

# Recasting the state: The Scottish National Party and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie

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## Funding information

This work was funded by the University of Edinburgh's Principal's Career Development Scholarship, which supported the PhD studies of the author.

## Abstract

In 2014, voters in Scotland and Flanders were faced with a choice which would shape the constitutional future of their respective nations as well as that of the British and Belgian states. The Scottish National Party and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie sought different types of self-government, but their proposals were made in response to the embedding state. This article analyses the messaging of each party, determining that both *discursively use the state* – as concept and as institution – in similar ways. Both acknowledge the interdependence inherent to governance in the twenty-first century, but argue that self-government remains necessary. They also use the perceived failings of the state to make their case for self-government. However, there are important, albeit subtle, areas of variation, reflecting both the nature of each party's self-government goals and their strategies in pursuit of them.

## KEYWORDS

secession, self-government, sub-state nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, voters in Scotland and Flanders were faced with a choice which would shape the constitutional future of their respective nations as well as that of the British and Belgian states. For Scottish voters, it was a direct choice between an independent Scotland or remaining within the United Kingdom (UK), in a referendum agreed by the Scottish and UK Governments. In Flanders, this process was more ambiguous: a choice between the status quo and a radical reform of the Belgian state along confederal lines, delivered by the entry of the Nieuw-Vlaamse

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Alliantie (N-VA) into the federal governing coalition. These were disparate events – an exceptional referendum and a normal election (albeit one given additional weight in the discourse of the N-VA) – but together they allow us to explore the nature of self-government and the state at a critical moment.

In each case, self-government was, amongst other things, a response to the embedding state. The British and Belgian states represent both the impetus for self-government and the reference point against which these goals are articulated. In this article, I analyse the messaging employed by the Scottish National Party (SNP) and N-VA in pursuit of their goals. I do so with reference to two distinct but related concepts – on the one hand, statehood as a model or an idea, and on the other, the behaviour and potential of the British and Belgian states to support these self-government ambitions. I find that the two parties *discursively use the state* – as concept and as institution – in similar ways. Both acknowledge the interdependence inherent to governance in the twenty-first century but argue that self-government remains necessary. They also use the perceived failings of the state to make their case for self-government. However, there are important, albeit subtle, areas of variation, reflecting both the nature of each party's self-government goals and their strategies in pursuit of them.

The SNP and N-VA are two of the most successful sub-state nationalist parties in Europe – as measured by their electoral results and progress towards their goals – but they differ in their development and ideology and the system in which they operate. The Scottish National Party originated in the 1930s but operated largely in obscurity until its electoral breakthrough in the late 1960s (Finlay, 2021). Its nascent success motivated thinking about the structure of the state by its mainstream Labour and Conservative rivals, culminating in an unsuccessful referendum on devolution in 1979 (Hassan, 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s, the SNP matured, developing a more coherent position in favour of independence and with regard to European integration. A second referendum on devolution in 1997 succeeded, leading to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament (with devolved powers) and providing a platform from which the SNP could mount a credible bid for independence. In 2007, the SNP entered government as a minority, but it formed a majority in 2011, with what it argued was a mandate to hold a referendum on independence; a claim recognized by the UK Government.

The Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie's rise was more precipitous. It emerged from the Volksunie (VU), a federalist party that had been instrumental in the gradual federalization of the Belgian state (Beyens et al., 2017). The VU dissolved in 1999 following factional conflict over the ideological direction and self-government goals of the party. The N-VA retained the party's organizational resources but adopted a more radical self-government agenda and a more overtly centre-right policy platform (Adam & Deschouwer, 2016). Faced with electoral thresholds that threatened its survival, the N-VA entered an electoral cartel with the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), and in 2007 the electoral cartel dominated the federal elections (Govaert, 2009). The N-VA abstained from joining the federal governing coalition, however, using its position outside of government to criticize Flemish parties for the compromises they made with the Francophone Parti Socialiste (Abts et al., 2012: 432).

The N-VA broke from the CD&V, and in the 2010 federal elections it won 17% of the vote. This was a period of intense turmoil in Belgium, with record-breaking protracted periods of government formation at the federal level, largely driven by ideological and partisan divisions between Flemings and Walloons. Ahead of the 2014 federal elections, the N-VA was faced with a stark choice: to enter government at the federal level and risk becoming *belgicized*, or to remain in opposition and risk irrelevance. The party chose to seek entry into government, coupled with the pursuit of radical reform.

Although both the SNP and N-VA are sub-state nationalist parties, their ideological positioning and articulation of Scottish and Flemish nationalism differs in important ways. The SNP sits on the centre-left of the political spectrum, advancing a progressive social and economic agenda alongside its self-government goals (Lynch, 2009). These goals are heavily

entwined, with the SNP as a party of government stressing the success of its political programme, the limitations inherent to Scotland's incorporation within the UK's political system, and the potential for independence to unlock a progressive future (Hearn, 2019). On issues of culture and identity, the SNP presents Scottish nationalism as open, inclusive, and left-wing, often contrasted against what it suggests is a more closed British or English identity, although social surveys typically find little variation (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015). Proponents of independence tend to employ largely instrumental arguments – informed by a progressive ideology – in favour of their goals.

