



Sticking to the script: nationalist contestation and the cost-of-living crisis in plurinational states

Judith Sijstermans, P. Anderson & C. Brown Swan

To cite this article: Judith Sijstermans, P. Anderson & C. Brown Swan (03 Nov 2025): Sticking to the script: nationalist contestation and the cost-of-living crisis in plurinational states, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2025.2581972](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2581972)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2581972>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 03 Nov 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 87



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Sticking to the script: nationalist contestation and the cost-of-living crisis in plurinational states

Judith Sijstermans ^a, P. Anderson ^b and C. Brown Swan ^c

^aDepartment of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK;

^bDepartment of International Relations and Politics, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK; ^cDepartment of Politics, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the growth of the transnational cost-of-living crisis provided an impetus for state and substate nationalist cooperation but has also created a window of opportunity for nationalist competition in plurinational states. Capturing the period from 2021 to 2024, this article addresses two key questions: How do state and substate nationalist parties frame the crisis? And how have they instrumentalized it to further their territorial claims? Focusing on Belgium (Flanders), Spain (Catalonia), and the United Kingdom (Scotland), we analyse party manifestos, parliamentary debates, press releases, and public statements. We find that state nationalists predominantly exogenized the crisis, attributing it to global shocks, while substate nationalists endogenized it, blaming domestic policy failures. Both engaged in blame attribution and credit-claiming to bolster their territorial positions. Rather than reshaping territorial debates, the crisis reinforced existing nationalist narratives, highlighting the resilience of constitutional contestation in plurinational states.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 April 2025; Accepted 24 October 2025

KEYWORDS Cost-of-living crisis; nationalism; crisis exploitation; Spain; United Kingdom

Introduction

From late 2021, as countries around the world continued to grapple with the Covid-19 pandemic, a new economic crisis emerged. Marked by surging energy costs and rising inflation, this 'cost-of-living crisis' became a global phenomenon, exacerbated by the lingering effects of the pandemic and further intensified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹ Addressing this transnational economic shock required not only international

CONTACT Judith Sijstermans  judith.sijstermans@abdn.ac.uk  School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Edward Wright Building, Dunbar Street, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

cooperation but also close coordination between different levels of government within states.

The need for multilevel policy coordination during crises can either exacerbate political tensions between different levels of government or encourage collaboration (Hegele and Schnabel 2021). Central and substate actors exhibit the crisis-driven push and pull between 'command and control' leadership and a coordinated, networked approach (Helsloot 2008). This is further heightened in plurinational states – those characterized by the presence of multiple national groups that define themselves as a nation – where territorial contestation is particularly salient (Lecours and Kerr 2021). In these settings, both state and substate nationalists frequently engage in processes of credit-taking and blame-shifting regarding the origins and effects of crises and employ strategies of instrumentalisation to advance their territorial ambitions.

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars suggested that substate nationalists might exploit the crisis to fuel conflict and advocate for enhanced autonomy (Woods et al. 2020). Later analysis confirmed this and highlighted how central governments also leveraged the pandemic to strengthen their case for state unity (Anderson et al. 2024). In this article, we explore whether similar patterns have emerged in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

We focus on three plurinational states, Belgium (Flanders), Spain (Catalonia) and United Kingdom (Scotland). In each case, the cost-of-living crisis has its origins in early 2021, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and rising energy prices after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Inflation peaked at 10.8% in Spain in August 2022, and in October 2022 hit 11.1% in the UK and 12.3% in Belgium (Statista 2024). Correspondingly, in 2022 many citizens of these countries reported being somewhat or very concerned about energy bill prices – 94% (Spain), 84% (UK), and 81% (Belgium) (OECD 2023). Cost of living concerns were prevalent in all three countries' elections, providing substantial ground for our research.

This article addresses two main questions: How do state and substate nationalist parties frame the causes and consequences of this cost-of-living crisis? And how have they instrumentalized the crisis to advance their constitutional objectives? To answer these questions, we draw on Boin et al.'s (2009) theory of crisis exploitation and examine data from a range of sources, including election manifestos, parliamentary debates, party documents, public statements and press releases.

Our paper shows that state and substate nationalist parties frame the causes of the cost-of-living crisis in support of their own political and territorial objectives. They attribute blame accordingly, with state nationalists typically exogenizing the causes of the crisis whereas substate nationalists attribute blame to internal domestic factors. This allows them to

instrumentalize the crisis to make the case for further territorial reform/independence. In line with our expectations, state nationalists likewise exploit the crisis to suggest a need for maintaining state unity and to bolster the territorial status quo. Across the three cases, we demonstrate that parties follow a script, repeatedly drawing on well-rehearsed territorial arguments and grievances, tailored towards their respective audiences.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, we build on recent research that underscores the importance of examining state and substate nationalism as an ongoing dialogue between political actors (Anderson 2024; Cetra and Brown Swan 2020). Second, we develop a recent strand of research focused on how nationalist parties frame their arguments for constitutional change (Elias et al. 2023; Ferreria 2022; Royles 2024). Expanding on this, we demonstrate how *both* state and substate nationalist parties leverage crises to advance their territorial agendas. As the recent Regional & Federal Studies editorial highlighted, across Europe – and further afield – successive crises ‘have all contributed to a climate of resurgent nationalisms’, exacerbating territorial tensions in many states and engendering increased calls for autonomy or independence on the one hand, and an effort to strengthen state unity on the other (Vampa et al. 2025, 500). Third, we contribute to ongoing research on multilevel governance, nationalism and crisis (Coletti and Filipetti 2022; Lecours and Kerr 2021; Vampa 2021). By examining the dynamics in Belgium, Spain and the UK during the cost-of-living crisis, our research provides a framework for understanding how crises become incorporated into long-standing nationalist scripts. Our findings thus further support previous research showing that competing political forces engage in patterns of blame and credit attribution to promote and strengthen their territorial objectives (Anderson et al. 2024).

Nationalism and crisis narratives

Crises are defined by exceptional circumstances, high uncertainty, and the ‘necessity to make critical choices’, driven by a sense of acute threat (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997, 297–298). As high-salience political disruptions, crises often precipitate change and produce discourses of change (Boin and ‘t Hart 2022, 14). Crises thus provide political actors with ‘windows of opportunity’ and engender ‘framing contests’ between political actors over how to make sense of the crisis, claim credit, attribute blame and offer solutions (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell 2009).

In plurinational states, framing contests during crises can become particularly complex. Lecours and Kerr (2021, 3) note that ‘normal politics’ in plurinational states, such as party competition, executive decisions and public policymaking, ‘are typically coloured by the deep diversity of plurinational

democracies', hence in crisis situations the potential for increased conflict and divergent narratives is substantially heightened. While conflict may stem from disputes over jurisdiction in crisis management (Schnabel, Anderson, and de Francesco 2024), it also relates to state and substate nationalist definitions of the crisis and the ensuing interpretative battles as they seek to narrate the situation to their advantage.

State nationalism refers to the promotion of the state by political elites and institutions. In plurinational states, the term 'state nationalist' describes political actors that advocate for state integrity, that is, the preservation of the existing political union. Recent scholarly work (Brown Swan and Anderson 2024; Gagnon 2020) has highlighted that state nationalists may not identify as nationalist or may reject the label, but their commitment to advocating for political union and strategies for state continuation position them as state nationalists (Cetra and Brown Swan 2020). In contrast, substate nationalists explicitly challenge the state as they seek to acquire, strengthen or preserve their own distinct identities and political interests. They advance claims for self-government with demands ranging from calls for (enhanced) autonomy to full independence. In plurinational states, state and substate nationalisms are thus framed in opposition to one another, manifest in competing, 'dialectical' claims and counterclaims of territorial strategies and constitutional visions (Craigie 2010).

