


STATE OF THE FIELD

Kin-State Politics: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

This article situates the development of the kin-state politics literature within the context of post-Cold War scholarship on ethnicity, nationalism, and conflict. It outlines how an increasingly mature literature emerged around the domestic political and foreign policy drivers of kin-state politics as scholars drew from a number of perspectives, from the literature on irredentism to that on diaspora politics and transborder nationalism. The article then evaluates scholarship on the drivers and impacts of kin-state politics, with a focus on the consequences of kin-state politics for the cultural and political landscape of external kin communities and the impact on regional security and stability. While a rich and nuanced literature has helped to contextualize the tensions and complexities of the former, I argue that the latter needs to be developed further. Careful work needs to be done to more precisely establish the conditions under which kin-state politics constitute a security threat. Future scholarship should bring together a more ground level perspective of how kin-state policies are perceived, utilized, and/or instrumentalized by their intended subjects with a critical understanding of how the “game” of kin-state politics is played within the home state and the kin-state.

Keywords: kin-state politics; diaspora politics; minorities; nationalism; post-communist

Introduction

The term “kin-state,” as it is broadly understood, refers to a state that represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighboring territories. Kin-states actively cultivate ties to external members of that group based on shared cultural and national kinship, and take on “a role in the protection and preservation” of their external kin.¹ The study of kin-state politics, then, focuses primarily on trying to understand why, how, and to what extent states adopt this role and what the consequences are of the actions that states take on behalf of ethnic kin in other countries. What makes the study of kin-state politics both highly relevant and analytically broad is that the policies and practices that kin-states engage in span a range of transnational and extra-territorial activity and can have a variety of domestic, inter-state, and regional impacts. Studies of kin-state politics include those looking at external state support for secessionist or rebellious minorities in civil wars (Heraclides 1990; Cederman, Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Wucherpfennig 2013), those studying kin-state support for the teaching of minority languages in neighboring states (Csergő 2007), and those focused on the externalization of passports, citizenship, and identity (Dumbrava 2014; Knott 2019; Pogonyi 2017; Waterbury 2014). Kin-state politics, therefore, is a category of practice and a subject of analysis that falls somewhat uncomfortably between the literatures on irredentism and other security-related challenges of external intervention and those on diaspora politics, minority rights, and identity more broadly.

This article takes these tensions and ambiguities within the study of kin-state politics as its starting point. It argues that it is precisely because kin-state politics draws on and is relevant to the study of security, nationalism, and minority rights and brings together domestic, regional, and international levels of analysis that it has developed into its own unique area of study. However, analysts of kin-state politics need to be careful in balancing a broader transnationalism and minority rights framework with security-related perspectives. From the former perspective, analysts need to be cognizant of the very real impact that transborder politics can have on sovereignty, minority political action, and the legitimization of exclusive forms of nationalism. To avoid overly securitizing kin-state politics, careful work needs to be done to more precisely establish the conditions under which extra-territorial policies constitute a direct security threat and to distinguish the over-simplifications of elite rhetoric from the complex identities and preferences within transborder political and cultural groupings. Future scholarship should bring together a more ground level perspective of how kin-state policies are perceived, utilized, and/or instrumentalized by their intended subjects with a critical understanding of how the “game” of kin-state politics is played within the home state and the kin-state.

The discussion begins by situating the development of the kin-state politics literature within the context of post-Cold War scholarship on ethnicity, nationalism, and conflict. I outline how a rich and nuanced literature on kin-state politics emerged over time as scholars drew from a number of perspectives, from the scholarship on irredentism to that on diaspora politics and transborder nationalism, in order to understand the kin-state phenomenon. The second section focuses on the literature pertaining to the factors that shape kin-state politics and the broader effects of those politics. Here I highlight the complexities and contradictions in the relationship between what kin-states do and how that impacts the cultural and political landscape of external kin communities, which are often minorities in their states of residence. The third section looks at the impact of kin-state action on security. This is an area of the literature that I argue needs to be developed further, ideally by recognizing and grappling with the grey area that kin-state politics occupies between challenging state sovereignty and protecting the rights of culturally distinct groups.