Ideologically, the N-VA sits at the opposite end of the spectrum, advancing a centre-right ideology and exhibiting increasingly right-wing views on immigration and multiculturalism – in part in response to electoral competition from the Vlaams Belang (VB) and the heightened salience of the refugee crisis in Belgium (Abts et al., 2019; Adam & Deschouwer, 2016). The nationalism of the N-VA draws heavily on the intellectual engagement of the party's leader Bart de Wever, based on a philosophy which Ico Maly (2016) describes as 'scientific nationalism'. While on the one hand, scientific nationalism strives to distance the N-VA from the far-right nationalism advocated by the VB, on the other, it leads the party to rely more heavily than its Scottish counterpart on cultural arguments. Outsiders can become Flemings, the N-VA argues, but only if they adopt the language and culture of Flanders (ibid.). The emphasis on language and culture is much stronger in Flanders than in Scotland due to the existence of a distinct language within the territory,<sup>1</sup> but it also signals a conscious effort by the party to stress its defence of Flemish culture and identity.

In 2014, self-government was the dominant theme in both polls. In Scotland, this was explicit: the referendum was underpinned by an agreement between the Scottish and British Governments, with both sides actively campaigning on the issue. The debate centred on the why and how of independence, and political parties campaigned under the umbrella of Yes Scotland (bringing together the SNP and the Scottish Greens) or Better Together (incorporating Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats). The N-VA's prospectus was less explicit in contrast, taking the form of a normal – albeit significant – election campaign. In what was described as the 'mother-of-all-elections', Belgians participated in regional, federal, and European elections simultaneously. The federal elections were central to the N-VA's self-government strategy, as it sought to become '*incontournable*', or mathematically necessary for a governing coalition. In the government formation process, the N-VA leadership would seek a commitment to radical state reform, transforming Belgium into a confederal state – bound by treaty – rather than the highly decentralized federation that it had, over decades, become (N-VA, 2014).

Neither party succeeded in realizing their self-government goals in these contests. The N-VA eventually entered into federal coalition with an agreement to enact some socioeconomic reforms<sup>2</sup> – but not the state reforms set out in its manifesto – while the SNP's ambitions for independence were thwarted by its failure to achieve a majority in the referendum.

Both parties have experienced significant change since the 2014 contests, which may prompt the reader to wonder why this research is relevant now. The N-VA faces renewed pressure from the VB, which outflanks it on both the self-government question and on right-wing orientation. The N-VA's position on Europe has also become more critical (Brack et al., 2019). In Scotland, the UK's decision to leave the European Union will require substantial revision of the SNP's understanding of independence; a process that has been stalled by Westminster's refusal to agree to another referendum in Scotland as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the prospectuses and positions adopted by each party in the period between 2011 and 2014 remain the most comprehensive articulations of their self-government goals to date. They also provide a unique opportunity for empirical analysis, despite the time that has passed. This research speaks both to how sub-state nationalist parties engage discursively with their own state, and to the broader concept of statehood, an issue of continued relevance as debates over self-government persist.



## THE STATE, SELF-GOVERNMENT, AND SUB-STATE NATIONALISM

Sub-state nationalism, as embodied by sub-state nationalist parties, can be read as a reaction to the state: both as an ideal, with self-government goals measured against the yardstick of independent statehood, and as a reality, by actually responding to the state. The intrinsic link between the state and sub-state nationalism has been extensively documented in the field's foundational texts, including John Breuilly's *Nationalism in the State* (1993). It is also found in the terminology we use to describe parties which seek to reform their relationship with the state and their goals, including 'stateless nations' (Friend, 2012; Keating, 2001) and 'nations without states' (Guibernau, 2013). These terms suggest that their essence is this absence of statehood. Rokkan and Urwin's definition of 'peripheral movements' is fundamentally state-centred, designating the 'relationship between the periphery in question and the core of the state after the conflict has been resolved' (Rokkan & Urwin, 1982: 142). Hence, just as state nationalism centres itself on the state, sub-state nationalism does not emerge 'in a vacuum, but through its interaction with the central state, which is itself a supplier of nationalism' (Dieckhoff, 2011: 29).

Explanations for the rise and persistence of sub-state nationalist parties place the state at the centre. The state is understood as 'contribut[ing] to a larger discourse that delineates what decision-makers can legitimately conceive of as politically feasible policy alternatives' (Anderson, 2007: 190). Explanations for the rise of sub-state nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s centred on the expansionist state, focusing specifically on threats to the cultural identity and political and economic interests of the sub-state nation (Guibernau, 2013: 46; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967: 14), on issues connected to the welfare state (Béland & Lecours, 2005; McEwen, 2002), on perceptions of economic decline or neglect (Hechter, 1977; Nairn, 1977), and on concerns about relative prosperity (Dalle Mulle, 2017).