Crises often lead to 'framing contests' in which political leaders and opponents seek to interpret the crisis and to engage in credit-claiming and blame-attribution strategies (Boin and 't Hart 2022). Credit-claiming is used by politicians and political parties to bolster their political legitimacy and electoral credibility among the public. On the other hand, attributing blame allows politicians to deflect responsibility for the origins or effects of a crisis and can be used to harm the credibility of other actors. In plurinational states, credit-claiming competitions and blame games between state and substate nationalists are prevalent during crises (Anderson et al. 2024). In developing their theory of 'crisis exploitation', Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2009, 81) illuminate the prevalence of blame discourse as political leaders seek to 'advance and defend the policies they stand for'.

Political discourse thus becomes a contest of causality in which political actors identify (potentially competing) factors that triggered the crisis. In denying responsibility and avoiding blame, political actors – especially incumbent political parties and leaders, and their respective governments – seek to get 'off the hook' by exogenizing accountability, whereas the state's opponents and critics are more likely to endogenize a crisis. As Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2009, 88) note, the former typically leads to the discourse of 'yes, this is big, bad and urgent, but this is not our doing; all of us need to unite to cope with this' whereas the latter entails 'this is big, bad and urgent, and it is so because the people and programmes that

govern us have failed us'. Nevertheless, other research suggests that while political actors may acknowledge the same underlying reality regarding the causes of a crisis, they often engage in attributing responsibility selectively to advance and defend their own policies (Bisgaard 2015; Vasilopoulou, Hali-kiopoulou, and Exadaktylos 2014). Bringing together these insights and the specific dynamics of plurinational states, we posit that the cost-of-living crisis is likely to provide a new arena for territorial contestation between state and substate nationalists. We anticipate both state and substate nationalists will employ credit-claiming and blame-attribution strategies and integrate these into their constitutional claims.

Previous scholarship shows that state nationalists are likely to bolster the state in times of crisis through the (often symbolic) performance of state power for example through increasing the visibility of leaders (O'Reilly et al. 2015; Samad, Al Jerjawi, and Dadich 2022; Schnabel, Anderson, and de Francesco 2024), mobilizing the military (Kalkman 2021; Casaglia and Coletti 2023), and securitizing the border (Kallis 2018; Bieber 2022). Crisis thus requires politicians to reinforce the power of state institutions to the public, while recognizing the calls for reform that may come because of crisis-driven upheaval (Boin and 't Hart 2003). The tensions between these two responses to crisis mean that state leaders may re-emphasize or re-frame ideas, without necessarily leading to full scale reform.

Existing studies often focus on the performance of state power vis-a-vis the external world or vis-a-vis a wider conceptualization of 'public opinion'. To complement these findings, this article follows up on several recent studies (driven by the Covid-19 pandemic) that centre on how crisis affects state and substate politics in internal territorial dynamics (Lecours and Kerr 2023; Anderson et al. 2024). Following from these studies, we expect that state nationalists will use crisis to defend state unity, thus performing their power in the territorial arena. To achieve this end, we expect state nationalists, in incumbent state governments, to primarily emphasize exogenous factors in their framing of the crisis. In contrast, substate nationalists may find it politically advantageous to leverage the crisis by endogenizing its causes, pointing to factors at state level that exacerbated crisis.

Research design

To explore the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the territorial claims of state and substate nationalist parties, we examine the crisis narratives of political parties across Belgium (Flanders), Spain (Catalonia), and the UK (Scotland). These cases are well-known plurinational states in Western Europe, with democratic governments, well-established substate institutions, ongoing centre-periphery tensions, and substantial electoral competition

between state and substate nationalist parties (Anderson 2024; Dalle Mulle 2017; Lecours 2021).

With the aim of providing a thick description on how state and substate nationalists framed and instrumentalized the cost-of-living crisis and following Leuffen's (2007) guidelines on case selection, we adopted a small-n, in-depth qualitative methodology. As noted above, these are similar cases, all of which experienced a cost-of-living crisis and are characterized by centre-periphery tensions. In all three cases, the development of the crisis took place against the backdrop of ongoing centre-periphery tensions, although the salience of such constitutional tensions varied. In the UK/Scotland, the union-independence dichotomy has been a central feature of political debate for well over a decade, while this has been a less salient feature in Belgium/Flanders. Akin to Scotland, centre-periphery tensions in Spain/Catalonia have long been characterized by debate on Catalan independence, but in recent years as the PSOE Spanish government has sought to de-escalate tensions with the Catalan government, the salience of this debate, as well as support for independence, has declined. The similarities between these cases thus make the comparison plausible, while the varying levels of salience of nationalist contestation make it interesting.

Our analysis focuses on political parties that represent either the state or substate nation, specifically those advocating for territorial unity (state nationalists) or further autonomy/independence (substate nationalists). Parties were selected based on their incumbency in government at state or substate levels between 2021 and 2024 (see Table 1). Given the importance of leadership in crisis, crises can be seen as 'the domain of high politics, in that they put to the test the viability of the political regime and challenge the capacity of ruling elites or incumbent authorities' (Rosenthal and t'Hart 1991, 358). Governing authorities are crucial actors in crisis management, but they are neither unitary nor reified (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997, 286). Acting as representatives of crisis-managing governments, incumbent political parties defend their record and institutions and

Table 1. Case selection.

	State nationalist parties	Substate nationalist parties
Belgium	<i>Mouvement Reformateur</i> (Reformist Movement) <i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats) <i>Parti Socialiste</i> (Socialist Party)	<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> (New Flemish Alliance)
Spain	<i>Partido Socialista Obrero Español</i> (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) <i>Unidas Podemos</i> (United We Can)/ <i>Sumar</i> (Unite).	<i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i> (Republican Left of Catalonia) <i>Junts per Catalunya</i> (Together for Catalonia)
UK	Conservative and Unionist Party	Scottish National Party

compete with one another within the system to apportion blame and take credit.

Given variations in electoral and party systems, as well as the complexities of government formations, our analysis in Belgium and Spain includes multiple parties representing the state/substate. In Belgium, we focus on three main parties in the coalition government (2020–2024): *Mouvement Reformateur* (MR), *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD), and *Parti Socialiste* (PS). At the substate level we focus on the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA). In Spain, our focus at state level includes the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), *Unidas Podemos* (UP) and *Sumar*. Prior to the 2023 election, UP was the PSOE's main coalition partner, but it was later replaced by Sumar, a new electoral platform uniting various left-wing parties, including UP. In the Catalan case, we examine *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) and *Junts per Catalunya* (JxCat), which formed a coalition government after the 2021 Catalan election until JxCat withdrew in October 2022, leaving ERC to govern as a single-party minority government. In the UK and Scotland, we focus on the single parties that represented the state and substate level: the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

To explore how state and substate parties framed and instrumentalized the cost-of-living crisis, we gathered data covering a three-year period (October 2021–December 2024). This captured the onset of the crisis across Europe and several state and substate electoral campaigns. We analysed election manifestoes, parliamentary debates, party documents, public statements and press releases related to the crisis. Given that political actors use different channels to express their opinions and positions on different issues to different audiences (Ivanusch 2025), we collected and analysed a wide range of 'political documents'. This was also crucial to our qualitative approach, enabling the development of a more holistic analysis and thick description of how state and substate actors understood the cost-of-living crisis (Wesley 2014). The process of data collection and analysis followed methods used by the research team in an earlier study (Anderson et al. 2024). Data was gathered using targeted key word searches and individually coded by the research team. To capture the nuances of each case, no strict coding scheme was applied. Following Wesley's (2014) application of content analysis to political documents, this involved a three-stage process, namely identifying general themes (e.g. 'framing of crisis' or 'instrumentalisation'), highlighting specific passages from documents under each theme and finally reviewing and narrowing codes to develop single case-study and comparative analysis across all three cases. Coding was facilitated through a collaborative process of analysis using Microsoft OneNote, which allowed authors to code specific sections of documents across the cases and generate a

‘code search report’ to write up the analysis and compare these across the cases (Fernandes and Barbeiro 2014).

