

Generating data: studying identity politics through political ethnography in Ukraine and Moldova

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the use of interviews and ethnographic methods for political science research in Eastern Europe. It will argue that such methods are vital for understanding the meaning of taken-for-granted political concepts and data, such as census data, by using a bottom-up approach which engages with people from the region and tries to understand from their perspective what concepts such as national identity and citizenship mean in everyday life.

This paper will first introduce the methods of ethnographic interviews by discussing how they can be applied and their value within political science. The paper will then use data gathered from interviews in Moldova and Ukraine to demonstrate the value of such an approach. The paper will show how interview data can add significantly to understanding of political concepts in these cases by adding a richness of context and a bottom-up perspective that quantitative and elite-level interviews do not engage with. Lastly the paper will draw on experiences gained from field research to discuss the problems of ethnographic research within political science and the post-Soviet region, and examine how these can be overcome, to contribute to a more rigorous political ethnographic approach in the post-Soviet space.

Overall this paper will argue that this approach fills in the gaps of understanding within the region and political science about what institutions, like citizenship, mean for those that are using them. It will argue that this kind of research is vital for bridging the gaps between the disciplines of anthropology and political science, by examining the bottom-up perspective of politics in the region.

“Interpretive approaches start with the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved.” (Finlayson et al. 2004)

“Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.” (Harper Lee 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

1 Introduction

This paper will explain how and why political ethnography can be a useful methodology for studying identity politics in Eastern Europe. It is based on the methodology that I have used for my doctoral project: *Citizens and Compatriots: Comparing Russia's kin-state policies in Crimea and Romania's kin-state policies in Moldova*. This research focuses on understanding the bottom-up perspective on kin relations between Romania and residents in Moldova, and between Russia and residents in Crimea, in terms of the meaning of kin identification and the use of Romania's and Russia's kin-state policies, such as citizenship acquisition. I sought to understand the impact of kin-state policies from the perspective of those eligible, and in turn for the states and sub-states involved, to fill the gap that existed due to a lack of bottom-up research on the politics of kin-state relations.

This paper will discuss why political ethnography is an appropriate methodology for this research area and for identity politics within Eastern Europe, as well as the ways in which researchers can ensure that the standards of rigour required by political science are met, to provide useful and interesting context-rich research. Despite a dearth of interpretivist political research in post-Communist societies, this paper will show how political ethnography is useful for looking at issues from below and at the meaning of taken-for-granted concepts, such as ethnicity and kin identification.

2 What is political ethnography?

Wacquant defined ethnography as “social research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do” (Wacquant 2003). Following the post-modern turn, ethnographic methods

became common practice in much social science research, in particular anthropology which endorses the rich and contextual-dependent nature of research, and hence benefited from the “thick description” potential of ethnography (Geertz 1973). However political ethnography has been an unpopular method in mainstream political science, with only one article published in the *American Political Science Review* between 1995 and 2006 which used ethnographic methods (Auyero and Joseph 2007)¹.

Political science has therefore failed to engage with the “texture of political life” and everyday actors, with political scientists preferring to research from afar (Auyero and Joseph 2007: 2). This has left many research questions unanswered because of the use of ethnographic methods for studying the “backstage of politics”, i.e. the “gray zone” [sic], rather than the “respectable” and mainstream forms of politics, such as parliaments and governments (Auyero and Joseph 2007: 1; Auyero 2007). Ethnographic research analyses political questions in a different way, by avoiding a “broad strokes” approach to political life and instead “seeks to find out what their [respondents] preferences are and what motivated them to act” (Baiocchi and Connor 2008; Rhodes 2005). Crucial to this interpretivist study of politics is the shift of focus towards understanding meaning and thus not just the “practice of politics” but also the “signification” and “meaning-making” content of these practices (Wedeen 2009: 80).

The use of ethnography in political science is also novel as it shifts the focus from top-down to a bottom-up perspective. A bottom-up approach requires the researcher to undertake a much more involved method than is usual for political scientists, by becoming immersed in everyday situations and analysing them from the perspective of everyday actors. This immersive approach requires the researcher to “get out there and see what actors are thinking and doing” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 2, 237). In turn this allows the research to “move beyond official rhetoric” and explore how rhetoric “resonates [...] in everyday contexts by everyday actors” through direct engagement (Blee and Currier 2007: 158). Ethnographic methods therefore have the potential to fill the gaps in understanding about post-Communist politics and societies and question the assumptions that have been made by political research that has lacked engagement with everyday actors in these states.