Conceptualizing Kin-State Politics: Between Irredentism and Diaspora Politics

The emergence of a specific kin-state literature has been intimately tied to developments within post-communist Europe and the former Soviet Union and the search for analytically fitting tools with which to understand them. The early to mid-1990s saw the creation of new states out of the dissolution of multinational states in the region, the break-out of nationalist violence in former Yugoslavia, and the public reawakening of long-held animosities between neighboring states framed by the historical shifting of borders and populations. These developments revealed that bonds of shared ethnic kinship across borders were a potentially dangerous driver of instability in the region, and that the status and treatment of national minorities—those most likely to have strong ties to a neighboring state—was a key issue in the foreign and domestic policy of many post-communist states. Yet, there was initially a paucity of analytical tools to help scholars and policy-makers grasp the interaction between ethnicity and foreign policy in the post-Cold War world.

One of the first frameworks scholars looked to draw from the long-standing literatures on irredentism and external state support for secessionist groups, two sides of the same coin which both assumed that state interest in transborder ethnic groups was likely to result in dangerous violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This earlier work argued that marginalized and mobilized ethnic groups would seek to draw in the support and intervention of willing external kin-states, thereby strengthening or prolonging secessionist and state-capturing projects. For example, a classic piece by Myron Weiner (1971) used the historical case of Macedonia to show how states could become engaged in conflict over a transborder ethnic group, focusing on the interaction between minority marginalization and irredentist claims by kin-states. Updated versions of this argument highlighted the ways in which secessionist minorities (Heraclides 1990) or disadvantaged

and highly mobilized minority groups argues (Davis and Moore 1997) sought to involve external ethnic patrons in conflicts involving their co-ethnics. This literature was eventually found to be wanting due to its inability to explain the actions of many kin-states, even seemingly committed and historically aggressive states like Hungary, which did not actively seek to reclaim lost territory or populations through direct violations of sovereignty.

A number of scholars began to argue in the late-1990s into the 2000s that irredentism should not be the dominant framework through which to understand state action regarding kin minorities (King and Melvin 1999; Waterbury 2010). Irredentism as border revision proved to be the most extreme, costly, and, therefore, unlikely outcome at a time when states had a number of less risky ways to engage their kin across the border, and when the protection of minority rights had become externalized as a matter of concern for regional and international organizations. More nuanced work began to emerge that focused on the conditions that countered or discouraged irredentist projects (Saideman and Ayres 2008) or that broadened the concept of irredentism to include non-revisionist forms of cross-border intervention, notably Csergő and Goldgeier's (2001) coining of the term "virtual irredentism" to describe Hungary's policies toward its co-ethnics in neighboring states. Other scholars focused on isolating the very specific set of domestic conditions that might allow irredentism or support for secessionism to emerge despite the risks; for example, ethnic homogeneity and low institutional constraints on foreign policymaking (Carment and James 1996) or the existence of weak institutions and fragmented elites during an incomplete democratic transition (Koinova 2008).

Other scholars borrowed from the literatures on diaspora politics and transnationalism as a way to understand kin-state policies as it became more apparent that, for the most part, these states were not interested in redrawing borders or fighting with their neighbors. Seeing the target of kin-state politics as "accidental" diasporas (Brubaker 2000), or as mobilized minorities struggling for rights and recognition, rather than as potential irredentists or secessionists, allowed for more focus on the actual policies that states were employing across the border. Built primarily on case studies, scholars developed a rich empirical literature on the ways in which kin-states crafted their policies and used diplomatic advocacy, cross-border political, economic, and cultural networks and institutions, and various forms of citizenship to protect, promote, and engage with ethnic kin communities (King and Melvin 1998; Waterbury 2010; Wolff and Cordell 2007). This work also helped highlight types of kin-state policies that seemed distinct from those typically utilized by migrant sending states, such as the emergence of "benefit laws" that provided special rights as a form of semi-citizenship to external co-ethnics (Fowler 2001; Shevel 2010; Udrea 2014), or other forms of external citizenship (Bauböck, Perchinig, Sievers 2007; Štiks 2010).