In the following section, we present our empirical analysis of the three cases. To answer the research questions and ensure a controlled comparison, we divide the analysis of each case into two parts: first, we examine how parties framed the crisis, and second, we explore if and how they instrumentalized it in relation to their territorial ambitions.

Flanders and Belgium

In Belgium, a long period of successive crises (including Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy price increases and purchasing power decreases) preceded June 2024 elections. The Belgian government’s initial response to the crisis – a cut to VAT and energy bill discounts for low-income households – led to a rise in debt which triggered the EU’s excessive debt procedures. For state and substate parties alike, the economy had high salience during the period of study. Building on divergent strategies of blame and credit attribution, state and substate nationalists instrumentalized the cost-of-living crisis through the lens of constitutional demands. State nationalists portrayed the causes of crisis as exogenous while substate nationalists used the cost-of-living crisis to illustrate existing, endogenous issues with the Belgian state. Nationalists thus became further polarized, with state nationalists arguing constitutional changes would be a distraction from crisis management, while substate nationalists argued that only state reform could solve Belgium’s problems.

Characterizing crisis

While both state and substate nationalists centred Belgium’s economic issues, state nationalists were more explicit in their use of crisis language. In 2024, state nationalists’ manifestos opened with reference to crisis. MR claimed: ‘A society in crisis can be an opportunity’ (MR 2024, 1). OpenVLD posited that the country had emerged from crisis, arguing: ‘Our country has come out of these crises. The De Croo government has protected our citizens ... nowhere in Europe has people’s purchasing power been better protected’ (Open VLD 2024). Meanwhile the PS identified multiple crises (‘climate change, global epidemics, wars in Ukraine, the Middle East or in eastern Congo’), noting that ‘the consequences are felt in our daily lives’ (PS 2024, 9). The language of crisis, threat, and protection were paramount for the three governing parties.

Substate nationalist N-VA framed price increases as a crisis while also identifying a wider and further reaching malaise in Belgium. In his 2023 ‘State of the Union’ address, N-VA Minister-President of Flanders Jan Jambon

emphasized: 'We cannot afford not to take action in the disruptive energy crisis that we are now in' (Vlaams Parlement 2023). Energy price rises were underpinned by a sense of urgency, but wider issues were also emphasized. Their manifesto stated: 'Belgium lacks the political decisiveness to tackle the major challenges of the future. The past four years have proven this abundantly'. In contrast, 'In Flanders, we are making the right choices' (N-VA 2024, 1). For substate nationalists, the Belgian state and its leaders were thus seen as a source of crisis.

While all parties agreed on the salience of economic challenges, they developed diverging narratives around the source of economic problems. State nationalists situated economic crisis as external to the country and took credit for defending Belgium from worse harm. Reflecting on his time in government, Prime Minister De Croo (Open VLD) argued that the government had been confronted with successive external crises, naming Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and energy price increases (De Standard 2024). In his 2023 New Year's speech, PS chairman Paul Magnette emphasized these successive crises and concluded that solidarity with Ukrainians led to 'economic and social consequences that we are suffering here at home' (PS 2023). The MR, in its 'Belgium 2030' plan, noted that the government should be a 'protector' in an environment in which 'the war in Ukraine followed [the Coronavirus] health turmoil', and in which Belgium faces 'an energy crisis that is gradually turning into an economic crisis' (MR 2022). As such, all three state nationalist parties sought to couch the cost-of-living crisis within wider crises, driven by external geopolitical challenges, and portrayed the state as protective in this context.

Meanwhile, substate nationalist N-VA recognized the impact of war in Ukraine on energy prices but blamed the Belgian government for the severity of the effects. In his 2022 budget statement, six months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Minister-President Jambon noted the effects of the war in Ukraine but also argued that more autonomy would mitigate these effects: 'Flanders does not have sufficient resources to fully bear the increase in energy bills ... I say that honestly, but at the same time it is also frustrating' (Vlaams Parlement 2022). Thus, for the N-VA, energy prices were as much the fault of external actors as the fault of the dysfunctional structure of the Belgian government. In fact, a year later, N-VA Chamber of Representatives leader Peter De Roover criticized the Belgian state's spending habits, arguing that 'today's deficits are tomorrow's loss of purchasing power'. He concluded, 'Within Belgium, reform is impossible, and Belgium is a luxury that we can no longer afford' (De Kamer 2023). The Belgian government, its political leaders' failed policies, and its constitutional structure were thus interchangeably criticized by substate nationalists.

Instrumentalizing crisis

As De Roover's argument highlights, different patterns of attributing blame and credit led parties to diametrically opposed constitutional claims. Belgian state nationalists took credit, arguing that crisis meant there was no need or demand for reform. In contrast, substate nationalists claimed that the state's preoccupation with crisis deflected from the need for deeper, structural reforms to the state.

Seeking to take credit for the handling of crisis, Open VLD PM De Croo argued that the state was a protective body and that the government 'built a thick wall around everything that was important: jobs, income, companies' savings' (De Standaard 2024). As a member of the coalition, PS Chamber of Representatives leader Ahmed Laaouej noted: 'In times of crisis and risk of recession ... we had to be on the side of households and their purchasing power ... Belgium has held up better economically than other countries' (De Kamer 2023).

State nationalists dismissed calls for further decentralization (in Belgium, called state reform) and instead focused on government efficiency. Open VLD, for example, argued for 'a smaller state instead of a state reform' (Open VLD 2024, 67). In fact, state reform was portrayed as an unnecessary distraction amidst crises. Socialists argued that: 'incessant institutional debates don't respond to the concerns of citizens' (PS 2024, 13). OpenVLD PM De Croo said in an interview with *De Standaard*: 'Nobody is interested in the Catalonia moment for Belgium. Nobody is interested in a programme that generates tens of billions in new taxes. Nobody wants to indulge in adventures' (De Standaard 2024). Paul Magnette, leader of the PS, argued that the purchasing power crisis meant that state reform wasn't a priority: '[State reform is] not what people expect from us. The people I meet tell me: 'You have to do something about purchasing power, low wages and pensions'' (VRT NWS 2024a).

Departing from this narrative, the MR showed an openness to a new round of state reform despite their 2024 manifesto only calling for increased efficiency. They argued that, considering successive crises: 'It is today, the obligation to proceed with all reforms with a demand for results, strategic foresight, generous ambition and a conviction to overturn all barriers' (MR 2024, 1). For MR, state reform was a strategic choice not underpinned by crisis. MR leader Georges-Louis Bouchez argued: 'We want a more efficient state. If this must be done by a reform that makes it lighter and more efficient, fine. But not one that ends Belgium' (VRT NWS 2024b). The MR's openness to reform stemmed from interests in coalition building but did not suggest a real alternative state nationalist narrative around the economic crisis.

The N-VA blamed the federal government and called for structural state reform. In the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, De Roover (12 October

2022) argued that crisis was an insufficient justification for ‘wafer-thin’ policy. He said: ‘The war in Ukraine did not only break out in our country. Energy prices have not only risen in our country. Covid has not only broken out in our country. In comparison with our neighbouring countries, you are falling below the already not spectacularly high bar’. The N-VA thus pushed directly against the government’s claims that crisis negated the need for reform.

The Belgian government’s failures to deal with successive crises provided a rationale for the N-VA’s calls for greater Flemish autonomy and fundamental reform to the Belgian state. As N-VA representative Sander Loones said in a 2023 interview with a Sunday paper: ‘More people need to get to work ... But let’s be honest: that is no longer possible in this country ... Belgium isn’t sick, Belgium is the disease’ (De Zondag 2023). The N-VA manifesto further justified confederal reform through the language of cost and prices. It noted, ‘Due to the current state structure, both Flemish and French-speakers continue to waste time and energy. Moreover, federal money has now also run out and, without intervention, the repayment of the Belgian debts will end up on the shoulders of the Flemish ... Only a confederal paradigm shift can protect our Flemish prosperity’ (N-VA 2024, 4).