If we accept the premise that sub-state nationalism is a response to the state, it is worth exploring how sub-state nationalist parties *discursively use the state* to advance their self-government goals. My analysis found that in the two cases under examination this took three key forms, with variations reflecting the goals and strategy of each case: 1) the state as an ideal type; 2) the use of the flaws of the embedding state to make the case for self-government; and 3) an articulation of what the relationship between the state and sub-state would look like once self-government had been achieved.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The Scottish National Party and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie are paradigmatic cases, representing two of the most electorally successful sub-state nationalist parties in Europe, capable of asserting themselves in their respective party systems and states. Although the context in which they each operate is very different, they both offer a highly developed vision of self-government and both sought, in 2014, to pursue their self-government goals. This makes a sustained paired comparison between them possible.

This work forms part of a larger historical analysis which examines Flemish and Scottish nationalists from their origins to the present; the focus in this article is the use of the state at this pivotal moment in the lifespan of the two parties. Keen followers of Belgian politics may wonder why the Vlaams Belang has been excluded from this analysis. The VB has more extreme territorial goals than that of the N-VA, which is to seek independence, and in the 1990s and early 2000s its electoral fortunes and influence waxed and waned. The *cordon sanitaire* which was introduced to exclude the party from governing in coalition remains in place. In 2014 – the key period under analysis – the VB received just 5.9% of the Flemish vote, although it has since experienced a dramatic increase in support, becoming a modern 'mass party' (Sijstermans, 2021). An analysis of the VB's recent successes and its challenge to



the N-VA on the territorial dimension is certainly worthy of further research, but is beyond the scope of this article.

The campaigns in Flanders and Scotland offered me an opportunity to delve deeply into these nationalist parties' conceptions of self-government, which had not previously been articulated in such detail. I began by compiling a dataset in NVivo, consisting of party documents from 2010 onwards; a period which pre-dates the official campaign period but one in which important thinking on self-government was taking place. The dataset included manifestos, parliamentary documents, major speeches, and internally focused communications, including the parties' blogs and membership communications; a total of 125 documents in all. Three rounds of coding took place, all carried out in NVivo to allow for consistency checks. The first round of coding merely identified all references to a) the British and Belgian states and b) statehood as an idea. This resulted in 400 pieces of data. In the second round of coding, I took these pieces of data and began to code them iteratively. In the third round, the coding schema was refined and dominant frames – the most common arguments – were identified. There was, of course, variation across actors, but all the dominant interpretations were included.

While this work is not underpinned by formal hypotheses, certain expectations can be set out and evaluated about the way the state might be used by sub-state nationalist parties, depending on their self-government goals. The N-VA sought a relatively moderate form of self-government, which would still retain the Belgian state (albeit in a minimalist form). In contrast, the SNP's goal – that of full political independence – was more radical, suggesting a rupture with the British state. I expected these goals to shape the parties' framing of their respective campaigns, with the N-VA exhibiting more moderate and more neutral framing as it sought – in a federal coalition with its Walloon partners – agreement for significant reform of the state. I also expected the SNP's framing to be more negative, with an emphasis on grievance in order to mobilize support for independence.

Neither of these expectations were met. In fact, the situation was reversed, with more negative framing of the state employed by the N-VA and more neutral to positive framing employed by the SNP. This divergence suggests that there is an important strategic dimension to each party's discourse which further illustrates the value of this comparison.

## NATIONALIST MESSAGING AND THE DISCURSIVE USE OF THE STATE

As previously mentioned, the dominant frames to emerge from my coding of the dataset were: 1) the state as an ideal type; 2) the use of the flaws of the embedding state to make the case for self-government; and 3) an articulation of what the relationship between the state and sub-state would be once self-government had been achieved. It also became clear that the SNP and N-VA used these frames in different ways during the campaigns of 2014 and had quite different end goals in their sights (see Table 1). The three frames will now be analysed in detail, which forms the substantive part of this paper.

TABLE 1 The framing of self-government in Scotland and Flanders.

	Scottish National Party	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
<b>Self-government and the ideal of statehood</b>	A post-sovereign vision of independence	Independence unnecessary in a post-sovereign world
<b>The state as motivator of self-government</b>	The UK unable to serve Scotland's interests, particularly under a Conservative government	The artificial and dysfunctional nature of the Belgian state
<b>Redefining self-government</b>	A new partnership, made possible by equality of status	Reducing interactions to reduce conflict



## Self-government and the ideal of statehood

The state is first expressed as an ideal – the form of self-government aspired to by sub-state nationalist parties. Contemporary sub-state nationalist parties, at least those which hope to present a credible conception of self-government, adopt a nuanced position on the state, acknowledging the realities of an interdependent world (Keating, 2001; MacCormick, 1999). Many propose forms of self-government which fall short of traditional Westphalian statehood, accepting the multilevel nature of sovereignty. Keating describes this process as one in which ‘Independence-seeking movements thus embraced transnationalism in a way that is logically coherent even if it sometimes mystified their opponents (and some of their supporters)’ (Keating, 2019: 318).