Perhaps the most influential framework that shaped the kin-state literature came from Rogers Brubaker's work on the "triadic relational nexus" in which national minorities, nationalizing states, and what he called "external national homelands" are bound, forming an interdependent web of shifting and competing stances and claims (1995). Brubaker's work was instrumental in moving the conversation toward more nuanced analyses of how states and minorities interact that allowed for contingency, agency, and tension within and between the political projects of state and minority actors. Brubaker's formulation helped scholars to understand kin-state politics as a type of nationalism, one that privileges ethnic belonging and descent-based national membership over membership tied to existing political borders. Building on Brubaker's work, scholars have attempted to more narrowly define this specific category of nationalism, using terms such as "kin-state nationalism" (Waterbury 2010) or "transsovereign nationalism" (Csergő and Goldgeier 2004), bringing more conceptual clarity to the field as well as a recognition that the content and broader resonance of this nationalist project can change over time.

One long-standing critique of Brubaker's formulation was that it seemed to ignore the growing influence of a broader range of external actors, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Council of Europe, and the United Nations, on the choices and behavior of both state and minority actors in the post-communist region and elsewhere.

David Smith (2002) famously reworked Brubaker's triadic nexus as a "quadratic nexus," which included the interests, perceptions, and stances of regional and international organizations as a fourth field that shaped kin-state policies and the nationalist projects with which they intersect. Smith's critique of Brubaker's work has proven to be particularly salient, as the concept of kin-state politics came into more widespread usage as actors in European bodies and organizations struggled to come up with a set of normative recommendations about what sorts of state action regarding minorities in other countries would be acceptable in an increasingly supranational Europe. The 2001 Venice Commission Report (on the Preferential Treatment of National Minorities by Their Kin-State, "Conclusions") was one of the first regional documents to define a kin-state and its role within Europe in response to Hungary's controversial "Status Law." The Bolzano Recommendations of 2008 also addressed a kin-state's right to protect and preserve its kin-minorities residing on the territory of another state, while attempting to place limits on how far kin-state intervention should go (OSCE 2008). Scholars have since built upon this expansion of Brubaker's work to highlight the ways in which international organizations and processes of Europeanization have shaped kin-state policies and the relations between states and minorities within the triadic nexus (Waterbury 2017; Csergő and Regelman 2017). Most have found, however, that while interventions and inducements by regional actors can dampen the most extreme and conflict-producing forms of kin-state politics, they most often fail to decrease the salience of kin-state nationalism, and can even increase it (Csergő and Goldgeier 2004; Waterbury 2010). Membership in supranational organizations can create incentives for more intra-ethnic coordination across borders (Waterbury 2016), and home state actors can strategically frame pressure from regional bodies to justify more interventionist or exclusive policies (Schulze 2018).

The Drivers and the Impact of Kin-State Politics

Over the past few decades scholars of kin-state politics arrived at a loose consensus about the largely domestic political factors that drive a kin-state's transborder policies and their levels of intensity over time. Within this consensus, there is variation among scholars about which domestic variable best explains outcomes, and whether levels and types of kin-state action are driven more by agency or structure. On the agency side, Saideman and Ayres (2008) argued that higher levels of xenophobia and economic progress within the kin-state would lead state elites to less interventionist policies, while Waterbury (2010) focused on domestic political competition as the main factor that shapes the timing and intensity of kin-state politics. Others have looked to more structural or historical factors to explain variations among kin-state policies, such as the ethnic demography of the external kin population and its place in kin-state national narratives (Csergő and Goldgeier 2013), the relative size and homogeneity of the majority kin-state ethnic group (Cederman, et al 2013), the relative economic parity of cultural groups within the kin-state (Siroky and Hale 2017), and the degree of democratization within the kin-state (Koinova 2013). Another group of scholars looks primarily at the foreign policy priorities of the kin-state and how they impact the state's relationship to internal and external minority populations. In this vein, Mylonas (2012) argued that co-ethnics are treated better by states only if they reside in strategic border areas, and non-core groups are excluded if they are ethnically tied to a rival state. The literature on Russia's policies toward its "near abroad" also tends to see kin-state intervention as a product of Russia's foreign policy priorities and its desire to maintain influence in the post-Soviet neighborhood (Grigas 2016).