Given the presence and competition from more radical competitor the Vlaams Belang, the N-VA’s claims for constitutional reform were more moderate and centred around economic goals and performance. This link between conservative economic policies and calls for confederalism is consistent with the party’s longer standing strategic positioning (Huyseune 2017). While the constitution is not the top priority for N-VA voters, it is essential to the party’s organizational DNA. As such, calls for a confederal solution remained the first subject in their 2024 manifesto. As Loones noted: ‘We remain a radical Flemish party; that is also clearly stated in article 1 of our statutes’ (De Zondag 2023).

State nationalist parties emphasized the depth of crisis and used the idea of successive crises to justify government policies. They sought to dismiss ‘adventurous’ claims for state reform because of these crises. In contrast, the N-VA recognized that the cost-of-living crisis is externally triggered but argued that Belgium and the Belgian government were ultimately to blame. In this telling of the story, state reform is the solution, not the distraction. Two divergent narratives thus persisted, strengthened rather than altered by the cost-of-living crisis.

Catalonia and Spain

Variably framed as a ‘cost-of-living crisis’, an ‘inflation crisis’ and even an ‘olive oil crisis’, in Spain the dominant characterization of increasing electricity and gas prices was as an ‘energy crisis’. From late 2021, the crisis was a core feature of political debate. It remained a recurring issue during the 2023

general election campaign while the salience of constitutional issues during the period of the energy crisis in Spain was less than in previous years. In framing the causes of the crisis, all parties analysed here – PSOE, UP/Sumar, ERC and JxCat – identified exogenous sources as the main culprit for rising energy prices, but both substate parties repeatedly referenced endogenous factors as exacerbating the crisis. Both state and substate nationalists engaged in credit-claiming and blame-attribution strategies, with the various parties using the crisis to bolster – at least to some extent – their territorial objectives.

Characterizing crisis

From 2021 onwards, there was a consensus among state and substate nationalist political elites on the exogenous causes of the crisis. In his ‘State of the Nation’ speech in July 2022, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez noted that ‘the uncontrolled growth in prices has been caused by the chain of two unique international disturbances in the economy... the first the pandemic, the second, Putin’s war in Ukraine’ (Sánchez 12 July 2022). As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continued throughout 2022, the PSOE’s narrative on the exogeneity of the crisis remained unchanged, with much of the blame placed on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s strategy of ‘blackmail and using gas as a weapon of war’ (Maroto 14 December 2022). In consonance with this narrative, substate nationalist parties in Catalonia likewise blamed the same exogenous factors for spiralling prices (ERC 2023; JxCat 2023). However, for both the ERC and JxCat, while there was an international origin to the crisis, endogenous factors, notably the actions or inaction of successive Spanish governments, exacerbated the crisis.

Responding to the Prime Minister’s address in July 2022, Miriam Nogueras – spokesperson for JxCat in the Spanish Congress – refuted the Prime Minister’s characterization of the crisis as caused principally by the war in Ukraine, arguing that ‘the crisis did not come with the war, however much you repeat it, it was there before’ (Nogueras 13 July 2022). For JxCat, while the economic implications of the pandemic and war were not wholly denied, they were subsumed within existing critique of the Spanish state and its economic model. This argumentation was also employed by ERC which, while acknowledging the global origins of the crisis, criticized the policies of Spanish state: ‘war is not the only factor triggering the crisis ... we are also paying for the disastrous economic policies implemented for decades by different [Spanish] governments’ (Salvador 21 December 2022). Highlighting the effects of rising energy costs, the party’s 2023 manifesto blamed ‘the economic and social model of the Spanish state’ (ERC 2023, 54).

The Spanish Government repudiated the crisis narratives of Catalan parties but sometimes adopted similar rhetoric by characterizing the crisis as

exacerbated by endogenous factors, namely the actions of previous Partido Popular (PP) governments (Díaz 9 March 2022). Crisis rhetoric, thus, was often characterized by both vertical and horizontal blame-shifting. While ERC and JxCat sought to shift the blame upwards to the Spanish state, the PSOE – as the incumbent representative of the Spanish state – blamed its political predecessors. The PSOE manifesto for the 2023 election was replete with references to the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity measures implemented by the previous PP government, with the latter often framed as a key factor in the exacerbation of the energy crisis.

Across all three political parties, there was broadly similar rhetoric used in characterizing and attributing blame for the crisis, with narratives drawing on both endogenous and exogenous factors. These narratives were not limited to apportioning blame but were instrumentalized to claim credit for mitigation efforts and advocate for state and substate territorial preferences.

Instrumentalizing crisis

The crisis provided ample opportunity for state and substate nationalists to credit-claim for their crisis management. This was more pronounced in the case of PSOE and Sumar, with politicians making repeated references to ‘successful measures’, such as VAT discounts on energy and food, reduced costs and free travel on public transport and capped rent rises implemented by the Spanish government. The principal measure featured in credit-taking discourse was the ‘Iberian exception’. This measure enabled Spain and Portugal to decouple the price of gas from that of electricity and reduce wholesale electricity prices. It was repeatedly heralded as ‘historic’ in allowing Spain to more effectively mitigate the economic consequences of the crisis (Sánchez 12 July 2022). PSOE and Sumar politicians spoke regularly of the savings the measure had delivered, with recurrent references to lower prices in Spain and Portugal compared to elsewhere in Europe. This credit-claiming strategy featured in the 2023 election campaign, with the Iberian exception framed as a measure that could only have been delivered by a ‘socialist government at the helm’ (PSOE 2023, 71). Both the PSOE and Sumar went beyond credit-claiming discourse around the energy crisis. They also made frequent reference to their Covid-19 pandemic policies as proof of competence (Maroto 14 December 2022; PSOE 2023; Díaz 9 March 2022; Sumar 2023).

ERC adopted a two-pronged credit-claiming strategy focused on their influence in the Spanish Congress and as the (main) party of government in Catalonia. The party’s 2023 manifesto lauded ERC’s influence on the Spanish government, highlighting measures such as increases in the minimum wage, regulating rent prices and bringing down inflation, as ‘thanks to the advocacy capacity of *Esquerra Republicana* in the Spanish

Congress' (ERC 2023, 68). The 2024 Catalan manifesto took a similar approach, this time more focused on the economic competence of the Catalan government. With repeated references to the economic strength of Catalonia and the 'good management' of the Catalan economy under the stewardship of ERC, the manifesto identified mitigation measures, such as increasing the rate of basic incomes provided by the Catalan government or the provision of school supply vouchers for students, as a key strength in its crisis management strategy (ERC 2024, 88). JxCat's narratives revealed little evidence of credit-taking during the energy crisis, perhaps explained by their minimal role in governing during the crisis following their resignation as coalition partner in October 2022.

Since coming to power in 2018, the PSOE has sought to ease tensions between the Spanish and Catalan governments. Measures such as pardoning imprisoned leaders, reforming the sedition law, and re-establishing talks with the Catalan government have helped to reduce some of the friction. While progress was cautiously welcomed by ERC officials, this was not the case for JxCat which was more vociferous in its critique of the Spanish government's handling of the energy crisis as well as using the crisis to promote Catalan statehood. JxCat politicians repeatedly criticized the PSOE (and previous PP governments), building on long-standing criticisms about the inadequate investment by the Spanish state in Catalonia, notably on the topic of public transport. Acknowledging measures implemented by the Spanish government to provide discounted prices on trains during the energy crisis, JxCat representatives argued that investment in rail infrastructure in Madrid dwarfed that of Catalonia. They concluded, 'In Catalonia, we do not want charity, what we want is for things to work, for the trains to work, because we pay more than 50 billion euros in taxes. Where is this money? Where does our money go? Because I assure you that it does not reach Catalonia' (Nogueras 13 July 2022). JxCat thus targeted both state nationalists in the PSOE and PP governments through condemning the Spanish state and its centralization, arguing that state nationalists' policy failures were evidence of structural neglect.

