 6).

For the N-VA, the promotion of further autonomy was constrained by their position in the Flemish government, which gave them a voice in Belgian discussions on COVID regulations and a seat at Wilmès' press conferences. The N-VA had to show *competence*, not only critique. The party supported the formation of the emergency government and also a specific Flemish approach. Leader Bart De Wever said in the N-VA's magazine (March 2020): 'As Flemish Prime Minister, Jan Jambon is part of the National Security Council coordinating the crisis ... also at Flemish level we take good measures to protect health and prosperity.' Consequently, the N-VA pushed against attempts to re-federalise health care and was hesitant to give the 'emergency government' full powers.

After October 2020, under PM Alexander De Croo (Open VLD), the state government sought to take a stronger political stance. De Croo shifted from using the National Security Council to the Concertation Committee, which is a

political rather than expert forum (Sinardet & Pieters, 2021: 316). In November 2020, the government introduced the 'one team of 11 million' campaign to promote solidarity between Belgians. The campaign noted, 'together we can defeat this virus' and encouraged citizens to hang the poster in their windows. The slogan echoed messages used for the Belgian football team, another rare unified national symbol. Its late timing, right after the formation of the new government, showed that a more politically empowered government could take a stronger political stance than the caretaker government. However, the campaign was not clearly owned by one political party, nor did it see significant success.

The N-VA strongly opposed the De Croo government but not based on its COVID strategy. Instead, the party criticised the government's democratic legitimacy by emphasising that Open VLD was only the seventh most popular party in the 2019 election (N-VA Magazine November 2020). N-VA leader Bart De Wever wrote that the government was implementing 'structural policy changes … under the veil of this crisis'. He added, 'Even during this corona crisis, the Flemish people know what is being decided above their heads. Especially when it is done by a government that does not have democratic legitimacy in Flanders' (N-VA Magazine December 2020: 3). For the N-VA, the COVID crisis *obscured* important issues, namely, the exclusion of Flemish nationalist and conservative parties (like themselves) from the government.

Critiques of COVID policies did not dominate the VB's narratives of the crisis either. The party focussed on anti-elite, anti-government, and economically oriented framing of the crisis and linked the COVID crisis with their nativist stances (Sijstermans & Van Hauwaert, 2022). For example, when Black Lives Matter protesters took to the streets of Brussels, the party called it 'a slap in the face to the thousands of people who have worked in recent months to keep our country running' (VB, 2020a). At a protest against the De Croo government, leader Tom Van Grieken did not once mention COVID. Instead, he called the state of Belgium 'a systemic crisis' (VB, 2020b).

Scholars noted that Belgium had a surprisingly uniform policy approach to the pandemic (Sinardet & Pieters, 2021). Political uniformity began to show cracks as the pandemic went on and after the formation of the De Croo government. However, sub-state nationalist protests against the De Croo government were framed in terms of democratic and constitutional problems rather than a specific backlash against the government's approach to COVID. This opposition through familiar narratives may have allowed for more uniform COVID policies.

5.2 | Growing tensions: vaccine stage

The vaccination stage of the crisis brought greater successes for the Belgian government (Demeyer, 2021). State nationalists' ability to capitalise on this success, however, was hindered by the slow start to the vaccination campaign and territorial divisions in vaccination uptake between Flanders and Wallonia. Walloons were more vaccine hesitant than their Flemish counterparts (Van Hecke & Andries, 2021).[vi] This led the Flemish government to call for a more regionally disaggregated, and less federal, approach to managing COVID (Bursens et al., 2023: 392). Thus, even on the vaccination campaign, the Belgian government struggled to articulate a united front.

As the crisis progressed, the N-VA was more vocal in its criticism. N-VA MP Sander Loones noted:

> We vote differently in elections. Flemish people work more on average and longer. We are among the first in Europe in the fight against poverty … And so on. Everything is indeed communitarian in this country. Also, during the coronavirus crisis, the cracks in Belgium are clearly visible
>
> (N-VA magazine June 2021: 9).

Loones' argument identified COVID as an *example* of Belgian state failure but not the first nor the most prominent example. The N-VA leader argued, 'Corona has shown that the Belgian system doesn't work. That analysis is now, thanks to the stress-test of COVID-19, more widely agreed. The question is: what is the solution?' (Spoormakers, 2021).