This is evidenced in both the Flemish and Scottish cases, as the respective parties acknowledged fundamental shifts in the nature of sovereignty, noting that a Westphalian ideal of statehood (if it had ever existed) had little relevance. In the process, they came to different conclusions, however. For the SNP, twenty-first century statehood was underpinned by interdependence and shared sovereignty. This, according to the SNP’s framing, did not undermine the case for independence but reinforced it. In contrast, the N-VA questioned the nature of sovereignty more explicitly, arguing instead that in an era of global (and particularly European) integration a more modern form of self-government – that of confederalism – was more appropriate.

These conclusions are informed by the strategic considerations facing each party. In the Scottish context, independence was defined quite simply and strategically as a natural next step rather than a radical departure. Independence was a model in which:

The Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government would take over all Westminster’s remaining powers and responsibilities for Scotland. Decisions on economic policy, international relations, defence spending and priorities, social security benefits, taxation and other public spending would be made in Scotland by governments accountable to the Scottish people. (Scottish Government, 2013)

This was strategically important – a framing designed to suggest that independence was not a radical proposal, but the natural next step. The SNP and its representatives continually acknowledged the potential limitations that an independent Scotland, as a small country, would face: ‘The independence we propose reflects the realities of an increasingly interdependent world and is based upon a firm commitment to partnership and cooperation’ (Scottish Government, 2013: 215). In line with this argument, it was also imperative that Scotland find its seat at the international table, given the limited influence it exercised within the UK. An independent Scotland would articulate ‘different international priorities’ (ibid., 2013: 209). In other words, according to this framing, an independent Scotland would not have been party to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and it would be a positive voice at the European level (Salmond, 2013). The SNP’s position is consistent with sub-state nationalist ambitions advanced by parties elsewhere, with the acknowledgement that the ideal of a wholly sovereign state is no longer realistic nor desirable, but that self-government does require some form of international legal personality.

The N-VA, in contrast, expressed scepticism about independence, a goal espoused by its far-right rival Vlaams Belang. A resolution proposed in the Flemish Parliament by the members of the governing coalition, which included the N-VA, set out a proto-constitutional document, the *Charter for Flanders*. This dismissed absolute sovereignty as a ‘fiction’, noting instead that: ‘Decision-making processes and policy competences are no longer the monopoly of one authority but are shared by authorities at different levels, all of them interconnected’ (Flemish Parliament, 2012). Consequently, the party’s understanding of self-government was both more

moderate and more ambiguous than that of the SNP. Confederalism, the party's stated objective, entailed maintenance of the Belgian state, albeit one which had undergone significant reform. However, the party was vague about what precisely this would entail, and in a speech to the N-VA Congress in Antwerp, the party's senior leader Ben Weyts rejected what he described as an 'expensive academic, professorial definition'; rather, the party was presenting a practical solution to the shortcomings of the Belgian state (Weyts, 2014).

On a practical level, the N-VA proposed a confederation consisting of two *deelstaten* – Flanders and Wallonia – with a special status for the Brussels Capital Region and the German-speaking region in the east (N-VA, 2014). Brussels as capital would fall within the territories of both Flanders and Wallonia, and the city would remain the capital of Flanders. (N-VA, 2014). A party representative described confederalism as an arrangement in which the 'constituent entities behave as nation states' (Peumans, 2010); over time, the limited functions of the Belgian state would be transferred up to the European Union or down to the regions, leading to the eventual dissolution of Belgium. Each of the *deelstaten* would be accorded greater competences, coming together only on issues which affected the whole territory. The N-VA's strategy was one of constructive ambiguity, not actively seeking formal independence or to break up the Belgian state, but aiming gradually and irrevocably to hollow it out. This sentiment is best articulated by party president Bart de Wever in 2010, when the idea of confederalism first entered the party's ambitions:

We are not revolutionaries; we are opposed to this sort of radicalism. No one wants to break this country, no one wants chaos. We are in support of a gentle evolution which leads to more autonomy and the strengthening of democracy, an evolution which permits Flemings and Walloons to become stronger as well as maintain the solidarity between the north and the south of the country. (De Wever, 2010)

The N-VA was simultaneously a party in pursuit of radical change in the short term, pursuing the restructuring of the Belgian state, and a moderate party which sought incremental progress towards independence. This ambiguity is seemingly at odds with the party's formal commitment to political independence as written into its statutes, and this has at points caused tensions within the party. Unlike the SNP, where independence is the overriding ambition of its membership, the issue of Flemish independence is less salient, both amongst the party membership and within the population at large. Surveys of the party's growing support base found that even committed N-VA voters remained tepid on the question of independence and their vote choice was often more motivated by socioeconomic concerns than the question of self-government (Abts et al., 2012, 2019; Huyseune, 2017). As a result, the party has largely based its appeal around a conservative social and economic programme (Swyngedouw & Abts, 2011: 15; De Winter, 2012: 22). This sparked debate at the party's Congress in February 2014, with Flemish parliamentarians mobilized to reassure the party faithful that 'An independent Flanders remains well and truly the first objective in the statutes of the party' (Diependaele, 2014). Ultimately, however, self-government was de-prioritized when the party had the opportunity to pursue sweeping socioeconomic reforms at the centre following the elections in May.