Other criticisms of the Spanish state more explicitly promoted Catalan independence. As prices sharply rose in March 2022, JxCat representative, Joan Canadell stated: 'having a state of our own is the only way to face the crises of the twenty-first century' (JxCat 2022). The party's 2024 manifesto underlined the need for independence by criticizing the measures implemented by the Spanish Government to mitigate the energy crisis as insufficient and with little concern afforded to the needs of Catalan citizens (JxCat 2024, 89).

ERC representatives also focused on the economic crisis to draw attention to perceived inequalities in the Spanish financing system, viewed as detrimental to Catalonia. Akin to JxCat, ERC representatives repeatedly referred

to differences in investment between Catalonia and Madrid to justify the case for Catalan independence (Salvador 21 December 2022). Throughout the energy crisis, ERC regularly challenged the actions of the Spanish government in mitigating the crisis, believing that much more needed to be done, and faster. However, party officials rarely instrumentalized the energy crisis to promote independence. Beyond the economic argument discussed above, the most frequent narrative deployed to promote Catalan independence was the perceived low quality of Spanish democracy (Bassa 27 April 2022).

The central narrative adopted by the state nationalist parties reinforced the case for unity and cooperation between the Spanish Government and autonomous communities. With its strategy ‘to convert every crisis and problem into an opportunity’ (PSOE 2023, 14), the PSOE used the energy crisis and frequent reference to the threat of Russia to promote political, parliamentary and state unity (Maroto 14 December 2022; Durán 27 April 2022). Likewise, Sumar (2023, 37) framed the energy crisis as ‘an opportunity ... to build the Spain of the coming decades’. Referencing an extraordinary meeting between the Prime Minister and Presidents from the 17 Autonomous Communities in March 2022 in response to the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent energy crisis, Minister for Territorial Policy, Isabel Rodriguez proclaimed ‘today Spain comes out of this Conference of Presidents stronger because we are more united’ (Spanish Government 2022). After the meeting, Prime Minister Sánchez (22 March 2022) emphasized the importance of ‘dialogue with parliamentary parties and with others, as well as with the autonomous communities, to reach agreement so that we can cushion the economic consequences of this war effectively’.

Throughout the crisis, both state and substate actors engaged in credit-claiming rhetoric. State nationalists championed their actions in mitigating the crisis and leveraged geopolitical events to call for state unity. In contrast, substate nationalists acknowledged the global origins of the economic shock but framed the consequences of the crisis as the result of mismanagement by both the incumbent and past Spanish governments. While Catalan parties continued to advance the case for independence, the intensity of these claims varied: JxCat more explicitly pushed for Catalan statehood, while ERC, supporting the government in Madrid, less explicitly connected crisis and independence.

Scotland and the UK

The 2021–2024 period was marked by economic uncertainty, with rising costs driven by global shocks and domestic policy decisions like Brexit and the 2022 mini-budget. As a result, the cost-of-living crisis topped the political agenda in the UK. In response, all actors sought to respond to the salience of the issue amongst voters and mobilize on the (mis)management of the

economy by their political rivals during this period. The Conservative Party sought to minimize the urgency and acuteness of rapidly rising costs for British households, eschewing crisis framing for more technical language of ‘inflation’ and high energy costs, while the SNP sought to amplify the crisis, attributing blame to economic mismanagement by the UK Government. Despite the diminished salience of the constitutional question during this period, the respective substate nationalist and state nationalist governments sought to claim credit for their management of the economy to advance their constitutional objectives.

Characterizing crisis

The Conservatives and the SNP sought to define the crisis for their own political ends. Conservatives largely avoided the term crisis, while the SNP emphasized it. Both acknowledged external causes but framed them differently: Conservatives attributed the cause of the crisis entirely to global events, whereas the SNP saw the causes as exogenous, the result of global events, but the consequences of these events were substantially worsened by UK government’s response to the crisis.

The Conservative Party eschewed crisis language in its discourse, particularly following the Autumn 2022 budget, when economic conditions rapidly worsened. Instead, the party employed more neutral and technical framing of the economic upheaval experienced by voters. Neither Prime Ministers Liz Truss nor Rishi Sunak used the term ‘cost-of-living crisis’ in debates, preferring terms like ‘struggling’ (Truss 7 September 2022) or facing the ‘burden’ of high energy prices (Sunak 15 November 2023). Crisis was mentioned twice in the 2024 UK Conservative manifesto, in both instances referring to the 2008 financial crisis, blame for which was attributed to the previous Labour Government (Conservative Party 2024). No mention was made of the cost-of-living, or even inflation. By denying the existence of a crisis, the Conservative Party, incumbent at Westminster, attempted to sidestep blame, by suggesting there is no crisis for which blame could be attributed. The Scottish Conservatives, in contrast, used crisis language more regularly when in dialogue with the SNP, for whom the crisis was a central plank of political discourse. Scottish Conservatives, particularly leader Douglas Ross, used crisis language but framed it as a ‘global’ issue to deflect blame from Westminster (Scottish Conservatives 2024; Ross 23 November 2022; Ross 16 May 2023).

In contrast, the SNP persistently employed crisis language, suggesting that the crisis had touched all aspects of people’s lives. While for Conservatives, the crisis was global, the SNP appended ‘Westminster’ or ‘Tory’ to their discussions of the cost-of-living, attaching blame for the crisis through its labelling. Scotland, the SNP argued, experienced ‘not just a cost-of-living crisis but a

cost of Westminster crisis' (Hendry 2023). For the SNP, the blame for the crisis sat wholly outside of Scotland but could not be attributed solely to global economic disruption. The SNP framed the crisis as an extension of Westminster's failures, citing austerity, Brexit, and economic mismanagement. In response to downgraded IMF forecasts, then First Minister Nicola Sturgeon noted 'the UK is facing a worse cost-of-living crisis than elsewhere' (Sturgeon 2 February 2023). As these examples show the SNP uses 'Westminster' and 'Conservative' as interchangeable in this period, reflecting a common conflation of the two after more than 10 years in government.

Throughout the 2024 general election campaign, the Conservative Party sought to render the crisis exogenous – suggesting that inflation, energy, and rising bills were a result of global events. In response to an attack on his government's economic record, Sunak deflected blame: 'These are the root causes of the challenges we face, which are global in nature. It is wrong to say they are particular to this country' (Sunak 2 November 2022). The emphasis on global crisis, and a rejection of claims that the UK was hit harder than others, was core to the party's crisis framing.

These competing efforts to attribute blame were in direct confrontation in a May 2023 debate. Conservative MP John Glen attributed the economic challenges to a series of exogenous shocks, arguing the UK's challenges were not unique: 'high inflation in our country cannot be separated from global events. Other countries are experiencing similar situations to the UK' (Glen 16 May 2023). His statement was rebutted by Mhairi Black, SNP MP, who noted that while global events had of course contributed to the broader global economic situation, it was the mismanagement of the crisis which exacerbated it. She described the crisis as a 'cost of greed crisis', 'a crisis made by the choices of this place [UK Parliament]. This place is the one that has the power – nowhere else. This is a crisis made by a dangerous Government making bad decisions' (Black 16 May 2023).

Instrumentalizing crisis

Beyond framing the crisis, the Conservatives and the SNP sought to claim credit for their responses, stressing their economic interventions to bolster their constitutional arguments. The Conservatives emphasized UK-wide initiatives, while the SNP highlighted efforts to mitigate Westminster's economic mismanagement, despite the Scottish Government's limited powers. While the salience of the constitutional question had declined, the crisis became a vehicle for both parties to advance their preferred outcome: the Conservatives emphasized the Union's role in funding government and public services during difficult times, while the SNP positioned independence as the only way to fully escape and prevent future crises.