Any perceived successes of the vaccine programme did not hinder the VB's continued criticism of the government response to COVID. In his new year's speech in 2021, the VB leader Tom van Grieken criticised the 'disproportionate reaction' to the pandemic and called for: 'Freedom to live out our identity, freedom to choose our leaders … but also freedom to move around and to do business' (VB, 2021). The party's 'freedom' agenda was complemented by a general de-emphasising of COVID and move towards more traditional populist and nationalist policies (Sijstermans & Van Hauwaert, 2022: 251).

For both Flemish independentist parties, COVID was yet another crisis and provided *more evidence* to the nationalist case for state reform and independence. After an initial period of specific opposition to the government's COVID response, sub-state nationalist demands were once more driven by the usual suspects: Flemish nationalism, nativism and sense of grievance against the gridlock of the Belgian state. State nationalists showed some rare signs of unity, but these were much weaker than in Spain and the UK. The lack of 'ownership' over health policy and fragmented party system led to diffused blame/credit taking and constrained political actors' instrumentalisation of COVID. Given these constraints, both sub-state and state nationalist narratives around COVID were comparatively muted.

6 | SPAIN: CONTESTED TERRITORIAL STRATEGIES

When the first COVID case was registered at the end of January 2020, Spain was in a state of constitutional deadlock, precipitated by the 2017 Catalan independence referendum (Ferreira, 2021). The Spanish premier Pedro Sánchez—in power since June 2018—approached the independence issue with an offer of dialogue, but little progress had been made. Dialogue was further hindered in November 2019, when the Supreme Court imposed lengthy prison sentences on several regional ministers for the 2017 secessionist attempt. On top of mutual distrust between the Catalan and the Spanish governments, a division within the pro-independence camp—between the hard-line JxCat, favouring unilateral independence, and the more moderate ERC, leaning towards dialogue and compromise with Spain—was becoming even more explicit as the COVID crisis emerged (Anderson, 2020).

In March 2020, as infection rates grew and the first deaths from COVID were registered, the Spanish government announced a declaration of a nationwide state of alarm. This had the effect of centralising all health-care powers from the ACs, notwithstanding their devolution for more than three decades. By June 2020, the centralised response was replaced by a new 'co-governance model', although its structure and functioning remained largely hierarchical and dominated by the central government (Perez-Medina, 2020).

Throughout this crisis, the narrative of the socialist-led Spanish executive was based on prioritising national unity and institutional loyalty over territorial tensions. Conversely, the Catalan nationalist parties articulated two interrelated strategies to justify independence amidst the pandemic. Firstly, they blamed 'Madrid' (that is, the Spanish government) for crisis management failures and the high number of COVID deaths. Secondly, they claimed that an independent Catalonia would have been more competent in managing the pandemic. Far from disappearing or being sidelined by the urgency and severity of the pandemic, the territorial tensions sparked by the 2017 events continued to unfold during this crisis.

6.1 | Centralisation and co-governance: pre-vaccine stage

The state of alarm activated on 14 March 2020 was justified by the Spanish government because of the extraordinary situation presented by the pandemic. The centralisation of power under a single command (*mando único)* was to ensure a uniform approach to fighting the virus across all ACs, with the expectation that all 17 AC presidents would work together with the Spanish premier: 'every president must leave aside their differences and get behind the

Spanish government. There are no political parties, no ideologies, no territories' (Sánchez, 2020a). To defeat the virus, the government called for national unity, underpinned by 'solidarity, dialogue and territorial cohesion', and argued that Spain could overcome the pandemic only by working together (Sánchez, 2020a). Put differently, Spain would only be able to defeat the virus if it were politically united and territorially centralised. As such, Spanish authorities launched the *#EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos* (we will stop this virus together) campaign, an initiative to promote social solidarity and territorial cohesion across Spain.