3 Using political ethnography for researching identity politics

¹ The article was written by Soss (1999) and uses ethnographic methods as part of a mixed method approach.

Political ethnography offers the potential to look at ethnic identification in a different way from how pre-existing political science approaches have conceptualized ethnicity. Within political science, Chandra's "descent-based" idea has come to dominate understandings of ethnicity (Chandra 2001, 2006; Chandra and Wilkinson 2008)². Fearon and Laitin (2000) discuss an interesting paradoxical element to using a descent-based approach to ethnicity, in that a group must be a "primordial given to be 'ethnic'" because of their "natural history" but at the same time "what is recognized as primordially given (and thus 'ethnic') is clearly a matter of political negotiation and convention in many cases". The rational choice approach, and those who see ethnicity from an instrumentalist approach, use definitions like that of Fearon and Laitin (2000) to code different ethnic groups. Though ethnic identification is seen as constructed, it is also seen as a rational affiliation and is thus "strategically chosen" (Wedeen 2002).

The *ethnolinguistic fractionalisation* (ELF) index is a common data-set for analysing the role of ethnolinguistic diversity in promoting conflict by coding different ethnolinguistic groups based on a dataset gathered by Soviet ethnographers, who saw ethnicity based on objective criteria such as "native language" (Alesina et al. 2003; Fearon 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Posner 2004; Roeder 2011). Wedeen (2002) has been critical of this approach, stating that "[W]hereas understandings of the 'nation' as constructed and imagined are now taken for granted, 'ethnicity' often operates in datasets as a given category of belonging" and thus assumes that "people are Hutu or Tutsi, Slavs or Germans". Laitin and Posner (2001) also criticize the "essentialist premise" and temporally fixed way of using ethnicity on which the ELF was based, because they assume the givenness of such categories. The ELF approach is problematic, as there is no appreciation of how ethnic groups are constructed and the implications of this construction, because they lack engagement in the meaning of ethnicity in a particular context (see also Gagnon 2006: xviii). Moreover within political science there is a preoccupation with analyzing ethnicity only within the remit of ethnic conflict and as such there is little research into ethnicity outside the dichotomy of the presence or absence of conflict³.

Among scholars researching ethnicity in Eastern Europe, these methods for coding ethnic groups have been questioned, because of the observation that individuals' linguistic and even cultural identification are not necessarily congruent with ethnic identification (Fournier 2002; Wilson

² In general, descent-based characteristics are popular among those theorizing ethnicity, such as Smith's idea of the "myth of common ancestry".

³ See Wedeen (2002) for criticism of a "tautology" where these studies assume that "interethnic tension is caused by the tensions of interethnicity".

2002). Instead, an everyday approach has gained ground among interpretivist researchers who advocate for studying the “lay” categories of “everyday social experience” which are used by “ordinary social actors” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). This approach has its roots in Hobsbawm’s research, which discussed how nationalism and nationhood are “dual phenomena [...] that while constructed essentially from above, cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people” (Hobsbawm 1992: 10). Following this, Brubaker et al. (2006: 12) have argued for an approach which examines how these everyday actors “appropriate, internalize, subvert, evade or transform the categories that are imposed upon them” and construct the categories that they identify with (see also Dawson 2012; Gagnon 2006: 188).

Applying political ethnographic methods to identity politics in post-Communist states is appropriate, as it allows researchers to observe how ethnicity “works in everyday life” such as whether or not it is salient (Brubaker et al. 2006). Similarly C. King (1994) criticises the various “offences” that have been committed by researchers of the Soviet Union, for “ignoring the ‘nationalities question, or at least adopting a simplistic ‘top-down’ approach to ethnicity”. Political ethnography therefore has a lot to offer for furthering the understanding, and challenging the assumptions, of political and social phenomena within Eastern Europe from the perspective of those engaging with these phenomena in everyday life.