The Conservative's credit-claiming suggested that the UK Government's intervention in the economy ensured the strength and security of the Scottish economy. In interventions, Conservative politicians often drew a direct link between the pandemic – in which the UK Government intervened to protect businesses and support individuals, and its response to rising energy price and inflation (Jack 2 November 2022). Conservatives repeatedly cited the 'Union dividend' as a key benefit of UK membership for Scotland, enabling higher per capita public spending in Scotland, estimated at £2000 per person, as well as tax cuts, wage increases, and trade benefits for Scotland (Duguid 2 November 2022). Throughout the period of crisis, Conservatives suggested that Scotland's economic challenges would be alleviated had the Scottish Government sensibly allocated these funds and cease focus on independence.

The SNP's credit-claiming focused on the Scottish Government's efforts to mitigate the crisis. They emphasized financial support measures, positioning them as necessary responses to Westminster policies. In a Scottish Parliament debate, First Minister Sturgeon described £3 billion spent by the Scottish Government to 'mitigate' the cost-of-living crisis and 'to help people deal with Tory austerity' (Sturgeon 23 March 2023). SNP figures expressed frustration at having to mitigate Westminster decisions, including 'the bedroom tax, welfare reform, the two-child cap and the rape clause' (Adamson 7 September 2022). This exemplifies a tendency amongst the SNP to link the cost-of-living crisis, and in particular, the (in)action of the UK Government with unpopular policies which predated the crisis, suggesting that the cost-of-living crisis was an extension of austerity.

The Conservative's engagement with the constitutional question took two forms – a critique of the SNP's continual call for independence – a distraction from the business of government and the suggestion that independence would lead to severe and protracted economic crisis in Scotland. In a debate on independence, UK Government Minister Alister Jack put it bluntly 'a debate on Scotland leaving the United Kingdom is not a priority for the Scottish people, it is not a priority for Scotland'. Jack continued, noting lagging economic growth, 'How much better might things have been if the SNP had respected the democratic result of the 2014 referendum, and ceased its constant, unwanted demands to re-run that referendum?' (Jack 2 November 2022). The 'neverendum campaign' is, Jack argued 'a millstone around the neck of the Scottish economy' (ibid). Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross continued in this vein – suggesting 'If we had a Government who were more focused on economic growth and on delivering for the people of Scotland, rather than on division and independence, Scotland would be a lot better off' (Ross 16 May 2023). A theme emerged of an SNP distracted from the issues that really matter.

The SNP sought to suggest that the system itself – denoted by Westminster – was fundamentally broken. While the devolved government was able

to mitigate some of the worst effects of UK Government policy, it could not set general policy and influence the macroeconomic forces at work. Only an independent Scotland, the SNP argued, would have the power to innovate rather than mitigate: ‘Rather than being subject to Westminster control, we can choose a better future as an independent, outward-looking country with power over the full range of economic levers to build a better Scotland’ (Sturgeon 9 June 2022). Sturgeon’s successor Humza Yousaf (2 May 2024) set out the case for independence in a contribution which linked austerity and the cost-of-living crisis: ‘We need independence because this country has suffered 14 years of austerity from a government that has not won an election in Scotland since the 1950s. It is because a Brexit that we did not vote for was foisted upon us and because our people are suffering from a cost-of-living crisis that they did not create but are suffering the results of’. In the context of the 2024 general election, the SNP’s narrative continued to blame the Conservatives for the cost-of-living crisis, positing that the prospect of a Labour government offered little hope of improvement: ‘The Tories have enforced deep spending cuts, they’ve imposed Brexit and have worsened the cost-of-living crisis. They need to go. But we have to take care about what replaces them – the answer is not more spending cuts. It is not more Brexit and it is definitely not more Westminster decision-making about Scotland. And yet that is what the Labour Party is committed to: cuts, Brexit and continued Westminster control’ (Swinney 2024).

Throughout this period, the crisis was not just an economic issue but a political tool. The Conservatives used it to emphasize the security of the Union, while the SNP presented it as further justification for independence. As Scotland’s political future remains contested, the narratives around economic crises will continue to shape the constitutional debate.

Discussion and conclusion

Across all three plurinational states, the cost-of-living crisis was incorporated into the entrenched centre – periphery tensions that were expressed in debates between state and substate nationalist political parties. Our findings show that, in these cases, the cost-of-living crisis reinforced the existing script between state and substate nationalists, rather than disrupting it.

State and substate nationalists diagnosed the causes of the cost-of-living crisis differently: state nationalists exogenized the causes, citing global challenges, while substate nationalists predominantly endogenized them, pointing to their respective state’s policy failures. These divergent framings were instrumentalized into ongoing constitutional competition and used as tools in party competition between incumbents at substate and state level. In all three cases, state nationalists presented state unity as an essential protection against external threats, while substate nationalists argued that only further

territorial reform/independence could address domestic policy failures. Recurring patterns of framing and instrumentalisation suggest that nationalists of both types may follow a 'crisis script', a process through which their interpretation of crisis reinforces existing political narratives.

All the political parties studied agreed on a crisis framing. They recognized the cost-of-living increases were urgent and sought to mitigate rising prices. As expected, state nationalists predominantly framed the cost-of-living crisis as exogenous, triggered and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The rhetoric of state governments in Belgium, Spain and the UK followed a similar script in reupdating accusations that domestic factors were to blame for exacerbating the crisis and pointing the finger outwards to international events. This exogenization of crisis was used to deny substate nationalist demands and to push aside discussions of constitutional change as distracting.

We find that state nationalists thus explicitly instrumentalized the crisis to promote the importance of the state and the benefits of unity. In Belgium, Open VLD took credit for 'protecting' the people from external threats, often using the metaphor of building a wall around the Belgian people. In Spain, state nationalists went even further in credit-taking, referring to the Iberian exception as proof that the state was capable of effective crisis management. They used this credit-taking to not only promote state unity but to extend it, arguing that this was an opportunity 'to build the Spain of the coming decades'. In both cases, state nationalists framed unity as essential to dealing with external threats. The disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis in the UK made credit-taking more difficult for the British Conservatives. Instead, Conservatives focused on blaming by pointing a finger at the SNP's Scottish Government and its policies. While unable to take credit, they mirrored state nationalist arguments elsewhere by portraying substate nationalist demands as indulgent and a distraction from governing.

For substate nationalists, there was acknowledgement of the global origins of the crisis, but in all three cases their rhetoric linked its consequences to the policies of state governments. By endogenizing the causes, these parties shifted blame upwards towards the state. As the evidence shows, substate nationalist parties often alternated between blaming state nationalist parties in power (e.g. the SNP's attacks on 'Tory austerity') and the institutions of the state itself (e.g. 'a Westminster crisis'). At times, state nationalist parties – as the principal political defenders of the state – were treated as symbolic of the state as a whole. In their governing role, they were also expected to articulate a rationale for state unity. In some cases, substate critiques of a governing party's policies shifted into critiques of the state's institutional structure, incorporating debates over crisis management into ongoing territorial demands.

Akin to state nationalists, a crisis script was developed by substate nationalists, often using evocative language to level this blame: the state of Belgium compared to a 'disease', UK Government decisions labelled as 'dangerous', and the Spanish state's economic policies called 'disastrous'. This threat-based framing echoes state nationalist threat narratives during other crises, for example, the French militarization of its response to Covid-19 (Opillard, Palle, and Michelis 2020) and the territorializing of threat discourses in Italy around Covid-19 and migration (Casaglia and Coletti 2023). However, for substate nationalists, crisis-driven recriminations were instead aimed at 'enemies' within the state. These frames built on arguments around domestic policy failures in the run-up to the crisis and in crisis mitigation measures.