The two parties thus adopted broadly similar framing – stressing the nuanced nature of sovereignty in the twenty-first century – but they arrived at different conclusions. For the N-VA, which looked likely to remain Belgium's largest party, radical state reform falling short of full independence was a viable option. Confederalism was the party's compromise position, suggesting both radicalism and moderation to its membership, which was to some extent split on the issue of independence. For the SNP, which had little hope of securing sweeping constitutional reforms at the UK level and historically was committed to the pursuit of independence, an independence which acknowledged interdependencies (and sought close integration with the

rest of the UK, as detailed below) was the most politically viable option, although one which prompted accusations of a party trying to downplay the economic and political costs of independence.

## The failures of the state and the necessity of self-government

Sub-state nationalist parties use the state itself to build their case for self-government, suggesting that self-government is necessary, either for the very survival of the sub-state nation in extreme cases, or for its cultural, economic, and political success. Pavković and Radan (2007: 47–50) offer a typology of how the state is used in this context: a construction of grievance (arguing that ‘particular social or political arrangements are unjust or inequitable’), harm (including persecution, violence, and the confiscation of property), and alien rule. Grievance is most common amongst sub-state nationalist parties and can take the form of arguments around culture, economics, and democratic representation (Dalle Mulle, 2017; Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; della Porta et al., 2021).

The framing adopted by the SNP and the N-VA is consistent with this literature. Neither portrays the state as oppressive, abusive or alien, although individual politicians or activists have at times done so. Instead, the argument against the state and the status quo has been one of grievance. The British and Belgian states failed, by virtue of their structure, to serve the interests of the national community, and self-government was necessary to remedy this situation. Here, however, I identify a subtle (though significant) contrast between the frames adopted by the SNP and those of the N-VA, one which runs counter to the expectations set out earlier. Both parties argued in their electioneering that the status quo was untenable, and that their respective nations would be better off with self-government. According to the SNP, Scotland was ill-served by its incorporation within the British state, particularly under the governance of the Conservative Party. The challenge posed by the N-VA was more radical, however, calling into question not only the desirability of incorporation within the Belgian state, but the legitimacy of the state *tout court*, describing it as artificial.

The British state (and its Conservative government) was employed by the SNP to suggest that while Westminster was not actively hostile or oppressive towards Scotland, the Union no longer served Scotland’s best interests. Independence was therefore necessary. The politics of the UK, the British Government’s policies, and the modes of decision-making at Westminster were considered outdated and anathema to the progressive views of Scotland. In the words of then First Minister Alex Salmond: ‘With each passing day it becomes clearer that the Westminster system is not fit for any purpose – it is further away than ever from Scotland’s values, and past its time’ (Salmond, 2013).

The party was aided in this narrative by the disconnect between voting patterns in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom and the unpopular Conservative government. Then Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon described the United Kingdom negatively, as a ‘deeply indebted state’; one ‘adrift from Europe and increasingly isolated on the wider stage’ (Sturgeon, 2012). She noted a country ‘facing joblessness, bankruptcy, falling living standards, a sense of uncertainty about the future’ (ibid). British Prime Minister David Cameron was described by Alex Salmond as ‘the face of the Union’, but also ‘the face of the bedroom tax’, of social inequality, and of ‘frustrating Scotland’s economic potential’ (Keating, 2013). By highlighting these unpopular policies, the party sought to appeal to voters beyond those who were naturally predisposed to support independence, centring the debate on social policy rather than nationalism. Only independence, the party and the broader Yes Scotland campaign argued, would provide the power necessary to choose a different path.

The SNP used narratives about the nature of the UK state – a union incapable of serving Scotland’s interests and a Conservative government that was hostile to Scotland – to bolster its





case for self-government. Strategically, the party was careful to focus on the institutions – the parties, the parliament, and the government of the state – rather than the people who formed the state. Using this formulation, it sought to avoid charges of ethnic nationalism or hostility to an English Other, situating its nationalism as modern and civic.

With Flanders forming the demographic majority as well as the economic powerhouse of the Belgian state, the arguments of cultural, linguistic, and economic oppression employed by previous iterations of the Flemish nationalist movement were untenable. Instead, the N-VA argued that the country of Belgium was artificial – and as a result, deeply dysfunctional – necessitating radical change. This was, in and of itself, a quite radical framing, calling into question the very legitimacy of the state in a way that the SNP did not.