4 Using political ethnography for researching kin-state relations

In the field of kin-state relations, most research has focused on a top-down institutionalist perspective: how the institutions function and how this affects relations between the actors involved. Brubaker (1996) conceptualised kin-relations in terms of the antagonisms between the three actors: the kin-state, the external kin community and the state where the minority reside⁴. This antagonistic analysis was adapted by others to consider the likelihood of conflict between the states involved, with the kin-state intervening on behalf of the oppressed minority (see Fearon 1998; Laitin 1998; Laitin 2001; Saideman and Ayres 2008; Smith 2002; van Houten 1998). This is more evidence of the fixation within political science over associating ethnicity with ethnic conflict, and not trying to understand how ethnic identification functions and has a political impact outside of a conflict nexus.

⁴ The two examples Brubaker (1996) used were the interwar case of relations between Weimar Germany and the German minorities in neighbouring states, and the post-Soviet example of Russia and Russian minorities in successor states like Estonia.

More recent analysis of kin relations has recognised the rarity of conflict in kin-state relation, and instead focused on the growth of kin-state institutions (see Iordachi 2004; Shevel 2004, 2009, 2011; Waterbury 2011). However these analyses have failed to consider the opinions and role of everyday members of kin communities who, for example, are the people who are eligible and applying for dual citizenship from their kin-state.

Political ethnography is therefore a useful way to explore what has so far been overlooked by existing analyses of kin-state relations, such as the lived experience of kin identities and kin institutions. Hence this research focuses on the meaning of identification with the kin-state, how kin community members use policies provided by the kin-states and the relationship between the meaning of kin identity and the practice of these policies. By understanding these issues, the research tries to explore the impact of these policies for the community and the two states involved, such as how it might affect the relationship between the kin community and their home state.

The cases of Moldova and Crimea were selected as cases of kin majorities, where the majority of the residents of that case are claimed by an external state as sharing ethnicity with that state: Romania claims that the majority in Moldova are Romanian, while Russia makes the same claims about a Russian majority in Crimea. The majority aspect offered a different angle from the way that kin minorities have traditionally been studied. The cases were also selected because of a difference in the nature of institutions made available by the kin-state: in Moldova, the majority of residents are eligible to apply for Romanian citizenship. In Crimea, Ukrainian and Russian legislation prevents the *legal* acquisition of Russian citizenship and instead Crimean residents are eligible for rights and benefits from Russia as part of the programme for Compatriots abroad.

Political ethnography is not just a useful methodology for studying kin-state relations from a new perspective, but it also useful generates data that otherwise would not exist. While there are many sociological studies and censuses which are available in the public domain (Analytical Report of Razumkov Centre 2009; Petruți et al. 2006), they do not ask the questions from the perspective that is appropriate for this research. These surveys do have access to much larger numbers of respondents than is possible by more immersive approaches and thus can claim to be more representative of the whole. However these surveys do not allow respondents flexibility in their own answers and often assume the mutual exclusivity of categories, such as ethnicity. This approach lacks the deep engagement with everyday actors and can indicate less about the actors themselves, than about the way in which researchers want to collect data that works with their pre-existing notions of

how categories function. Hence political ethnography is useful for understanding how categories work and the nature of kin-state relations, and for generating a rich seam data in an Eastern European context.

5 Conducting an ethnographic analysis of kin-state relations

Following preliminary fieldwork in both cases, each case was visited twice for a month during 2012 and 2013. During these visits, 45-50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local people. In Moldova, interviews were conducted in Chişinău with several control interviews conducted in Bălţi, the second city in Moldova. In Crimea, interviews were primarily conducted in Simferopol, while several control interviews were conducted in Yalta. All respondents were given written information about the research, the rationale for the interview and the way in which their data would be used, and their consent for participating in research was established before the interview commenced. Signed consent forms were avoided as this might be off-putting in a post-Soviet context where signing a form is associated with an official procedure that might have negative repercussions, so making it harder to interview respondents.

Beyond semi-structured interviews, a significant amount of understanding was gained from observation of everyday activities, such as local protests and festivals, and participation in everyday life, experienced by living with local people and my experiences were recorded in daily fieldwork notes. Insights were drawn from conversations in both households in Crimea and Moldova, whether about the families' life histories, discussions of the different opinions of family members about the local language situation in Crimea, generational differences in perspectives about identity or about the acquisition of citizenship in Romania. These experiences helped to underline the salience of the issues being researching and at the same time, the irrelevance of other issues from the perspective of these households.