In response to critiques about a lack of engagement with the ACs over decisions taken by the Spanish government, from May 2020 there was a conscious move on the part of the government to involve regional premiers in decision-making processes. Framed as 'co-governance', this model facilitated increased interaction between governments via videoconferences and was presented by the Spanish government as an alternative approach to the 'parochial selfishness of nationalist parties' (Rodríguez, 2020). Much like the initial phase of the pandemic, the Spanish government's approach to intergovernmental collaboration was underwritten by a commitment to and expectation of territorial solidarity and institutional loyalty. Indeed, at the onset of the second wave of the pandemic in September 2020, Sánchez argued that 'Unity and co-governance is what is going to once again flatten the curve of this wave' (Sánchez, 2020b).

The arrival of the second wave also saw the Spanish government instrumentalise economic arguments to bolster its case for Spanish unity, specifically targeting Catalan nationalists. In a parliamentary debate on the budget in September 2020, Prime Minister Sánchez listed the economic benefits Catalans had received in the first wave of the pandemic such as guarantees of minimum incomes for employees and the self-employed and support for businesses, noting that 'Catalonia is the autonomous community where most businesses have accessed economic support … totalling 98,878 million euros' (Sánchez, 2020b). For the Spanish government, the economic capacity of the Spanish state underscored its case for state integrity.

For sub-state nationalists, the state of alarm was widely interpreted as a political project that unnecessarily usurped the powers of the ACs. Rather than speed up the response, the Catalan government believed the centralisation of power slowed it down, a result of the inexperience of the Ministry of Health in administering health care which had been devolved to the ACs for more than 30 years. Indeed, neither ERC nor JxCat voted in favour of extending the state of alarm in the Spanish Parliament between March and June 2020. ERC abstained on four occasions and voted against twice, whereas JxCat abstained on the first two votes and voted against in the remaining four.

In response to the centralisation of power, Catalan nationalists embarked on a blame game, holding 'Madrid' responsible for everything during the first phase of the crisis and repeatedly accusing the Spanish government of incompetence and mismanagement. High death rates among citizens, particularly in care homes, for example, became a central line of argument to advocate Catalan independence, more specifically a more competent executive. In the words of Merixell Budó, spokesperson for the Catalan government, 'with independence, we would have acted earlier and we would not have had so many deaths or infections' (Garcia, 2020).

6.2 | Stronger together versus brighter future: vaccine stage

The rollout of a vaccine across Spain, as well as wider Europe, was hailed by the Spanish government as a triumph of 'unity'. Much like the pre-vaccine phase, the Spanish government placed much emphasis on the importance and benefits of state unity, but post-vaccine, its rhetoric became more cosmopolitan, focussing on the benefits that ACs gained from being part of Spain as well as part of the EU. Emphasis on the EU bolstered the Spanish government's repeated narrative that being part of a bigger political project (in this case, both Spain and the EU) was more beneficial than being a small independent state (i.e., an independent Catalonia). Celebrating the vaccination of 30 million people, the Spanish premier emphasised the benefits of unity, arguing that a key lesson learned from the pandemic was that working together would help solve other issues:

> the pandemic has made it clear that the only way to act to deal with the big challenges facing us is unity. Unilateral posturing will not work if we want to respond effectively to challenges such as climate change or future health crises
>
> (Sánchez, 2021).

As well as implicit critiques of sub-state nationalism and pro-independence support, Spanish ministers also explicitly argued against the Catalan nationalist government. During the 2021 Catalan elections Eva Granados, parliamentary spokesperson for the Catalan Socialists, argued that at the hands of an independentist government for so many years, Catalonia was now 'in decline' continuing that 'division has weakened Catalonia, damaged social cohesion and at the same time caused Catalonia to miss out on many economic opportunities' (Fernández, 2021). As the party's election manifesto put it, the time had come to 'move beyond the independentist process' (PSC, 2021: 2).

For Catalan nationalists, the elections presented an opportunity to advance their cause of an independent Catalonia. This strategy was two-pronged and involved, as was the case in the pre-vaccine period, critique of the Spanish government's handling of the pandemic on the one hand, and the aspiration of a better future for an independent Catalonia on the other. The ERC's 2021 manifesto underlined this strategy, describing the Spanish state as 'authoritarian' (ERC, 2021: 7), whereas JxCat denounced 'explicit state repression against independentism' (JxCat, 2021: 8). By contrast, an independent Catalan Republic was painted as a fairer, more prosperous ideal, a better future necessary to ensure economic and social recovery post-pandemic.