Belgium was, in the framing of the N-VA, an artificial state, a historical accident rather than a genuine nation-state. ‘In the European Union, nation-states rule. Belgium is the exception’ (Peumans, 2010). As a result, the ‘objective basis’ for Belgium has been removed through a process of unravelling of the two communities: culturally, socially, economically, and democratically (De Wever, 2012). This narrative is not unique to the N-VA; indeed, it is present among many Flemish parties and used to ‘corroborate the idea that the end of Belgium is logical since its creation was – symmetrically – artificial’ (Farhat et al., 2014). Nonetheless, it was extremely pronounced within the party, emerging both in the party’s published materials and in interviews conducted over the course of this research.

Belgium was, in the view of the N-VA, a country in decline, stymied by institutional gridlock and increasingly disconnected from the preferences of the population on both sides of the linguistic divide. In a controversial interview with *Der Spiegel*, the party’s leader Bart de Wever characterized Belgium as a ‘failed nation’, the ‘sick man of Europe’, beleaguered by endless community conflict and fruitless reforms (Spiegel, 2010). The prolonged periods of state formation, according to the party, were merely a manifestation of this dysfunction and led to poor outcomes for all sides.

While the N-VA acknowledged that Belgium was failing both Wallonia and Flanders, Flanders was particularly hard done-by: its demographic majority was overruled and its economy exploited, with solidarity transfers from north to south undermining the Flemish economy. The structures of the Belgian state hindered progress, giving ‘4 million Francophones a de facto veto which they use to politically sideline 6.5 million Flemings’ (N-VA, 2014: 18). As a result, so the party argued:

We pay skyrocketing federal taxes, but don’t receive efficient services in return. We pay enormous social contributions, and yet our social security is neither social nor secure. Our businesses and entrepreneurs pay through the nose, but they don’t receive a favourable economic and investment climate. (N-VA, 2014: 3)

This parlous situation was a result of the historical – and, in the eyes of the N-VA, unfair – domination of the federal governing coalition by the Francophone Parti Socialiste, which pursued a policy platform anathema to that of the N-VA. A radical change was needed rather than tweaks to the federal arrangement, with the party noting that in the past ‘Flemings exchanged big bags of money for a further reduction of their democratic majority, a weakened position in Brussels, and a few bits and bobs of power’ (N-VA, 2014: 21). Belgium was, the party argued, a fatally dysfunctional state; one which could not be saved by continuous rounds of state reform (ibid.: 69).

Like the SNP, the N-VA largely avoided claims made in the name of culture, instead advancing functional, pragmatic arguments in favour of self-government. Framing Belgium as an artificial and dysfunctional state that was unable to cope with the demands of the contemporary world supported the party’s pursuit of radical state reform. This negative framing, at first glance, seems to sit at odds with the N-VA’s objective to become *incontournable* or necessary

for the formation of a federal governing coalition. But it can be read in light of the party's short-term strategy and long-term self-government goals. In the short term, the party was keen to avoid the fate of its predecessor, the Volksunie, which collapsed after being fatally undermined (in the N-VA's view) by its entry into federal government (Deschouwer, 2009).

The core framing employed by both parties was the same – the state was failing, self-government is necessary – but the tone of the argument reflected very different strategic considerations. The SNP's narrative was more cohesive and conciliatory, attributing the behaviour of the British state broadly to divergent interests rather than bad intentions. In contrast, the N-VA's argument drew on multiple themes and characterized the Belgian state in more negative terms, calling into question the legitimacy of the state itself. The entire Belgian project was dismissed, and although the party has tempered its language in recent years (notably, abandoning a narrative which dismissed Walloon welfare recipients as 'parasites'), its framing remains more hostile than that of its Scottish counterparts.

The SNP could be fiercely critical of the state – particularly the Conservative Party in government at the centre – but if the referendum was a success it would need to negotiate with that same state. Hence, as discussed in detail below, the SNP's understanding of independence was one which retained many of the trappings of the existing state, necessitating negotiation. It was also presenting its case to an electorate which retained significant attachment to a British identity and certain institutions of the British state. The N-VA, in contrast, sought to bolster its nationalist credentials by pledging to defend Flanders while in central government, but illustrating the fundamental limitations of the Belgian state and building a long-term case for the state's dissolution. These temporal considerations directly shaped the framing employed by each party.

## Recasting the state: redefining relationships after self-government

Self-government, whether in the form of confederation or independence, does not obviate the need for political coordination, and the proposals of both parties stressed that this would continue in some form. Lluch (2014) draws a distinction between pactist independentists – those who pursue some form of political, economic, or social integration following the achievement of self-government – and principled independentists, who eschew all ties. While sub-state nationalist parties reject the current structure of the state and the status quo, they rarely propose a complete rupture, envisioning instead some form of further cooperation, motivated by both pragmatic and strategic concerns. The adoption of a pactist approach is hence both pragmatic – an attempt to mitigate some of the costs of independence or simply 'retain the useful bits of the old state structure' (Keating, 2012: 13) – and strategic, appealing to voters who might be apprehensive about radical change or who feel an attachment to the existing state.

