

Inside Irredentism: A Global Empirical Analysis

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Abstract: *Although many countries have ethnic kin on the “wrong side” of their borders, few seek to annex foreign territories on the basis of ethnicity. This article examines why some states pursue irredentism, whereas others exhibit restraint. It focuses on the triadic structure of the kin group in the irredentist state, its coethnic enclave, and the host state, and provides new data on all actual and potential irredentist cases from 1946 to 2014. The results indicate that irredentism is more likely when the kin group is near economic parity with other groups in its own state, which results in status inconsistency and engenders grievances. It is also more likely in more ethnically homogeneous countries with winner-take-all majoritarian systems where the kin group does not need to moderate its policy to win elections by attracting other groups. These conditions generate both the grievance and opportunity for kin groups to pursue irredentism.*

Replication Materials: The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X88LYH>.

Russia justified its 2014 annexation of Crimea on the grounds that the Ukrainian government failed to safeguard the rights of the ethnic Russians, thereby creating a legitimate demand for unification. Many regard this argument as rhetorical eyewash hiding *realpolitik* objectives. Regardless of Russia’s motives, the ongoing conflict is a classic case of irredentism, defined as a state’s use of military force to advance a claim of ownership over territory in a neighboring state on the basis of coethnicity, and to create a greater congruence between the ethnic group and the state (Gellner 1983, 1, 57; 1992).¹ Unlike secession, which is a nongovernmental decision to leave one state on account of an ethnic difference, irredentism is a governmental decision that subtracts from one state and adds to another on the basis of shared ethnicity (Horowitz 1991, 10).

Although less common than secession, the historical record and contemporary politics afford many examples of irredentism over the last century (Horowitz 1985, 281).

It is one of the most intractable forms of conflict because it fuses intrastate and interstate conflict (Carment and James 1995; Moore and Davis 1998). More than two-thirds of the groups in the Minorities at Risk Project (Gurr 2000) and about half of the groups in the Ethnic Power Relations data have kin groups in adjacent countries (Cederman et al. 2013).² Irredentism is of significant scholarly and policy interest for the danger it poses to international order and human security, and it deserves a comprehensive, comparative analysis.

Most of the case study evidence on irredentism has focused on prominent cases (e.g., Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Serbia, Somalia) and has advanced case-specific explanations that do not generalize well (Andreopoulos 1981; Borsody 1988; Chazan 1991; Gagnon 1995; Gavrilis 2003; Haines 1937; Gutman 1991; Kitromilides 1990; Kolstø, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova 1993; Landau 1991; Munck 1999; Petacco 1998; Plaut 1999; Suhrke 1975).

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¹The term *irredentism* originates from the Italian word *irredenta*—“the unredeemed”—and refers to Italy’s efforts in the late 19th and early 20th century to bring Italian speakers living under Austro-Hungarian and Swiss control into the new Italian state (Petacco 1998).

²Cederman et al. (2013) show that excluded groups with kin in neighboring countries increase the risk of ethno-nationalist conflict.

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These studies have provided vital insights but have relied on research designs that ignore a large proportion of the *potential* cases of irredentism that were never acted upon, yet could have been—and thus sample on the dependent variable.³

Quantitative studies of irredentism fare better on this front, but they often suffer from other shortcomings. Primary among them is reliance on Minorities at Risk data, which do not enable us to examine the behavior of irredentist *states* since these data focus on minority groups and their desire to be redeemed (Birnie et al. 2014; Gurr 2000; Saideman and Ayres 2000); they are designed to analyze the *demand* for irredentism from the coethnic enclave, but not the supply. While many groups may wish to be joined to their kin state, the affection is often not reciprocated (Horowitz 1985, 286). The opposite is also true—as the recent annexation of Crimea illustrates, a state may annex territory against the will of many inhabitants, such as Crimean Tatars (Korostelina 2004; Shevel 2014). According to our definition, Crimea counts as a positive case of irredentism. Because irredentism is a form of ethno-territorial conflict between two states when “one state is attempting to annex parts of the other” (Ambrosio 2001, 7), there are potential benefits to recalibrating the literature toward the supply side by studying the behavior of the irredentist state.