For sub-state nationalists, COVID became subsumed within their long-established grievance rhetoric against the Spanish government and state. At the same time, however, it provided nationalists with an opportunity to advocate independence, particularly how an independent Catalan republic would have handled the pandemic differently. The centralised response by the Spanish government made this latter line of argumentation easier whilst also providing fodder for further critique. At the same time, however, the pandemic allowed the Spanish government to promote the importance of state unity, with successes such as economic support and the vaccine rollout used to shore up the credentials of state unity.

7 | UNITED KINGDOM: BROAD SHOULDERS AND THE CASE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The COVID pandemic was the most severe crisis to face the UK in decades, and by virtue of its scale, necessitated cooperation between levels of government (Anderson, 2022: 144). In the first phase, both unionist and nationalist actors sought to downplay the constitutional question in favour of a reassuring message of unity and coordination. However, as policies diverged between London and Edinburgh, and devolved elections neared, familiar narratives of constitutional contestation returned to the fore.

The narratives employed by the two sides of the Scottish independence debate reflected the ongoing, and heated, constitutional debate, simmering since the 2014 independence referendum. For the Conservative Party at both Westminster and Holyrood, the crisis was an opportunity to showcase the strength of the UK, a return of the 'better together' narrative employed by Unionist campaigners in 2014. The 'broad shoulders' of the UK, Conservatives argued, would support all four nations of the UK. For the SNP, this was more delicate. Discussion of independence, long the central point of contention in Scottish politics, was pushed aside by the immediacy of the pandemic. Independence became a liability externally, with government ministers accused of neglecting their day job if they strayed into discussions of independence, whilst pressure from the larger 'Yes' movement mounted. As an end to the acute stage of the crisis emerged, the SNP began to speak more readily about independence, arguing that independence was necessary to foster pandemic recovery.

7.1 | Lockdown, divergence and convergence: pre-vaccine stage

In the initial phase of the pandemic, both the Scottish and UK leadership attempted to situate COVID as an exogenous crisis, outside the realm of normal politics. Constitutional wrangling was to be set aside in favour of a coordinated response. However, questions of independence and union were not ignored entirely, and emerged albeit in a fairly subtle form.

The UK government adopted a narrative of *stronger together*, making the argument that the UK would weather the pandemic as 'One United Kingdom'. Support was provided to all four nations, including direct financial assistance to businesses and individuals, the British Army's support with testing efforts, and the NHS, the devolved nature of which was overlooked in Conservative discourse, were heralded (HC Deb 28 April 2020). The UK, rather than the individual nations, UK government ministers argued, was best positioned to tackle the crisis. This was not explicitly contested by the Scottish government, which was willing to work closely with the UK government to secure supplies of PPE and vital resources, reflecting the party's more challenging strategic position.

The Scottish government, under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, acknowledged that discussions of a future referendum must be put on hold, and the First Minister rebuffed questions about the politics of the crisis, suggesting instead that she preferred to remain focussed on the task at hand. Sturgeon's leadership during this period, in which she presented near-daily broadcast updates on the pandemic, was coupled with widespread public support for her leadership, which far surpassed that of Boris Johnson, and growing support for independence, which at various points achieved a majority (Liñeira, 2021).

As policies began to diverge in early summer 2020, the narratives employed by sub-state and state nationalist actors became more combative. UK government ministers cited the importance of ongoing cooperation, whereas for the Scottish government, this divergence, and the limitations placed upon the devolved nations, furthered the argument for independence.

The divergence of rules within the UK was acknowledged as within the remit of the devolved governments but was viewed as undesirable by the UK government ministers. Health Secretary Matt Hancock argued in June 2020 'The more we do this as one United Kingdom, the better', and Conservative leaders in the devolved nations called for lockstep easing of restrictions (HC Deb 8 June 2020). Chancellor Rishi Sunak pointed to the UK government's economic support which benefited each of the four nations: '[T]he jobs retention bonus for furloughed employees, the kick-start scheme, the VAT cut and the "eat out to help out" discount – are all incredibly significant interventions and all of them benefit the entire United Kingdom' (HC Deb 8 July 2020).