However the majority of *tangible* data was gained from the in-depth interviews that were conducted in both cases. I undertook a specific but consistent approach for interviews, which relied on a sense of vagueness in terms of my precise research interests. When contacting respondents, I indicated that I was interested in local cultural and political issues. I used these as icebreaker topics and as a way to link to the specific areas of interest: how respondents conceptualised their identity, and particularly their ethnicity, and how they used kin-state policies. This was useful in terms of determining whether respondents would discuss without prompting specific areas that I was

Table 1 Types of respondents

		Moldova	Crimea
Young people (18-35 years)	Political	Youth wings of main political parties – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communist Party (PCRM) - Socialist Party (PSRM) - Democrat Party (PDM) - Liberal Party (PL) - Liberal Democrat Party (PLDM) - National Liberal Party (PNL) 	Youth wings of main political parties – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community Party (KPU) - Party of Regions (PR) - <i>Batkivshchyna</i> (All-Ukrainian Union “Fatherland”) - <i>Front Zmin</i> (Front for Change) - <i>Russkoe Edinstvo</i> (Russian Unity)
	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students and young people - Student and youth organisations (AISEC, AEGEE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students and young people - Student and youth organisations (AISEC)
	>35 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of other organisations - Other ordinary citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of other organisations - Other ordinary citizens

interested in such as language rights and inter-ethnic relations, and therefore helped to place respondents in terms of the importance that they ascribed to these issues. Using an interview guide, I followed a similar order and construction of questions (see Table 2), but adapted or asked further questions depending on a respondent’s position. I avoided obviously using the interview guide during the interview, so that the questioning seemed natural. I used a long introductory section of the interview to put the respondent at ease, by asking them everyday and general questions such as what they did as a job and what they thought about local politics. In accordance with the immersive and everyday approach, interviews were conducted in whatever language respondents felt most comfortable⁵. To record interviews, a combination of note taking and recording was used, depending on the situation and the respondent’s wishes. Interviews recorded by notes were transcribed immediately to maximise my memory of the interview.

Who is chosen to participate in the study is crucial in terms of framing the research. Within political science, a large random sample of respondents is often preferred to decrease potential biases and increase the representativeness of results (Fearon and Laitin 2008; Stroh 2000). However due to the intensive nature of this research, the number of respondents sought was too small to warrant this approach⁶. Instead the goal was to have a broad overview of each case and to engage with a diverse range of ordinary citizens residing in each case, in particular the young post-Soviet

⁵ In Crimea, the majority of interviews were conducted in Russia, while in Moldova interviews were conducted in English and Romanian, and also in Russian where this was most convenient.

⁶ In terms of case selection for small-n research, reselected cases for small-n research are less likely to be representative and insightful, and it is therefore more useful to select cases which have sufficient leverage and interest (Gerring 2008; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

generation, and without the claim that these were representative of all residents within each case (Adams 2009). As Table 1 shows, respondents were sought from youth and student organisations as well as members from youth wings of political parties, to get a broad overview of the political spectrum. Equally those who were not affiliated with such groups were also sought. In terms of identity characteristics, respondents were not chosen based on their ethnicity or citizenship status as this was unknown to me until I asked them during the interview. Hence different types of respondents were targeted, and within these types, respondents were randomly selected to increase the breadth of the political and cultural overview of respondents. In the main therefore, respondents were not experts in the issues about which they were being questioned but instead were everyday actors in the situations they were being asked about. This presented some problems when asking about local politics with several respondents in both cases declaring that they did not know about politics and geopolitics, as I noted about one respondent in Crimea: “I asked him if it was about geopolitics but he didn’t know what geopolitics was”.