Substate nationalists sought to take credit for their response to the crisis, underlining the supports offered within the substate context, while instrumentalizing the crisis in pursuit of their territorial goals. Through this instrumentalization, they sought, sometimes against a tide of disinterest in independence, to increase the salience of the constitutional issue by building upon the discontent caused by the cost-of living crisis. In Flanders, the N-VA's grievances about the Belgian state were aggravated by crisis and this underpinned the argument that only further autonomy could solve economic challenges in Flanders. Similarly, in Catalonia, substate nationalist parties used the crisis to highlight long-standing economic disputes with the Spanish state, alongside credit-claiming discourse. The declining salience of the constitutional issue appeared to have a differential effect. Whilst JxCat vociferously used the cost-of-living to advocate for independence, this was less pronounced for ERC who made the case for independence using existing narratives, such as calling into question the quality of Spanish democracy. Salience similarly declined in the Scottish case, but the SNP continued to link the cost-of-living crisis with its demand for a second referendum on independence. The SNP argued that the crisis originated in Westminster and could only be partially mitigated by the powers of the Scottish Parliament. In doing so, it argued an independent Scotland would face better outcomes.

Akin to previous crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis proved a key trigger for the further mobilization of nationalist groups within plurinational states. In line with our expectations, entrenched constitutional discourses shaped nationalist responses to the cost-of-living crisis as political parties framed and instrumentalized the crisis by incorporating crisis into long-standing nationalist debates. While other scholars posit that crisis tends to engender change or reform within states (Boin and 't Hart 2022), our research shows that within plurinational states this is more complicated because of competing territorial claims. Instead, both state and substate nationalists appear to follow a well-rehearsed script that involves blame-shifting, credit-taking, and the subsuming the crisis into existing grievances.

In a previous paper we concluded by positing that cost-of-living would become a new arena for territorial contestation in plurinational states. Our analysis demonstrates this to be the case. Whilst all states (mononational and plurinational, unitary and decentralized) grapple with crises, the effects of these are particularly prominent within plurinational contexts because of intersecting levels of government, overlapping competences, and competing territorial demands. Notwithstanding the exogeneity of the crisis, substate nationalists instrumentalised its effects for political and electoral gain to challenge the state and make the case for state reform/independence. While state nationalists emphasized the exogenous roots of the crisis, they likewise instrumentalized the crisis by focusing on the benefits of state unity at a moment of geopolitical and global economic turbulence.

Like the 2008 financial crash, and resulting austerity measures, the cost-of-living crisis may also cast a long shadow. Across Europe, including in the three cases examined in this article, economic grievances stemming from the cost-of-living crisis have provided fertile ground for far right parties, once again bringing nationalism to the fore. Further research should examine the effects of both acute and chronic crises on nationalist and territorial contestation in plurinational contexts. This includes the slow burning yet profound climate crisis as well as broader geopolitical instability precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Trump Administration's emergent effects on the global order. Recent research has highlighted a rallying effect in response to the former (Steiner et al. 2023), raising questions about how such dynamics unfold in plurinational states where identities, political allegiances, and territorial preferences are contested. In the context of polycrisis, it is worth exploring whether political actors in plurinational states stick to the same script or are forced by events to adapt and improvise.

Note

1. While various terms have been used to describe the crisis across different cases, for the sake of consistency across the cases and reflecting its use in English-language media, we use the term 'cost-of-living crisis'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Judith Sijstermans  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5082-6877>

P. Anderson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8156-5542>

C. Brown Swan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7448-5966>

References

- Adamson, C. 2022. "Programme for Government (Cost of Living)." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, September 7, 2022.
- Anderson, P. 2024. *Territorial Politics in Catalonia and Scotland: Nations in Flux*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Anderson, P., C. Brown Swan, C. Ferreira, and J. Sijstermans. 2024. "'State Making or State Breaking?' Crisis, COVID-19 and the Constitution in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom." *Nations and Nationalism* 30 (1): 110–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12983>
- Bassa, M. 2022. "Interpelación urgente sobre la calidad democrática del Estado español." April 27.
- Bieber, F. 2022. "Global nationalism in times of the COVID-19 pandemic." *Nationalities Papers* 50 (1): 13–25.
- Bisgaard, M. 2015. "Bias Will Find a Way: Economic Perceptions, Attributions of Blame, and Partisan-Motivated Reasoning during Crisis." *The Journal of Politics* 77 (3): 849–860. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681591>
- Black, M. 2023. "'Cost of Living', House of Commons Debate." May 16.
- Boin, A., and P. T Hart. 2003. "Public leadership in times of crisis: mission impossible?." *Public Administration Review* 63 (5): 544–553.
- Boin, A., and P. 't Hart. 2022. "From Crisis to Reform? Exploring Three Post-cOVID Pathways." *Politics and Society* 41 (1): 13–24.
- Boin, A., P. 't Hart, and A. McConnell. 2009. "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests." *Journal of European Public Policy* 16 (1): 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>
- Brown Swan, C., and P. Anderson. 2024. "Representing Scotland: Conservative Narratives of Nation, Union, and Scottish Independence." *Frontiers in Political Science* 6: 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1392346>
- Casaglia, A., and R. Coletti. 2023. "Territorializing Threats in Nationalist Populist Narratives: An Italian Perspective on the Migration and Covid-19 Crises." *Space and Polity* 27 (3): 269–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2021.1991783>
- Cetra, D., and C. Brown Swan. 2020. "State and Majority Nationalism in Plurinational States: Responding to Challenges from Below." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26 (1): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2020.1716435>
- Coletti, R., and A. Filipetti. 2022. "'Negotiating Nationalism: Regional Politics in Italy during the Health Crisis'. Territory, Politics." *Governance* 10 (6): 791–816.
- Conservative Party. 2024. *The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024*. London.
- Craigie, A. 2010. "Unionism and pan-nationalism: Exploring the Dialectical Relationship between Minority and Majority Substate Nationalism." In *Nationalism and Democracy*, edited by André Lecours and Luis Moreno, 242–258. London: Routledge.
- Dalle Mule, E. 2017. *The Nationalism of the Rich: Discourses and Strategies of Separatist Parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland*. London: Routledge.
- De Kamer. 2023. "Integraal verslag: Plenumvergadering." October 11.
- De Standaard. 2024. "Alexander De Croo: Ik geef niet op als het moeilijk wordt." May 31.
- De Zondag. 2023. "Sander Loones, de grootste kwelduivel van de premier: 'Geen compromissen meer: het is confederalisme of niets!'," March 12.
- Diaz, Y. 2022. "¿Qué impacto va a tener en el empleo la crisis de Ucrania?." March 9.
- Duguid, D. 2022. "Scottish Independence and the Scottish Economy." *House of Commons Debate*, November 2.

- Durán, J. C. 2022. "Moción consecuencia de interpelación urgente para que el Gobierno explique las medidas que piensa adoptar para combatir la escalada de precios y evitar que la economía española entre en un escenario de estanflación." April 27.
- Elias, A., L. Basile, N. Franco-Guillen, and E. Szocsik. 2023. "The Framing Territorial Demands (FraTerr) Dataset: A Novel Approach to Conceptualizing and Measuring Regionalist Actors' Territorial Strategies." *Regional & Federal Studies* 33 (3): 355–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2021.1964481>
- ERC. 2023. "Defensa Catalunya." *Eleccions espanyoles 2023*.
- ERC. 2024. *Al costat de la gent, al costat de Catalunya*. Programa Electoral.
- Fernandes, J., and L. Barbeiro. 2014. "OneNote: A Digital Tool for Qualitative Research." *ESERA* 2015.
- Ferreria, C. 2022. "Identity, Money, or Governance? Explaining Secessionist Parties' Rhetorical Strategies." *Party Politics* 30 (1): 179–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221140249>
- Gagnon, A. G. 2020. "Majority, State Nationalism, and New Research Pathways." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26 (1): 85–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2020.1716445>
- Glen, J. 2023. "Cost of Living." *House of Commons Debate*, May 16.
- Hegele, Y., and J. Schnabel. 2021. "Federalism and the Management of the Covid-19 Crisis: Centralisation, Decentralisation and (non-) Coordination." *West European Politics* 44 (5-6): 1052–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1873529>
- Helsloot, I. 2008. "Coordination Is a Prerequisite for Good Collaboration, Isn't It?" *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management* 16 (4): 173–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2008.00554.x>
- Hendry, D. 2023. "The Cost of Westminster Crisis." *Scottish National Party*, November 22. <https://www.snp.org/families-Are-left-worse-off-after-tory-budget-failure/>.
- Huyseune, M. 2017. "The Flemish Paradox: The Hegemony of pro-independence Parties in a Region Largely Indifferent towards Independence." *Ethnopolitics* 16 (4): 352–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1120959>
- Ivanusch, C. 2025. "Where Do Parties Talk about What? Party Issue Salience across Communication Channels." *West European Politics* 48 (3): 618–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2322234>
- Jack, A. 2022. "Scottish Independence and the Scottish Economy." *House of Commons Debate*, November 2.
- JxCat. 2022. "Junts presenta un paquet de propostes per reduir el cost efectiu de l'energia davant de la inacció de l'Estat." March 22.
- JxCat. 2023. *Programa Electoral*. Ja N'hi Ha Prou.
- JxCat. 2024. *Programa de Govern. Un Nou Començament, la Llegislature de la represa*.
- Kalkman, J. P. 2021. "Military crisis responses to COVID-19." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 29 (1): 99–103.
- Kallis, A. 2018. "Populism, sovereigntism, and the unlikely re-emergence of the territorial nation-state." *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11 (3): 285–302.
- Lecours, A. 2021. *Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lecours, A., and S. Kerr. 2021. "Multinationalism and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Framework for Analysis." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 27 (3): 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2021.1954300>
- Lecours, A., and S. Kerr. 2023. *Multinationalism and Covid-19*. London: Routledge.