While we now know that kin-state actors do not simply respond to the plight of kin communities in neighboring territories, but develop and use kin-state policies largely to pursue their own domestic agendas, the current literature offers less clarity about the impacts of those policies. Kin-state policies, including external citizenship and specialized benefits, financial support to strengthen minority language and cultural institutions, and direct and indirect cross-border political support and intervention, have important but often contradictory implications for the external communities that are their target. We have evidence that kin-state policies can be important resources for the

political mobilization and community-building of minority groups, but also that they can make minority political projects more difficult and cause minority radicalism and majority backlash or trigger a politics of securitization. The ability to access kin-state citizenship can stabilize and strengthen ethnic identities, but may also lead to increased out-migration that can weaken minority identity cohesiveness. And more recent scholarship has made apparent that we need to understand the complex ways in which kin-state politics interact with the lived experiences, preferences, and identities of the individuals that make up these kin communities. Kin-state policies may be actively or passively resisted by external kin members, and they may conflict directly with the interests of some members of the kin community.

In the Central and East European context it is clear that active kin-states played a significant role in shaping minority political mobilization and inter-ethnic dynamics in the period following the collapse of Communist regions. During this critical juncture of political opening, institutional weakness, and uncertainty, kin-states contributed to patterns of conflict between majority and minority and helped “delineate rules of the game” in interethnic relations (Koinova 2013, 130). Kin-state support in the early post-communist years also made it more likely that minorities in neighboring countries would mobilize politically and form ethnic parties to ensure formal representation as a community (Gherghina and Jigla 2011, 69; Csergő and Regelman 2017). On the level of political agency and mobilization, kin-state support and access to kin-state citizenship has increased the number of arenas for claims-making, representation, and voice to which the minority community has access. The kin-state can act as an external “lobby actor” pressuring the minority’s state of residence diplomatically and creating more space for formal representation (Jenne 2007), or can help to externalize and legitimize minority claims in supranational and international forums such as the European Parliament and the Council of Europe (Waterbury 2016). In areas of formerly contested territories with competing self-determination claims, access to kin-state citizenship has been shown to help stabilize inter-ethnic relations by allowing minorities greater mobility and the ability to express multiple loyalties and feel secure in their minority identity, which moderates more radical territorial claims (Stjepanović 2018).

Kin-state support and resources can also be impactful in preventing the loss of minority identity and language knowledge. The desire by the kin-state to protect and promote the shared language in areas where minorities might face pressures of assimilation can lead a kin-state to step in to provide mother tongue educational institutions in the absence of investment by the minority’s state of residence (Csergő 2007; Han 2013). By offering an alternative to linguistic assimilation, kin-state support in the form of funding for teachers, private schools, and pedagogical resources gives individuals more choice, and potentially prevents the “tipping point” of assimilation that would affect the generations to come (Laitin 1998). Kin-state support through direct subsidies to kin communities can create pockets of “ethnic parallelism” in which minorities can reproduce their cultural communities institutionally, socially, and educationally, partially shielding the minority from the exclusionary policies of its own government (Kiss and Kiss 2018). Given enough resources, the kin-state can even potentially smooth out income inequalities between the minority and majority communities, which some researchers have found would help alleviate potentially conflictual self-determination struggles (Han, O’Mahoney, Paik 2014).