Although we acknowledge a continuum of irredentist activity, from “softer” claim making about territory and discriminated kin up to military action, this article’s objective is limited to explaining the use of military force to annex coethnic territory. To examine irredentist state behavior—while accounting for the enclave and its host state—we adopt a research design that involves three units: an irredentist state, its coethnic enclave, and a contiguous host state. This triadic structure has been highlighted in a number of important studies (Brubaker 1993; Carment and James 1995; Cederman, Girardin, and Gleditsch 2009; Cederman et al. 2013; Horowitz 1985; Jenne 2004, 2007; Moore and Davis 1998; Suhrke and Noble 1977). We adopt it here explicitly in order to test propositions on irredentism cast at different levels.

The literature suggests various hypotheses to explain irredentism, many pointing in opposite directions, and there is little evidence that any have superior explanatory power. We test these rival arguments and submit our own hypotheses on irredentism, emphasizing the importance of the kin group’s relative economic standing and political incentive structure in the irredentist state. An important benefit of the analysis is to systematically assess rival arguments against each other for the first time, using a new

disaggregated data set that covers all actual *and* potential irredentist actions between states around the world from 1946 to 2014.

The results indicate that irredentism is more likely when the kin group is near economic parity with other groups in the irredentist state. The mismatch between the kin group’s prominent demographic position, on the one hand, and its middling economic status, on the other, creates status inconsistency that fosters group grievances (Lange 2011; Laumann and Segal 1971; Lenski 1954). This can lead to a desire to change the status quo and establish dominance over other groups (Goffman 1957). Where this grievance is accompanied by “winner-take-all” majoritarian electoral systems, we suggest the domestic conditions are primed for political elites to pursue irredentism as a diversion from status inconsistency through the primordial satisfaction of ethnic unification. Equally important, we find little or no support for some commonly advanced causes of irredentism, such as ethnic discrimination and ethnic homogeneity in the coethnic enclave, economies of scale, relative power, or wealth at the state level.

The Calculus of Irredentism Ethno-Demographics and Ethnic Discrimination

The seminal studies of irredentism focused on ethno-demographic arguments (Horowitz 1985, 281–88; Weiner 1971) and lead us to expect that when a state, composed mainly (but not exclusively) of Group A members, considers irredentism, members of the majority group (A) and the minority group (B) evaluate how the balance of power among ethnic groups would be transformed in a larger unit (Lake and Rothschild 1998, 15–16). If the new state would shift the balance significantly in favor of Group A, members of Group B are likely to demur, if they can, and vice versa. Accordingly, irredentism has been called the “prerogative of homogeneous states” (Carment and James 1997; Horowitz 1985, 282).⁴

The literature also draws attention to the demography of the coethnic enclave (Davis and Moore 1997; Horowitz 1985, 285; Moore and Davis 1998). As the ethnic heterogeneity of the enclave increases, the demand to be retrieved should decrease since only *part* of the enclave is inclined to join the new state. Similarly, the supply

³An exception is Saideman and Ayres (2008).

⁴However, irredentism may be more likely when a dominant group has a *narrow* numerical margin over another group (Cederman et al. 2013).

should decrease since only part of the enclave is an ethnically attractive target.⁵ Relatedly, it is widely believed that there is more demand for kin state irredentism when co-ethnics suffer discrimination and nationalist politicians can exploit it (Davis, Jagers, and Moore 1997; Horowitz 1985, 291; Moore and Davis 1998, 93–94). However, other studies suggest that discrimination does not matter much (Saideman and Ayres 2008). To assess these arguments, we propose the first hypotheses:

- H1a:* Ethnically homogeneous states are more likely to pursue irredentism than ethnically heterogeneous states.
- H1b:* Ethnically homogeneous enclaves are more likely targets of irredentism than ethnically heterogeneous enclaves.
- H1c:* Irredentist states are more likely to pursue enclaves where coethnics experience more ethnic discrimination.