- Leuffen, Dirk. 2007. "Case Selection and Selection Bias in Small-n Research." In *Research Design in Political Science: How to Practice What They Preach*, 145–162. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maroto, R. 2022. "Interpelación urgente para paliar los efectos de la crisis energética y económica actual que están afectando a las empresas del sector cerámico de las comarcas de Castellón provocados por la guerra de Ucrania.. December 14.
- MR. 2022. *Belgium 2030: Nos mesures phares pour l'avenir de la Belgique*.
- MR. 2024. *Programme General 2024: L'avenir S'Eclaire*.
- N-VA. 2024. *Voor Vlaamse Welvaart: Verkiezingsprogramma 2024*.
- Nogueras, M. 2022. "Comunicación del Gobierno en la que solicita la celebración de un debate de política general sobre el estado de la Nación." July 13.
- OECD. 2023. *Main Findings from the 2022 OECD Risks That Matter Survey*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Open, Vld. 2024. *Groeiplan : Sterker Uit de Crisis*. Brussels: Open VLD. Viewed via the Wayback Machine, <https://www.openvld.be/groeiplan>.
- Opillard, F., A. Palle, and L. Michelis. 2020. "Discourse and Strategic Use of the Military in France and Europe in the COVID-19 Crisis." *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 111 (3): 239–259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12451>
- O'Reilly, D., C. M. Leitch, R. T. Harrison, and Lamprou, E. 2015. "Leadership, Authority and Crisis: Reflections and Future Directions." *Leadership* 11 (4): 489–499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015596641>
- PS. 2023. "Discours de Paul Magnette au vœux 2023 du Parti Socialiste." January 20.
- PS. 2024. *Programme du Parti Socialiste: Elections du 9 juin 2024*. March.
- PSOE. 2023. *Adelante. Programa Electoral Elecciones Generales*.
- Rosenthal, U., and A. Kouzmin. 1997. "Crises and Crisis Management: Toward Comprehensive Government Decision Making." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 7 (2): 277–304. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024349>
- Rosenthal, U., and P. T. t'Hart. 1991. "Experts and Decision Makers in Crisis Situations." *Knowledge* 12 (4): 350–372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107554709101200402>
- Ross, D. 2022. "Independence Referendum (Supreme Court Ruling)." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, November 23.
- Ross, D. 2023. "Cost of Living." House of Commons Debate, May 16.
- Royles, E. 2024. "Explaining the Salience of Secessionist Party Constitutional Demands for Independence." *Regional & Federal Studies* 34 (5): 807–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2243229>
- Salvador, J. 2022. "Para paliar los efectos de la crisis energética y economía actual que están afectando a las empresas del sector cerámico de las comarcas de Castellón provocados por la Guerra de Ucrania". December 21.
- Samad, A., K. Al Jerjawi, and A. Dadich. 2022. "Crisis Leadership: Political Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Sustainability* 15 (1): 266. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010266>
- Sánchez, P. 2022. "Intervención del presidente del Gobierno en el debate sobre el estado de la nación." July 12.
- Sánchez, P. 2022. "Sesión control Congreso de los Diputados preguntas al presidente del Gobierno." March 23.
- Schnabel, J., P. Anderson, and F. de Francesco. 2024. "Multilevel Governance and Political Leadership: Crisis Communication in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of European Public Policy* 31 (9): 2719–2747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2199784>

- Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. 2024. *Focused on Your Priorities. Manifesto 2024*.
- Spanish Government. 2022. "The Government of Spain Adopts the Agreements of the Island of La Palma with the Regional Governments to give a United Response to the Impact of the War in Ukraine." March 13h.
- Statista. 2024. "Inflation Rate of the European Union 1997-2024." <https://www.statista.com/topics/4120/inflation-and-price-indices-in-europe/#editorsPicks>.
- Steiner, Nils, et al. 2023. "Rallying around the EU Flag: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Attitudes toward European Integration." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61 (2): 283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13449>
- Sturgeon, N. 2022. "First Minister's Questions." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, June 9.
- Sturgeon, N. 2023. "First Minister's Record." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, May 23.
- Sturgeon, N. 2023. "United Kingdom Economy (International Monetary Fund)." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, February 2.
- Sumar. 2023. "Un programa por ti." *Elecciones Generales 23*.
- Sunak, R. 2022. "Prime Minister: Engagements." *House of Commons Debate*, November 2.
- Sunak, R. 2023. "Prime Minister: Engagements." *House of Commons Debate*, November 15.
- Swinney, J. 2024. "Introduction." *SNP 2024 Manifesto: A Future Made in Scotland*.
- Truss, L. 2022. "Prime Minister: Engagements." *House of Commons Debate*, September 7.
- Vampa, D. 2021. "COVID-19 and Territorial Policy Dynamics in Western Europe: Comparing France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 51 (4): 601–626. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjab017>
- Vampa, D., F. Boni, A. Fiseha, M. Kenny, M. López-Santana, and M. Zulianello. 2025. "Emerging Issues and new Frontiers in Federalism, Regionalism and Territorial Governance: The Role of Regional & Federal Studies in Shaping Future Research Agendas." *Regional & Federal Studies* 35 (4): 493–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2518752>
- Vasilopoulou, S., D. Halikiopoulou, and T. Exadaktylos. 2014. "Greece in Crisis: Austerity, Populism and the Politics of Blame." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52 (2): 388–402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12093>
- Vlaams Parlement. 2022. "Septembeerklaring van de Vlaamse Regering." September 29.
- Vlaams Parlement. 2023. "Septembeerklaring van de Vlaamse Regering." September 35.
- VRT NWS. 2024a. "Kies24: PS-voorzitter Paul Magnette in ontbijtgesprek op De Ochtend." May 29.
- VRT NWS. 2024b. "Le MR ouvre la voie à une réforme de l'État avec la N-VA, mais pas sans condition." May 30, 2024.
- Wesley, J. 2014. "The Qualitative Analysis of Political Documents." In *From Text to Political Positions: Text Analysis across Disciplines*, edited by B. Kaal, I. Maks, and A. van Elfrinkhof, 135–159. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Woods, E., R. Schertzer, L. Greenfield, C. Hughes, and C. Miller-Idris. 2020. "COVID-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange." *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (4): 807–825. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644>
- Yousaf, Humza. 2024. "First Minister's Question Time." *Scottish Parliament Debate*, May 2.