6 Producing rich data and seeing between categories

The main benefit of the ethnographic approach for this research was the richness of the data that was gathered. In contrast to the previous approaches which conceptualised kin communities in mutually exclusive ethnic categories, by talking to everyday people it was possible to understand whether and how these categories work in everyday life. It became clear that respondents saw themselves more in terms of assemblages of different ethnic, civic, linguistic and cultural identifications. As one respondent in Crimea described, their identity was complex and not completely Russian or Ukrainian: “I studied Russian culture, Ukrainian culture, and Ukrainian literature, and I don’t see, I don’t feel myself strongly Russian, as a mixture, and I feel more like a Ukrainian citizen”. In the Moldovan case, respondents discussed the blurring of categories, with one respondent describing how “all Moldovans are Romanians, but not all Romanians are Moldovans”. Another respondent described how these identities were equivalent to how he could be a “brother, lover and son” at the same time, meaning that the identities might work in different ways but he was still the same person. This approach also allowed insights into the uncertainty that some respondents had about their own identity “kind of Bessarabian, kind of Romanian but not 100% Romanian”⁷.

⁷ Bessarabia is another historical name for Moldova, referring to the Bessarabian *gubernia* in the Russian empire (1812-1918).

The richness of the qualitative data allowed an understanding of *how* these categories were assembled, for example whether they were seen as constructed and voluntaristic or whether they were primordialised and seen as natural (Zimmer 2003). One respondent in Crimea described how Russian culture “is for me my native and every culture is transmitted through blood and mother’s milk, and of course I love national cuisine, and I am much closer to Russian culture and it’s much dearer”. Similarly in Moldova, many understood relations with Romania in terms of having the “same language”, the “same blood” and sense of common ancestry because they were “brothers”. On the other hand, those with a more voluntaristic understanding dissected this sense of ancestry by placing emphasis on their separate histories, with one respondent discussing, in relation to Romania and Moldova:

We entered modernity from different doors. We are the same ethno-culture, basically, and language and so on but we are a little bit different. They imitated the French model. We entered modernity let’s say from the Russian door.

The rationale behind identities was therefore interesting because it allowed an understanding of the differing intensity of identification with the kin-state among the different respondents and the uncertainty and complexity that many felt in terms of their own identification.

In terms of kin-state policies, the richness of the data allowed an analysis of how these policies work in everyday life. It allowed analysis of how Russia’s Compatriot policy worked in everyday life and whether respondents considered themselves Compatriots. In reality, this demonstrated how far the Compatriot policy failed to work in everyday life, because respondents were not interested in its provisions, such as facilitated migration to underdeveloped regions of Russia which are far from Crimea. In terms of Romania’s policies, respondents gave detailed descriptions of how and why they had acquired Romanian citizenship, how they used and intended to use the rights acquired through citizenship acquisition, such as the right to travel and work within the EU, and the right to vote in Romanian elections, and how citizenship related to their identification with Romania. Many respondents personalised the abstract concept and made it seem material, by discussing it in terms of how “I received my passport”, as this was the format through which they viewed how rights associated with dual citizenship were conferred to them. With respect to voting, it was interesting how many of the respondents talked about their “duty” to vote in Romanian elections, to give something back to the state that had helped them and often in declaration of support for Băsescu, the current Romanian president, whom they saw as a figure that

had helped them personally in facilitating Romanian citizenship. The ethnographic approach therefore offered crucial insights into the lived experiences of forms of kin identification and engagement with kin-state policies from everyday actors, and the political and social impacts of the kin majority cases.

7 The problems of political ethnography

However it is important to recognise that there are problems with using political ethnography as a methodology within a largely positivist discipline and beyond. The central problems which are addressed below are problems experienced within the field in using ethnographic methods to study identity and problems of using ethnographic methods within political science. Identifying and acknowledging these problems helps to devise ways to overcome such pitfalls and at the same time, improve the marketability of the approach within the wider discipline.

7.1 *Doing the ethnographic research in the field*

While in the field, there were several issues which arose from the disjunction between conducting the research that I wanted to do and encouraging respondents and other gate-keepers to allow me to do this research. Several respondents criticised the questions I asked them on the basis that the questions were “too general” and my interests were “too general”. Respondents wanted to be able to provide more specific insights and information in line with the specificities of my research and they felt that a general approach to questioning was therefore not helpful in expressing to them the boundaries of my interests. I therefore had to relay that I was interested in their opinions and frame the questions in terms of they thought *generally* about certain issues.