Economic Value and Economies of Scale

Other scholars hold that states pursue irredentism primarily for material gain, like mergers and acquisitions in business (Alesina and Spolaore 2003, 71–72; Alesina, Spolaore, and Wacziarg 2000; Bolton et al. 1996; Wittman 1991, 126–27). A core mechanism involves the economies of scale that come with enlarged states—larger states pay less per capita for public goods, such as defense, and also possess larger markets (Wittman 1991, 128). They can also shift risk across regions to provide stability by redistributing resources from wealthier to poorer provinces when some region faces economic shock or natural disaster (Alesina and Spolaore 2003, 72–73).

If the economies of scale were unlimited, some scholars have suggested that we might have a world state (Wendt 2003), but larger countries must accommodate and aggregate a wider divergence in citizens' preferences for public goods and services.⁶ Holding heterogeneity constant, incorporating poorer enclaves is more costly than adding richer territories, implying a simple economic trade-off associated with expanding the state's size. All else equal, irredentist states seeking greater economies of scale should prefer to annex richer

enclaves.⁷ However, if territory is more valuable to the irredentist state, it may be more valuable to the host state as well, which will fight harder to retain it. It is unclear whether a costlier contest offsets the added value to the irredentist state. To evaluate this reasoning, we propose the following:

- H2:* Irredentism is more likely when the host state is wealthier (per capita) than the irredentist state.

Regime Type

A third approach focuses on regime types. Democratic regimes are arguably more responsive to diverse preferences than autocratic regimes, since democratic rulers tend to have a bigger winning coalition (and “selectorate”) and thus must provide more citizens with more public goods and services to stay in power (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Carment, James, and Taydas 2006). However, for different reasons, both consolidated democracies and autocracies may be less likely to engage in irredentism than anocratic regimes, which are more prone in general to intrastate and interstate violence (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Mansfield and Snyder 2002a, 2002b; Muchlinski 2014; Regan and Bell 2009; Reynol-Querol 2002a, 2000b; cf. Vreeland 2008).

Institutional instability and underdeveloped institutions of accountability and deliberation provide incentives for elites in anocratic regimes to mobilize the masses using ethno-nationalist appeals (Gurr 2000; Hegre et al. 2001; Huntington 1968; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Snyder 2000).⁸ There are at least two reasons why anocratic states may also be more likely targets. The first is that they are more likely to be characterized by “strong centers and weak peripheries,” unconsolidated power, and the coexistence of local warlords (Driscoll 2015; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Marten 2012). Peripheral regions in anocratic states are thus easier targets. Second, since regime types cluster in space, host states most proximate to anocratic, irredentist states are likely to be anocratic regimes themselves. This suggests the following:

- H3:* Irredentism is more likely when both the kin and host states are anocratic.

⁵Irredentist states may also decide against reclaiming an ethnically homogeneous enclave because peripheral coethnics are seen as “different.” Saideman and Ayres (2008: 2, 13, 245) discuss this in terms of the silver lining of xenophobia.

⁶Alesina, Barro, and Tenreyro et al. (2003, 305) examined how smaller states optimize the balance between diverse preferences and public goods through common currency areas.

⁷This may also work in reverse—demand for (re)unification with the kin state is greater when the kin state is richer than the host state, but the kin state may not desire a poorer enclave.

⁸Goldstone et al. (2010) found that anocracy was the strongest predictor of civil conflict.

Political and Economic Competition

Finally, we propose two of our own hypotheses on irredentism that build upon insights from previous studies. First, we suggest that ethnicity figures into the calculus of irredentism in ways related to economic competition. Where the dominant ethnic group in the potential irredentist state is near economic parity with other groups in the irredentist state, we hypothesize that the likelihood of irredentism is much higher than when the kin group is much richer (and, to a lesser extent, when it is much poorer) vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the irredentist state. The reason is that when the kin group is near economic parity with other ethnic groups in the irredentist state, but is demographically dominant, there arises a status inconsistency between its middling economic rank and its numerical power, which engenders group grievances.