In justifying continued restrictions, Nicola Sturgeon argued that Scotland's path out of lockdown was not informed by politics but by science, an implicit critique of the UK's policies: 'For me, that is not a predetermined and ideological constitutional or political decision. Decisions are entirely driven by the best judgements that I and the Government can make about what is right in order to protect the people whom we serve' (Sturgeon, 2020a).

The narrative of a benevolent UK Treasury, a key argument in the pro-Union rhetoric of the UK government, was challenged by Sturgeon, who was joined by Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts in calling for greater support and for borrowing powers to allow the devolved nations to fund their COVID response policies. In a heated exchange with Scottish Labour's Richard Leonard, Sturgeon (2020b) explained:

> The furlough scheme is funded by the UK Government borrowing money. The reason why it borrows money for us is because we do not have the powers here to do it ourselves. I say that Richard Leonard should use his imagination, and imagine that Scotland was independent right now. He would not have to ask me to plead with a UK Government to borrow more money to extend the job retention scheme; we could do it ourselves, here in Scotland, like other independent countries the world over do.

As issues with the UK government's management of testing and PPE contracts emerged, the Scottish First Minister argued that Scotland would be 'much better off being in charge of our own destiny, rather than being governed by a UK Government of such a nature', a narrative which echoed that of the Catalan and Flemish nationalists (Sturgeon, 2020c). The crisis and the different approaches adopted throughout the UK, the SNP argued, served to illustrate the limits of devolution and the necessity of independence.

7.2 | Vaccines and elections: vaccine stage

The rollout of vaccines marked a new period in the pandemic, and in political debates, coinciding with the 2021 Holyrood election. During the campaign period, the pandemic was used by both the Conservatives and the SNP to make the case for their preferred constitutional outcomes. In this period, competing nationalist narratives became more pronounced.

In the run up to the 2021 Holyrood elections, the Conservative framing became sharper, with two key arguments employed: firstly, that Scotland's access to vaccines was contingent on its position within the UK, a discourse described by political commentators as a form of *vaccine nationalism* (Caliendo, 2022) and secondly, that Scotland had been let down by the SNP's independence obsession, which impaired its pandemic response. The UK's vaccine programme was heralded as a distinctly British project. Conservative MP, Liam Fox, described the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine as 'one of the best cases we can make for the Union of the United Kingdom', a 'vaccine dividend' for the UK, not shared by European neighbours (HC Deb 22 February 2021). Michael Gove, then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, described it as a "particular pleasure" that Scotland also received the vaccine "thanks to the efforts of the UK Government … proof that our NHS means we are stronger together" (HC Deb 17 December 2020). As was the case in Spain, Conservative politicians combined pro-Union arguments with general critique of the Scottish government and SNP: 'That is all they can think of: break up this country – destroy our country – and call a referendum, in a way that I think is completely irresponsible at a very difficult time when we want to bounce back stronger together' (HC Deb 14 April 2021).

The central narrative adopted by the SNP suggested the pandemic offered an opportunity for reflection and change. Scotland should not cleave to the UK as the process of recovery began but should use the crisis as an opportunity to consider its constitutional future. The party cautioned that it would not move towards a referendum in haste but began to speak about independence more explicitly during this period. The country was faced with a choice to continue within Boris Johnson's UK with its cronyism, corruption, and mismanagement or build a new Scotland, with all the powers of independence:

> [A]s we start to recover from the pandemic and as all of us across the world start to ask ourselves what kind of countries and societies we want to live in, I want the people of Scotland to be in charge of answering that question, not the likes of Boris Johnson
>
> (Sturgeon, 2020d).

In doing so, the party acknowledged the challenges facing it but framed the pandemic as an opportunity for change, rather than a reversion to economic arguments of 2014. All countries faced a difficult economic position, the SNP argued, but could decide, in this moment, how to move forward.

State and sub-state nationalist contestation—the competing knowledge claims between the strength of the UK in its current form and the potential of independence—was largely consistent with the period before the crisis. Conservatives argued that Scotland benefited from the *best of both worlds* within the Union, whereas the SNP argued that only independence would unleash Scotland's potential. However, as this analysis indicates, the debate was more implicit in the pre-vaccine stage, becoming sharper following the rollout of vaccines and in the run up to the 2021 Holyrood election, suggesting the crisis had been incorporated into *normal* political discourse.

