Identity politics and kin-state relations from the bottom-up in Crimea and Moldova

"Moldova is (not) Romania" (Ellie Knott, Chisinau, Moldova, June 2012)

In 1991, Moldova declared itself an independent state as part of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 2014, the recognised Ukrainian territory of Crimea was annexed by Russia. Here, Eleanor Knott discusses identity politics and kin-state relations in Moldova and Crimea, and writes that in order to understand what ethnicity and citizenship mean in the context of people's everyday lives, bottom–up, people-centered research is crucial, yet underutilized.

I recently contributed to a special issue, "Whither Eastern Europe? Changing Approaches and Perspectives on the Region in Political Science" which explores the disciplinary relationship between political science and Eastern Europe as an area studies region, 25 years after the collapse of Communism. In my article, I argue that political science needs to engage more with an everyday, people-centred bottom-up approach, as opposed to a top-down state-centred and institutional approach. In particular, I argue kin-state relations research, which analyses relations between states and external co-ethnic communities, has predominantly analysed these relations and tensions from the perspective of the states involved. This has overlooked the bottom-up perspective of kin-state relations, in terms of what it means to identify as a member of a kin community, i.e. a community claimed by an external (kin-)state as co-ethnic.

This article was drafted, following the fieldwork I conducted in Crimea and Moldova in 2012 and 2013, in the months preceding the height of the Euromaidan violence in Kyiv when Crimea remained an autonomous region of Ukraine. Since then, Russia's annexation of Crimea, has unalterably shape post-Soviet politics and relations between post-Soviet states and Russia, and Russia, the EU and US. In this sense, the main argument of the article became the importance of studying bottom-up politics, engaging people who live in these contexts, not just to put people back into political science but also offer a point of reflection in a period of shifting political and geopolitical contexts.

Political science and identity politics from the bottom-up

In a simplistic sense, political science typically follows a neo-positivist goal of trying to measure political phenomena and establish causal relations between these phenomena to explain political outcomes. Contrastingly, interpretivism, the approach I use, is concerned with the meanings, experiences and plurality of interpretations, built on recognising subjectivity of these experiences, meanings and interpretations. While positivists might conduct surveys to verify, deductively, their ideas about the world (e.g. ethnic group membership), interpretivists can turn these identity categories on their head, question the mutual exclusivity of these identity categories and find out how individuals identify, how they experience these forms of identification, how they explain these identifications and why they identify in different ways.

Applying this bottom-up approach to identity politics, I argue the bottom-up perspective of identity politics is vital to understand how taken-for-granted concepts, like ethnicity and citizenship, function in everyday life. In particular, I criticise censuses as dominant a way in which identity is conceived, measured and analysed, by providing overly ascriptive and mutually exclusive categories, which indicate more about the way the state and regime conducting the census conceive of ethnicity than about those answering censuses.

In particular, post-Communist regimes have politicised censuses, both in the way regimes, such as Ukraine and Moldova, conceive of identity and try to measure it, to bolster the legitimacy of the regime. It may be significant that Crimea was a region that reported a majority identifying as ethnically Russian (58%) and speaking Russian (77%) in Ukraine's 2001 census. However this indicates little about what it *means* to be Russian in Crimea, what relations are with Russia or the dynamics of ethnic identification in the post-Soviet period (i.e. where it has been well over a decade since a previous census). In this context, these regimes have struggled to conduct regular censuses, both in terms of the cost and the politicised context in which these censuses are conducted and their results interpreted.

Crimea and Moldova from the bottom-up

To circumvent the problems of existing data, and to collect more context-rich research exploring the meanings and experiences of kin identification, I conducted fieldwork with everyday citizens, such as students, in Crimea and Moldova between 2012 and 2013. In this sense, I was interested to analyse if individuals identified as Russian (in Crimea) and Romanian (in Moldova), how they identified as Russian or Romanian, as opposed to other identifications (e.g. Ukrainian, Crimean, Moldovan) and why they identified in this way.

The data I gathered showed identification in both cases to be highly diverse, according to different individual explanations of identification in terms of language, culture, history, territory and political affiliation. This data, conducted from a people-centred perspective, allowed me to challenge existing framings of both cases, whether Crimea as a homogenous region of pro-Russian nationalist and separatist sentiment before annexation in 2014, and a challenge to kin-state narratives, that want to frame Crimea as homogenously Russian, Russian speaking, and hence supportive of Russian nationalism, and eventually annexation.

In Moldova too, I was able to explore the relationship between being Romanian and being Moldovan, identities that are variously conceived (by Romania) as co-terminous or oppositional (by the Soviet Union). Rather I demonstrated a diversity of opinions between those who conceived of themselves as naturally Romanian, because of their language and "blood", to those who negotiated these identities, pitching being Romanian as different because it meant more *European*.

The Benefits of a Bottom-up Approach for Post-Soviet Political Research

In political science, context-rich and specific, bottom-up interpretive approaches have been (unfairly) labelled as soft, unscientific, nonempirical and not really political *science*. However, empirically, I argue the approach I used in this research offers an important perspective for challenging the dominant framings of these cases. More theoretically, I argue it is important to

challenge how identification is conceived within political science, not as something mutually exclusive that can be measured by separate census categories, but as something worth exploring from the perspective not only of how but also *why*, by gathering data about experiences, personal, familial, political and educational, that individuals used to construct identity narratives. The challenge is to frame and design interpretive research to ensure standards of rigour and transparency, for example by making interview questions available, while not reproaching interpretivism for not generating generalizable or representative findings, when the intention is to derive context-specific research, whether in a single case or a comparative context.

Beyond identity politics and kin-state relations, I argue the bottom-up everyday approach is an overlooked and under-utilised approach in political science. This approach has the potential to enrich understandings of other processes and phenomena too, such as democratization and Europeanization, by encouraging researchers to go further in to the "gray zone" of politics, away from state-centred formal institutional approaches, towards studying the informal practices and everyday experiences of politics. This may also be the pursuit of anthropologists but political scientists too should be concerned with collecting data that probes, and challenges, informal and everyday experiences of politics, whether in post-Communist states and societies and beyond.

This blog summarises the main conclusions from a recent article I published in East European Politics and Societies: Eleanor Knott (2015) Generating data: studying identity politics from a bottom-up perspective in Ukraine and Moldova, *East European Politics and Societies*, 29: 467-486, doi:10.1177/0888325415584047 [ungated pdf].

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Department of Government nor of the London School of Economics.

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