Trying to encourage everyday actors to speak to me also posed certain challenges as it was a common practice that respondents would refer me to either superiors or experts. I had to therefore often convince those I contacted that it was most useful for me to speak to *them* because I was looking for opinions rather than information on specific issues. Another instance was where a gatekeeper at a university suggested I give them a survey which they could distribute to students. I had to decline this offer and convince them that this was not the kind of research that I wanted to do, as I wanted to speak directly and individually to the students. I realised that speaking to large groups of people was infeasible as I needed to ensure that each person answered each question. It was important therefore to admit defeat in instances where I was faced with a class full of students

and instead try to encourage them to set up individual one-on-one interviews outside of the classroom.

It was often difficult also to get respondents to go beyond the retelling of information and to give their opinions. As Narvselius (2012) discusses, it can be difficult to encourage respondents to “leave aside public narratives rehearsed on a number of public occasions and reframe their narratives according to their individual experiences”. It was therefore important to prompt respondents through asking *why* and framing the issues in terms of what they thought *personally*. Despite the challenges of everyday research, it is rewarding rewards in terms of the rich and interesting data that it provides as discussed above.

7.2 Using the ethnographic research in political science

Political scientists using ethnographic methods must be prepared to defend against criticism that this form of data collection is beyond the “permissible limits of political science” (Gagnon 2008)⁸. As G. King et al. (1994) discuss, the criteria of good qualitative political science have been established as providing data that is verifiable, reliable and repeatable. The assumption is that ethnographic methods cannot meet these criteria because unless triangulated with other data sources, and thus verified, the data cannot said to be reliable because respondents might be deliberately misleading the interviewer, and hence this needs to be verified by cross-checking with other data sources (Elliott 2005; Kvale 1996). Moreover it is not repeatable because the identity of respondents is unknown to anyone other than interviewer and so a separate group of respondents would have to be used, should the research try to be repeated.

Because of the comparatively small sample size, in comparison with large-N surveys, the potential for respondents to be misleading cannot be controlled for, because of the weight given to each respondent in small-n versus large-N studies. While this is true, the validity of the information is less important for interpretivist approaches as they focus more on meaning rather than on factual information. In reference to how far political discourse can be trusted (Gagnon 2006: 26) argues that it can be trusted as “the rhetoric of politicians is meaningful. [...] the discourse of politicians is a story they are telling about themselves and about how they would like to be perceived by the relevant audiences” and hence “speech acts are meaningful as evidence regarding the calculations of political actors about the preferences and values of the politically relevant audiences”. Moreover for

⁸ In fact, in an interview, Gagnon describes himself as a “bad political scientist” because he privileges richness over rigour and generalizability (see Gagnon 2013).

this research, what respondents say in the first instance was not taken at face value as respondents were probed repeatedly in terms of why and how they held the opinions they did.

When discussing the potential unreliableness of ethnographic data, it is necessary to consider how far any existing data, such as Soviet and post-Soviet census data can be trusted. The politics of censuses and the “imperative to create statistical majorities” has been discussed (Arel 2002b). The examples range from Kazakhstan where censuses have been used to produce “‘right’ numbers” because of inter-ethnic relations and the perceived link between “territorial rights” and majority status, to Crimea where there was a fear of Russians being under-counted, and the “psychological blow” that might come if censuses ever indicated that Russians were no longer the local majority (Arel 2002a; Dave 2004a, 2004b; Kertzer and Arel 2002). Censuses often act less as a source of information and more as a “medium through which nationalization is effected” and as guide to the underlying ideology of the state conducting the census (Brubaker 2011). Uehling (2004) describes therefore how ethnography can actually help analysis of census data because they “bring greater clarity to how various representatives of the state (and its citizens) are involved”. Consistent and trustworthy sources of statistics are also lacking for other elements of this research, such as how many Moldovans have acquired Romanian citizenship with statistics varying widely between official and unofficial sources⁹ and official sources failing to provide up-to-date data¹⁰. Political ethnography is therefore one way to overcome these obstacles, by using a method that does not require existing data but seeks to create new sorts of data and new kinds of insights.