8 | DISCUSSION

As the preceding analysis highlights, in Belgium, Spain and the UK, state and sub-state actors instrumentalised the pandemic to strengthen their territorial ambitions, although to varying degrees. In all three cases, after short periods of state unity, state and sub-state nationalist narratives involved instances of blame shifting and credit taking, accompanied by conflicting and rival narratives about managing the pandemic and its aftermath. Notably, we did not witness a significant shift in the type of arguments employed, or the type of political demands made by the nationalist parties, but rather saw a continuation (in all cases) and ratcheting up (in Spain and the UK) of existing nationalist narratives. The exogenous and international nature of the COVID crisis appeared to complicate the mobilisation and transformation of nationalist narratives.

For state nationalists in all three cases, the pandemic became a vehicle through which state governments advocated territorial unity on the one hand and sought to counter claims by sub-state nationalists on the other. Contrary to the understandings of state nationalism as banal and subtle, in a time of crisis, state nationalists used the pandemic to mobilise nationalism explicitly, drawing on national symbols, economic benefits and a discourse emphasising territorial unity and cohesion. Given the particularities of its divided party system and the lack of a clear state nationalist voice, in Belgium the articulation of state nationalism was less explicit than in Spain and the UK, but the 'one team of 11 million' campaign drew on the theme of social solidarity to advance a pro-Belgian narrative. Likewise, the Spanish 'we will stop this virus together' campaign underlined the importance of social solidarity and common responsibility but was also accompanied by a discourse that emphasised 'territorial cohesion' and the importance of working together. In addition, there was significant critique of sub-state nationalism, conveyed as out-of-touch with the reality of the pandemic and an impediment to an efficient response. A similar argument was found in the UK whereby the UK government contrasted a successful UK government working for the whole of the UK with an independence-obsessed and failing Scottish nationalist government.

In both Spain and the UK, central governments engaged in credit-taking strategies which they employed to bolster the case for union. In both cases, this related to the economic support provided by the governments during the pandemic as well as the successful roll out of a vaccine. The fact that more businesses in Catalonia than any other AC received economic support from the Spanish government during the pandemic was used to argue against independence, whereas in the UK, government ministers routinely drew upon policies such as the furlough scheme as a benefit of union for the devolved territories. The procurement and distribution of a vaccine was also used to talk up the strength of union, most notably in the UK given the development of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine—a British vaccine for the benefit of all across the four nations of the UK. The Belgian state was hindered from doing the same by a divided political system, numerous scandals and delayed vaccine successes.

In a similar vein to state actors, there is a discernible instrumental argument on the part of sub-state nationalists in using the pandemic to advance their territorial visions. Instances of blame-shifting were commonplace in Catalonia and Flanders, whilst governments in all three cases used the pandemic to champion the case for independence or state reform.

A key feature of nationalist discourse in Catalonia and Flanders was the attribution of blame to state governments for their handling of the pandemic. In Catalonia this was precipitated by the Spanish government's centralised response to the pandemic and was bolstered by a discourse that an independent Catalonia would have taken different decisions and thus saved more lives. Flemish nationalist parties were consistently critical of the federal government's containment measures, but the formation of the De Croo coalition without any Flemish party resulted in a more aggressive blame-shifting strategy. For the VB and N-VA, however, it was not just that the federal government was blamed for rising infection and death rates, but that its management of COVID was symptomatic of a more broadly ineffective state. The crisis, therefore, mostly became a further avenue for the VB to propagate its anti-government, right-wing populist discourse. Notably absent in our analysis were any explicit attempts by the SNP to shift blame to the UK level. As the preceding section shows, they did criticise the UK government when they

disagreed with the decisions, but opportunities for blame attribution were limited, largely a result of the decentralised pandemic response whereby the devolved governments took most decisions regarding restrictions.