Both the SNP and the N-VA fall on the pactist end of this spectrum, foreseeing continued cooperation as necessary and, in some cases, desirable. However, there are some striking differences in the framing employed by the two parties, reflecting the different strategic considerations they faced. The SNP proposed a radical form of self-government – that of independence – whilst nuancing or moderating this goal by assuring voters that many of the trappings of the state would remain: the continued use of sterling as the currency of an independent Scotland, the monarchy, and the historical and familial ties with Britain. Independence was not a break-up but a natural next step for a mature nation, facilitating a more equal and positive relationship between an independent Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. In contrast, the N-VA's framing stressed distance, proposing that the state would maintain minimal functions within its rather ambiguous confederal model, but that conflict would be reduced. Little attention was paid to the quality of relationships between Flemings and Walloons, however, beyond the reduction of costly community conflict. Implicit in this argument was the hope that European institutions would eventually supplant Belgian ones.



The SNP's arguments for independence emphasized interdependence at a global, European, and British level. Rather than cutting Scotland off from the world, independence would provide a seat at the table for Scotland to make a meaningful and positive contribution, and it would allow the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom to be recast, no longer dependent but a 'partnership of equals' (SNP, 2010: 22). This framing was most evident in First Minister Alex Salmond's discourse, which centred on the theme of union. Introducing his plans for independence, Salmond explained:

I also believe that the bonds of family, friendship, history and culture between Scotland and the other parts of the British Isles are precious. England, Wales and Northern Ireland will always be our family, friends and closest neighbours. But with Scotland as an independent country, our relationship will be one of equals. (Scottish Government, 2013: ix)

This emotive language was aimed both at a Scottish audience, many of whom felt an affinity with the British state, as well as the wider island of Britain, and can be read as an attempt to deradicalize the party's self-government goals, stressing continuity rather than radical change.

In a series of speeches conducted throughout the campaign, Salmond spoke of six unions; the first four of these (the monarchical, currency, social, and European unions) would be maintained, while the political union would be severed, and the NATO defence pact would be modified, because an independent Scotland would be a non-nuclear state. According to the party, which was sensitive to charges of separatism, independence was about reforming rather than severing these relationships. It 'is about updating the relationship between Scotland and England ... a social union to replace the current political union' (SNP, 2010: 22). Stephen Noon, Research Director of the Yes Scotland campaign, redefined independence as a form of cooperative independence: the 'new united kingdoms' (Noon, 2013). Although this phrasing was not widespread, it did capture the way in which the SNP sought to deradicalize the notion of independence by stressing continued ties. However, by emphasizing what would remain the same – most significantly, the currency and the open border – the party was left vulnerable to charges that it sought to maintain the benefits of the Union without the costs.

In contrast to the SNP's appeal for partnership, the N-VA's understanding of confederalism saw the Belgian state radically hollowed out, with only minimalist functions allocated to the confederal level. This model, designed as an interim step towards independence, is emblematic of what Belgian political scientist Lieven de Winter describes as 'living apart together'. Given their joint claim to Brussels – a Francophone and increasingly international city situated within Flemish territory – Flanders and Wallonia appear 'condemned to stick together' (De Winter, 2012: 29). In the words of party spokesman Joachim Pohlmann, Brussels is the child in the Belgian marriage: 'the only reason why we are still together'.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, then, Belgium would fade away, but the party neither could nor would cede Brussels.

The N-VA's proposals were consistent with this understanding: reduce interaction with the aim of reducing conflict, facilitate cooperation where necessary, and sustain the relationship until conditions would support Belgium's full dissolution (N-VA, 2014: 56). This framing was exemplified by the opening statement of the party's manifesto, in which senior party leader Ben Weyts described a confederal model where independence is the default option and cooperation takes place only if necessary:

Confederalism allows us to tackle our own problems with our own solutions and our own money. And if we can decide for ourselves how we handle our problems, we can also decide on how and in which domains we will collaborate with our Francophone friends. Not like today, because we have to. But because we want to. Because it serves us both better. (N-VA, 2014: 1)

An emphasis on demonstrating the weaknesses of the Belgian state whilst in government and on reducing cooperation with Francophone parties formed part of the party's long-term strategy. A coalition government in which the N-VA was the dominant partner would allow the party to pursue its ideological goals while forcing Francophones (who until this point were unwilling to consider further state reform) to think seriously about the future. As Joachim Pohlmann also said in interview: 'We believe that if they are confronted with a policy of tax reductions, smaller government, and reducing the debt, their reaction will be to demand devolution themselves'.