In trying to reconcile the criticisms that political ethnography is not *scientific* enough, given the different ontologies of positivistic non-ethnographic political science methodology and interpretivist methods, an appropriate middle ground is to consider how political ethnography can be made more rigorous. This might take ethnography slightly away from its anthropological roots, but brings benefits in terms of the potential for ethnography to be more accepted within political science. The main ways in which the rigour of political ethnography can be enhanced are through the theoretical framework and research design.

In terms of the research design, I used a cross-case comparison of two cases which were relatively similar but differed in terms of the policies available. Comparative work is uncommon in

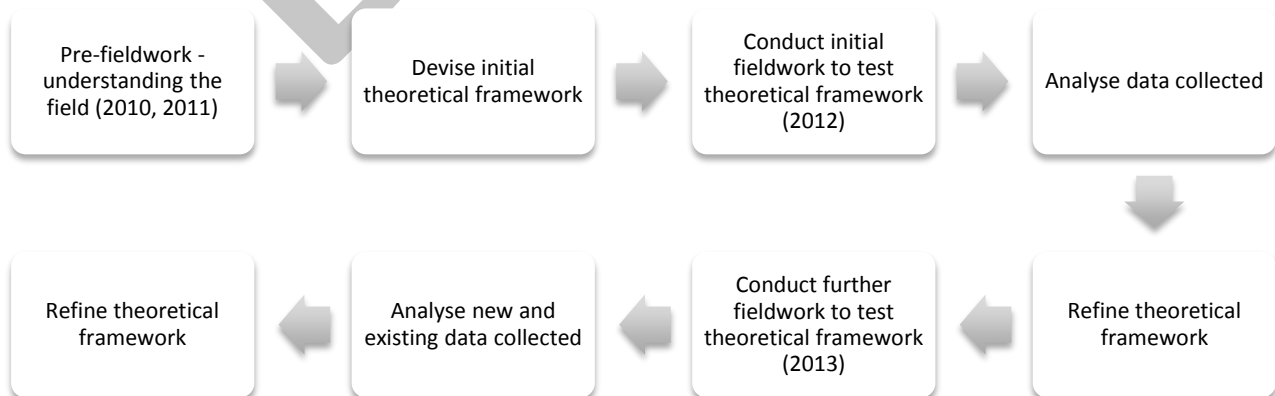
⁹ The official statistics provided to Eurostat by the Romanian state are far less than unofficial statistics which bases its calculations on news sources of how many applications has been processed. Compare Eurostat (1998-2010) with (Panainte and Nedelciuc (2012); Toderita et al. (2012)).

¹⁰ While other EU member-states have provided acquisition data as far as 2011, Romania has failed to submit any data on citizenship acquisition since 2009.

anthropological uses of ethnography, as anthropologists stress that the subjective nature of the data collected means data is tied to “particular cultural systems” and therefore hard to compare between cases (Roth and Mehta 2002). However for a political science appropriation of ethnography, comparison helps to draw out the idiosyncrasies of each case and offers a great scope for theory building, by understanding what might be the drivers of certain interactions based on the cases’ similarities and differences. Comparison can therefore be a strength of political ethnography, because it helps to tie the observation of micro-processes with the broader macro-dynamic framework of researching kin-state policies.

However a comparative approach requires consistency in terms of how ethnography is conducted in each case and how the theoretical framework is tested. I devised an interview guide that offered a common structure to guide interviews in each case. This ensured that each respondent from each case was questioned on the same issues and in similar ways, and thus allows data within and between cases to be considered in a comparative way, and in a way that allowed the theoretical framework to be tested against what respondents said. It is also important to ensure that the data is being analysed thoroughly. Although coding through coding software is a usual way to analyse interview data (Attride-Stirling 2001), I found coding software slightly unwieldy and not particularly helpful in terms of managing, reducing and analysing the data. I devised a coding framework but the number of codes became too unmanageable and complicated the process of analysis. Instead I used tables to summarise and analyse the data, by breaking it down into different categories for each case (see Table 3 and Table 4). This helped to reduce the data into a more manageable form, and create a reference table which could refer to the full interview, and to enable analysis of the interview in relation to the theoretical framework.