However, the literature shows that there are costs as well to kin-state support for external kin communities. Political and material intervention by the kin-state can lead to an increase in corruption, competition for resources, and factionalization within the kin minority community. A strong stance by kin-state political leaders supportive of minority claims can cause the minority leadership to radicalize, which is likely to lead to splits within the leadership that jeopardize intra-ethnic unity (Jenne 2007, 48). Other scholars have shown that too much kin-state funding of minority community building could derail the existing system of majority-minority bargaining within the state of residence by decreasing the minority’s reliance on local patronage networks in favor of transborder networks (Kiss, Toró, Székely 2018). The extension of kin-state citizenship and external voting in kin-state elections can have detrimental impacts on the political agency and

legitimacy of minority political actors if these developments split the focus and loyalty of the external kin members between politics at home versus politics across the border in the kin-state (Waterbury 2017; Papp 2017). Kin-state citizenship also provides increased access to cross-border mobility for external kin members, which in some cases increases out-migration from minority communities, worsening demographic decline and jeopardizing the thresholds for political representation of the minority (Pogonyi 2017).

Further contributions to our understanding of the scope and impact of kin-state politics have been provided by more sociological, ethnographic, and micro-level work that offers a ground-up perspective of how kin-state policies are interpreted and utilized by members of kin communities. One of the key findings of this emerging strand of the literature is that there is significant variation in how and whether individuals that are targeted by kin-state policies accept the larger claims of identity and nationalism that are embedded in these projects. Scholars have shown that members of kin communities adopt kin-state citizenship or vote in kin-state elections for a variety of material, symbolic, and personal reasons that are often at odds with or distinct from the rhetoric attached to such policies coming from the kin-state (Knott 2015; Pogonyi 2017; Wallace and Patsiurko 2017). Members of a kin community may also be largely disinterested in or ambiguous about the transborder policies or projects coming from the kin-state, as Kallas argues has been the case with Russophones in Estonia (Kallas 2016). Other work has drawn our attention to cases in which local leaders within the kin community came to reject and rebel against intervention by the kin-state (Caspersen 2007), or in which the external community more broadly resists and rejects the kin-state's attempt to claim them as co-ethnics (Stjepanovic 2015). We cannot, therefore, assume that the policies and projects pursued by kin-states are being passively accepted by willing and grateful external kin members, nor that engagement with kin-state policies signifies a deep identification with the kin-state or its goals.

Kin-State Politics and Security

Compared to the rich empirical studies that highlight the complex relationship between kin-states and external kin communities, the scholarship on whether and under what conditions kin-state policies contribute to conflict is relatively underdeveloped. This is in part because instances of kin-state action that rise to the level of direct violations of sovereignty or irredentist challenges to existing state borders are relatively rare (Siroky and Hale 2017). More challenging for the security-related strand of the literature, and for regional policymakers in Europe and elsewhere, is the difficulty in determining which kin-state policies are acceptable interventions on behalf of cultural kin and besieged minorities, and which are likely to become sources of insecurity and instability. As Walter Kemp, former Senior Adviser to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner on National Minorities, asked in a 2011 book, in a time of increasingly transnational politics, the internationalization of minority rights, and the normative acceptance of the Responsibility to Protect principle, “is the kin-state a problem or a solution?” (Kemp 2011). Kemp's question reflects the paradox that kin-state intervention on behalf of a threatened minority may increase conflict, particularly if it is seen as threatening the sovereignty of another state. Yet, kin-state representatives must also be seen as actors with legitimate interest in the protection and promotion of transborder kin.

The literature on kin-states and security has identified some conditions under which kin-state intervention is problematic and needs to be countered or handled cautiously. As Erin Jenne pointed out in her 2015 book on *Nested Security* “aggressive kin-states” may act as external spoilers that can derail peace efforts in conflicts containing marginalized minorities with ties to a neighboring kin-state. She finds that the role of kin-states is so impactful in some cases that relations between home and kin-state and between the kin-state and co-ethnics must be normalized before regional security guarantees can be maintained and a peace process can succeed (Jenne 2015, 30-33). A kin-state may also provide material or political support to a kin group engaged in civil war, prolonging the group's

ability to fight and discouraging negotiation (Cederman, Girardin, Gleditsch 2009). The stated desire by a kin-state to protect a threatened group of co-ethnics can also become a justification for aggressive and revisionist foreign policies, and the extension of kin-state citizenship to an external population (sometimes described as “passportization”) can provide a legal smokescreen for revisionist intentions. Modern examples of this type of clear-cut kin-state aggression are relatively few and far between, though Serbia and Croatia’s actions in the early 1990s would certainly fall under this category, as would Russia’s interventions in Ukraine since 2014 and its annexation of Crimea.