The N-VA's short-term goal of confederalism presumed there would be a mechanism for the joint administration of Brussels and cooperation in key areas, until such time that competences could be transferred either up to the European level or down to the Flemish level. Hence, although the N-VA's position can be characterized as pactist, preserving several core state functions, it was ultimately rooted in the need to enable self-government and reduce costly community conflict, rather than to foster a more productive relationship between the two communities. This was a key function of the campaign. Self-government goals, on the other hand, which would be achieved over the longer term through negotiations with other parties in coalition, were less central. Unlike the SNP, which needed to stress continuity, the N-VA was motivated to take a more radical stance, in part to signal to supporters that the party would, unlike its mainstream rivals, be a fierce advocate of Flemish interests once in government.

Rather than put forward a strong message of separation, the SNP stressed the opportunity that independence would provide to renew and rebalance the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Its framing can be read as softer than that of the N-VA, stressing continuity rather than radical change or hollowing out of the state. This difference was a product of the temporal and strategic considerations facing both parties. For the SNP, the radical goal of independence had to be softened, to emphasize that independence was not a radical departure but a natural progression in Scotland's journey towards self-government. The N-VA, for its part, employed a radical framing, assuring Flemish voters that it would be a strong advocate for Flemish self-government. This message was also designed to signal to Francophone parties and voters that radical change was coming, and that they should therefore also start considering their future.

## SELF-GOVERNMENT IN 2014 AND BEYOND

Returning to the expectations set out above, similar framings were evident in the two political campaigns. Both the SNP and the N-VA acknowledge the interdependencies of self-government in the twenty-first century and use the behaviour of the state to justify their pursuit of this goal. However, there are crucial differences in the two approaches: first, in the use made of the state; and second, in the proposed relationships between the state and sub-state once self-government was achieved. The N-VA, which at the outset I expected to be more moderate in its framing, defied my expectations by offering a hypercritical understanding of the state and proposing a minimalist relationship with Wallonia under a confederal arrangement. The SNP, in contrast, stressed the things that would remain the same with independence, foreseeing a new partnership between an independent Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. This difference is largely rooted in the strategic considerations facing each party: the nature of the contest and its timing.

For the SNP, the 2014 vote was a judgement on its proposal for independence. Whilst the exact arrangement would be subject to prolonged negotiations, there was a need to signal to voters that the party was realistic and reasonable in its goals, that independence was a natural next step – a gradual evolution rather than a radical change – and that a productive relationship with the rest of the UK was possible. In contrast, the N-VA had two audiences for its messaging, and the luxury of time. To its own voters, the N-VA sought to suggest that, even in a

federal coalition, the party would be a fierce defender of Flemish interests. It would not, as its mainstream rivals had, become *belgicized* or co-opted into the Belgian power system. It would pursue significant state reform in order to achieve socioeconomic goals. This message appealed to the party stalwarts, who prioritized state reform, as well as to those who aligned themselves ideologically with the N-VA on the basis of its socioeconomic prospectus. It was also a message to future coalition partners in Wallonia, making it clear that the N-VA was determined to secure reform of the state and that they should therefore consider what they might be willing to accept.

Both parties remain significant actors in their respective systems, but at the same time, they face significant challenges. The SNP was returned to government in 2016 and 2021, yet the path to another referendum on independence remains unclear, given the Conservative government's refusal to countenance a second vote. The N-VA entered into government without an agreement on state reform, instead embracing an opportunity for significant socioeconomic reforms. However, it left the governing coalition ahead of the 2019 election, in which it faced pressure from a resurgent Vlaams Belang. Despite these significant changes, the 2014 proposals remain the most comprehensive visions of self-government to date and are worthy of exploring, both in the context of this unique constitutional moment and in light of recent events.

Both parties will face questions over their self-government goals in the years to come. Like other European sub-state nationalist parties, the N-VA and the SNP embedded their self-government goals within a European context in which EU membership would reduce the cost of self-government and essentially supplant the functions of the Belgian and British states. However, this European future has fundamentally altered. For the N-VA, we see the adoption of a more critical approach to Europe in the face of the bloc's perceived failure to manage the refugee crisis since 2015. For the SNP, the European dream appeared to be ripped away by the UK's vote to leave the European Union in 2016. Once an umbrella to allow the relationship between an independent Scotland and the United Kingdom to flourish, it is now unclear what form independence might take. Both parties will consequently need to reconsider their proposals ahead of any future vote.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the editors of this special issue, Ceren Şengül and Idreas Khandy, for their invaluable feedback, as well as the anonymous reviewers of this piece.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> There is of course a linguistic question in the Scottish context as well, but both Gaelic and Scots are spoken only by a minority of the population, and language has played a comparatively minor role in the Scottish national debate, particularly when compared with Flanders, Catalonia, and Quebec.
- <sup>2</sup> The N-VA left the federal governing coalition in December 2018 in a dispute over Belgium's participation in the Marrakech Accords. This departure was viewed at the time as a tactic in preparation for the 2019 elections by distancing the N-VA (which has stressed its position as an outsider party) from the corridors of power.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview by the author, Brussels, February 2014.

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**How to cite this article:** Brown Swan, C. (2022). Recasting the state: The Scottish National Party and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 22(3), 188–202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12376>