Irredentism offers a means of diverting attention away from the state's inability to elevate the kin group's economic status by delivering an irredentist, nationalist victory to the kin group while signaling political dominance to the other ethnic groups. Although poorer kin groups in the irredentist state are also likely to harbor grievances, just like groups at economic parity, the very poor are generally more constrained in their collective action capacity to influence governmental policy (Krishna 2006, 439). By contrast, when the kin group is much richer, it already enjoys a privileged position relative to other groups in society, and ethno-economic grievance and threat arguments are less likely to persuade (Olzak 1992; Quillian 1995).

It follows from this discussion that economic parity between the kin group and other groups in the irredentist state will increase the probability of irredentism, with departures toward more wealth having a stronger impact on reducing irredentism. To assess this conjecture, we hypothesize the following:

H4a: Irredentism is more likely when the kin group in the irredentist state is near economic parity with other ethnic groups.

Our second hypothesis emphasizes political incentives to engage in ethnic outbidding. It suggests that when a kin group has a significant numerical margin over the next largest group in the irredentist state, and the electoral system provides "winner-take-all" incentives for politicians to appeal to only their own ethnic group, political competition is more likely to assume a nationalist hue. There is little political inducement to engage in moderate politics if smaller groups are not needed to win districts. This can pit politicians against each other to

become the "real" representatives of the group by offering protection from out-groups in a dynamic of ethnic outbidding. Although Rabushka and Shepsle (1972, 66–88) and Horowitz (1985, 358–59) advanced a logic of ethnic outbidding to explain why some multiethnic democracies are unstable (cf. Chandra 2005), it may apply with equal force to irredentism, since one common way for politicians to emphasize their nationalist credentials is by protecting ethnic kin in neighboring states.

When one group controls the political organs of the state through its numerical advantage in a winner-take-all system, politicians can frame domestic political competition as an ethnic census on supporting the subjugated co-ethnic enclave. Kin groups that possess sufficient numbers can win by appealing only to their own group's interests in majoritarian systems. At the same time, they can ignore the out-group's opposition to irredentism and generally have fewer constraints on foreign policy decision making (Saideman 2007). Foreign wars can provoke a "rally around the flag" effect that inoculates leaders from the effects of domestic opposition and problems (De Figueiredo and Weingast 1999; Saideman 1998).

In addition to any material benefits, irredentism arguably provides members of the kin group the primordial satisfaction of making the national unit and the political unit more congruent. This fulfills one of the primary objectives of nationalism and thereby enhances the political legitimacy of the group's leaders (Gellner 1983, 1; Hechter 2000). It follows that:

H4b: Irredentism is more likely as the relative size of the kin group increases under majoritarian electoral systems.

In sum, this reasoning suggests that irredentism is most likely when there is a large kin group suffering status inconsistency as a result of the disparity between its numerical dominance and its middling economic status (Lenski 1954). Such inconsistency engenders grievances in the kin group and motives for political elites to search for outside options. In majoritarian systems, demographic majorities have no need to project moderation, since other ethnic groups are not needed to win district seats. When status inconsistency is accompanied by winner-take-all incentives, opportunity and grievance collide to fashion the perfect storm for irredentism.

Data and Methods

To examine these hypotheses, we created a new data set that aims to cover the entire universe of *potential* and actual irredentist cases over nearly the last 70 years

(1946–2014) in all countries with a population over 500,000. The data set expands on previous data collection efforts.⁹ The unit of analysis is the triad, consisting of the irredentist kin state, the coethnic enclave, and the host state. Every state whose largest ethnic group in power possesses a coethnic enclave in a contiguous country is considered a *potential* case of irredentism and constitutes a row in the data for each year in which it is a potential case. In this way, we remedy the selection issues that have arisen in other studies of irredentism. Coethnicity or kinship is defined here as an ethnic linkage between the largest ethnic group in power in the kin state (hereafter, “kin group”) and its coethnic enclave in the host state.¹⁰ Since multiple countries often surround any given state, we code each triad separately as a potential case of irredentism annually. The data are thus structured as a time-series cross-section.¹¹