Figure 1 Explaining the research process and chronology



8 The benefits of political ethnography for post-Soviet political research

It is therefore possible to increase the rigour of ethnographic methods to study political questions. Moreover this paper has shown that political ethnography is appropriate to answer certain questions, in particular those of identity politics, because it helps to fill in the gaps of understanding and challenge long-standing concepts and assumptions.

Overall political ethnography allowed a deeper engagement with everyday respondents who reside in post-Communist societies than has been evident from political sciences studies of the region. As Tuathail (2010) argues, “research on the micro-dynamics of nationalism underscores the fact that nationalism works itself out in everyday life in local places”. Thus it is important to engage with how nationalism is operating at the local level rather than maintaining the assumptions that are formed from an over-confidence in the validity of detached datasets, like the ethno-linguist fractionalisation index (Tuathail 2010). By engaging with everyday actors, it was possible to engage more with the research questions, than would have been possible from other methodologies, such as elite interviews or statistical analysis. It also permitted research of questions that could not have been researched through other data, because available and trustworthy data does not exist on this subject matter, such as citizenship acquisition. As discussed above, the approach of this research indicated how complex categories of identification appear when viewed from below, because for everyday people these categories, like ethnic categories, are far more complex and less mutually exclusive than censuses or sociological surveys have indicated, and have permitted respondents from indicating.

Thus the bottom-up perspective of identity politics is vital for bridging the gaps between the disciplines of anthropology and political science, by understanding how taken-for-granted concepts, like ethnicity and citizenship, function in everyday life. It is also crucial to engage with those who have previously been left out of political studies of Eastern Europe and to bring back into the discipline a concern for understanding those who participate in everyday politics. It can be argued that such research which lacks engagement from everyday actors is not only falling into the trap of assuming that social reality is not “just social physics where certain causal mechanisms can be successfully detached from the rest of reality” but lacks any engagement and understanding of social reality in the first place by failing to ask those participating in the reality what they think (Mitropolitski 2010). This research proposes therefore that to have greater understanding of the political and social implications of phenomena kin-state relations and dual citizenship acquisition, and the wider issues of identity politics, it is necessary to be immersed in social reality in order to be

able to begin to examining these phenomena from those who are engaging with them on a daily basis.

DRAFT

Table 2 Usual interview questions

	Crimea	Moldova
1. Basic intro questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you do in Crimea? - What does your organisation do? - Where were you born? What about your parents/family? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you do in Moldova? - What does your organisation do? - Where were you born? What about your parents/family?
2. Culture and politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about politics in Crimea? - What do you think about culture in Crimea? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about politics in Moldova? - What do you think about culture in Moldova?
3. Self-identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For ethnicity, how do you feel yourself? - What makes you feel [ethnicity]? - What about language? Culture? - Do you think that there are differences between Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea? - Do you feel near or far to Russia/Russians? How do you feel in Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For ethnicity, how do you feel yourself? - What makes you feel [ethnicity]? - What about language? Culture? - How do your parents describe their identity? Do they agree with you? - Do you think that Romanians from Moldova are the same or different to Romanians from Romania? - How do you feel in Romania?
4. Kin-state relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about relations between Russia and Crimea? Between Russia and Ukraine? Between Ukraine and Crimea? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about relations between Romania and Moldova?
5. Kin-state policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the policies of Russia towards Crimea? - What do you think about the Compatriot policy? - Do you feel like a Compatriot of Russia? - What do you think about dual citizenship? What do you think about Russian citizenship? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the policies of Romania towards Moldova? - What do you think about the policy of Romanian citizenship reacquisition? (<i>redobandire</i>) - Have you applied for Romanian citizenship? - When did you apply? When did you receive it? - Why did you apply for Romanian citizenship? - Has Romanian citizenship changed how you feel about Romania? - What can you do as a Romanian citizen? - Can you vote in Romanian elections? Will you vote in Romanian elections?
6. Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the integration of Crimea with Russia? - What do you think about Crimean independence? - What would you think if Crimea became an oblast of Ukraine (rather than an autonomous republic)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the integration of Moldova with Romania?

Table 3 Crimea analytical table

Respondent code	Summary	Being Russian	Being a compatriot	View of Russia/integration	View of citizenship

Table 4 Moldova analytical table

Respondent code	Summary	Being Romanian	View of Romania/integration	View of citizenship

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