Elections in Catalonia and Scotland in 2021 presented the sub-state parties in these territories with opportunities to link the experience of the pandemic and more specifically strategies for post-COVID recovery with their territorial preferences of independence. Although for some supporters of ERC, JxCat and the SNP independence is an end in itself, the discourse of these parties during the pandemic placed significant emphasis on independence as a means to an end, specifically to equip the governments of Catalonia and Scotland with all the necessary tools and resources to rebuild post-pandemic. The crisis, as expected, presented an opportunity for the expression of sub-state grievances towards the state, and also allowed nationalist parties to justify independence as a means to creating a better future.

The pandemic proved a key trigger for the further mobilisation of nationalist groups within plurinational states. In line with our expectations, sub-state nationalists pushed for greater autonomy and/or independence, whilst state nationalists reinforced the case for state unity. State nationalists used the pandemic to engender increased patriotism combined with a call for solidarity and adopted credit-taking strategies for successful policies to defend the territorial status quo. Indeed, in the three cases in this paper, state governments exploited the circumstances of the pandemic to shore up the credentials of national unity. This was most pronounced in Spain and the UK, but even in Belgium, despite the absence of a strong state nationalist actor, the federal government sought to use national symbols to promote a united Belgian agenda. Consequently, our analysis suggests that COVID, as an exogenous threat, provided an opportunity for both state and sub-state nationalists to push their territorial aspirations. We find, however, that there was a ratcheting up of existing grievances and demands rather than the creation of new ones. Instead, both state and sub-state nationalists subsumed the COVID crisis into their existing narratives.

9 | CONCLUSION

This research began in the throes of the pandemic, when at an online workshop, the co-authors realised that they were each, in different ways, grappling with the sense of crisis and its implications for territorial politics in their respective case studies. The pandemic was in full swing, allowing us to capture the evolving dynamics in Belgium, Spain, and the UK in real time, analysing shifting policies and discourses, as we lived them.

At the outset, we, and early analyses, expected the framing of territorial preferences to fundamentally shift with new frames and demands coming to the fore. Instead, we identified a ratcheting up of demands, with the crisis as a catalyst, after a brief period of coming together. COVID is, broadly, subsumed within existing discourse, suggesting that narratives are quite stable over time, even in the face of exogenous crises. However, sub-state and state nationalist actors will instrumentalise crisis, using it to bolster the case for independence, territorial reform or state integrity. We found this was true for sub-state nationalist discourses—which have been well-studied in the extant literature, as well as for state nationalist discourses—which, with certain exceptions, are less studied.

As we bring this article to a close, European states face significant challenges, with widespread industrial action, a cost-of-living crisis, precipitated in part, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and against the backdrop of the global climate emergency. As permacrisis becomes the new normal, scholars of territorial politics will have ample fertile ground to further explore the impact of exogenous crises on state and sub-state nationalists' territorial narratives.

ORCID

Paul Anderson 🔵 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8156-5542
Coree Brown Swan 🔵 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7448-5966
Carles Ferreira 🔵 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9985-7818

ENDNOTES

[i] Akin to Cetrà and Brown Swan (2020), we understand state nationalism to be distinct from majority nationalism. The latter represents the demographic majority within a given polity, whilst state nationalism is instead focussed on the state itself.

[ii] There are, of course, other relevant state and sub-state nationalist parties in the multiparty systems of Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom. However, given the scope of the article, all parties could not feasibly be included within the study.

[iii] For example, the French speaking *Parti Socialiste* (PS) gained more votes and, ultimately, more government ministries than Flemish Open VLD. However, Open VLD leader and PM De Croo have been the main target of N-VA and VB critiques of the state in part because of his Prime Ministerial role and his position in the Flemish party system.

[iv] Regional elections took place in Catalonia in February 2021 and in Scotland in May 2021. Material was gathered from these two elections. Although comparable election data were not available in Belgium, which had regional and federal elections in 2019, the nature of Belgian politics ensures that parties are actively engaged in political campaigning.

[v] Article 116 of the Spanish Constitution provides for three types of emergencies: a state of alarm, state of emergency and state of siege. The state of alarm (*estado de alarma*) is the lowest level of emergency which lasts for a maximum period of 15 days unless extended by Congress.

[vi] This is attributed to different cultural influences in Flanders and Wallonia, as well as different socio-economic profiles.

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