Other scholars, however, have found that kin-state intervention is often unlikely to trigger conflict, and that pressure by a kin-state can in fact stabilize inter-ethnic relations in a neighboring territory. Some quantitative studies of kin-states and conflict demonstrate that large and stable kin-states representing a transborder ethnic group are less likely to risk conflict and jeopardize their own position by supporting violent or secessionist kin groups in other states. Instead, kin-state pressure is used to moderate minority demands away from secession (Nagle 2013) or to encourage the neighboring state to treat the minority better (Cederman, Gleditsch, Salehyan, Wucherpfennig 2013, 407). These large-N studies mirror in many ways what earlier qualitative studies found regarding kin-states’ general reluctance to risk domestic stability in order to engage in aggressive and revisionist transborder conflicts (Saideman and Ayres, 2008; Waterbury 2010). However, the large-N studies have also contributed to broadening the scholarship on kin-state politics beyond the region of post-communist Europe by bringing in cases from Asia, Central Asia, and Africa. Diplomatic pressure and conditional incentives from other external actors, such as regional organizations and potential trade partners, offer another explanation for why kin-states may avoid or abandon problematic interventions or support for secessionism by their co-ethnics. If kin-states are involved in a process of democratization and economic integration supported by regional allies and actors, such as the European Union, then they can be persuaded to adopt a policy of supportive rather than aggressive intervention or even non-intervention (Krasniqi 2013; Gjevori 2018).

Conclusion

The study of kin-state politics emerged out of a desire to understand developments witnessed primarily in post-communist Europe after the end of the Cold War. But, as this essay shows, this increasingly robust and nuanced field of study has gained broader relevance by highlighting a range of extra-territorial and transborder state practices that are distinct from both the highly-securitized expectations of the past and from the highly-fluid expectations of a globalized future in which borders, history, and nationality cease to matter. Kin-state politics is also an important area of study because it has broad and wide-ranging consequences; for the political and social environment within kin-states and within the home states of external kin communities, for the political mobilization and cultural reproduction of kin minorities, and for regional security and stability. The field has also benefited from an increase in regional and methodological cross-pollination. The analytical advancements gleaned from the study of kin-state politics in post-communist Europe are being tested and extended to other regions of the world and our understanding of kin-state politics and its impacts has been deepened by more ground-level research on identity and individual experiences, reflecting the micro-political turn in areas of the social science literature.

The kin-state literature has been at its best when it has not overly-securitized the actions of kin-states and their desire to play a role in the lives of their external kin, but has recognized that state actors are driven by more than ethnic affiliation and that members of those external kin communities also have their own complicated interests and identities. On the other side, the actions of kin-states must continue to be evaluated and assessed by the consequences they produce for kin communities and inter-group relations, for the nature of kin-state governments, and for regional stability. In order to balance these prerogatives, additional work needs to be done to illuminate more precisely the security-related impact of kin-state politics and its capacity to both exacerbate and

mediate conflict within and between states. We should see kin-state politics as capable of producing both types of outcomes in order to answer the puzzles that remain. For example, what makes the extension of kin-state citizenship across borders an unacceptable case of aggressive “passportization” in one case and a welcome opportunity for minority mobility and identity maintenance that prevents conflict in another? Scholars will need to draw on research done on both sides of the borders involved in kin-state politics in order to meet the challenge of determining when and under what conditions kin-state politics is more of a problem or a solution.

Disclosure. Author has nothing to disclose.

Notes

- 1 Venice Commission Report 2001. These kin communities are most often understood as “kin-minorities” within their state of residence, but some external kin communities are local or national majorities (Knott 2015).

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