We systematically identified potential positive cases of irredentism for each triad-year, beginning with data from militarized interstate disputes (MIDs; Kenwick et al. 2013; Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004; Palmer et al. 2015). First, we isolated those MIDs that were pertinent to our own triad-years and coded as involving the use of force.¹² Because of potential limitations in the MID data (Gibler, Miller, and Little 2015), and our interest in identifying only cases that met our definition of irredentism (which was not the focus of the MID data project), we eliminated all cases where an irredentist state did not forcibly attempt to annex territory to reclaim ethnic kin, using secondary sources and area experts.¹³ Se-

cession (where an enclave separates from an existing state with the help of a kin state, but is not claimed by the kin state) counts as a negative case.¹⁴ Similarly, when a potential irredentist state makes territorial claims not backed by the use of force, it is also coded as a negative case.¹⁵

Some countries are not included in our data set because they lack opportunities for irredentism, due to the absence of coethnics in neighboring states. It would be misleading to include them since they are not relevant to testing any theory of irredentism.¹⁶ Ethnicity is a defining feature of irredentism—indeed, “non-ethnic irredentism” is a contradiction in terms (Horowitz 1991, 11; Neuberger 1991, 103). Of the remaining countries to which the theories should apply, there are 118 unique enclaves, 54 unique irredentist states, and 61 unique host states. Measured on an annual basis dating back to 1946, the final data set used in the main model affords 3,057 observations, each representing one triad-year.

To assess the idea that ethnically homogeneous kin states are more likely to pursue irredentism than ethnically heterogeneous states (Hypothesis 1a), we took the size of the largest ethnic group in power in the irredentist state (“the kin group”) as well as “the margin,” or the difference between the largest and the second largest ethnic group, from Fearon (2003).¹⁷ Turning to the enclave (Hypothesis 1b), we measure whether the particular coethnic group is geographically dispersed or spatially concentrated using data from Weidmann (2009) and Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch. (2011). To assess the prediction that irredentist states are more likely to target enclaves where ethnic kin experience more ethnic discrimination, we measure discrimination at the group level in the host state (Hypothesis 1c) using data from Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011).

Turning to Hypothesis 2 and economic theories of irredentism, we included country-level GDP per capita to assess the effect of differences in wealth between the irredentist state and the host state using data from Gleditsch (2002).

Mueller, Harris Mylonas, Branislav Nesovic, Jean-François Ratelle, Arturas Rozenas, Anoop Sadanandan and Dejan Susak.

⁹See the “Data Sets Utilized” section in the supporting information for bibliographic information on every data set and variable used to construct our own data.

¹⁰All enclaves are contiguous with the kin state, except islands within 950 km, following Gleditsch and Ward (2001). Following the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) coding, we exclude kin groups that EPR codes as “powerless” or “excluded” since these groups have no access to the use of military force required for our definition of irredentism.

¹¹For additional detail on the construction of our data set, see the “Construction of the Data Set” section of the supporting information.

¹²For further information on the variable from MID used to code force, as well as for more specific information on all variables, see the “Data Sets Utilized” section of the supporting information.

¹³A spreadsheet listing the qualitative source material (encyclopedias, country studies, reports, articles and books) used to either include or eliminate MIDs as positive instances of irredentism is available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/X88LYH>. We would also like thank, without implying any responsibility for the final coding, several experts who kindly offered their time to discuss particular cases with us: Noah Briggs, Laurence Broers, Valery Dzutsati, Petra Guasti, Milli Lake, Ceyhan Mahmudlu, Devorah Manekin, Sean

¹⁴For this reason, we do not use the Minorities at Risk (MAR) irredentism indicator.

¹⁵If inaction leads to talk, and then action, we code it as positive in the year action begins. Table 1 in the supporting information lists all triads.

¹⁶We are interested in country pairs Woodwell (2004; 2007, 2) characterizes as containing irredentist-type (minority-majority) demographics.

¹⁷We present results for margin in the main text. Results for the group’s proportion are similar and presented in Table 11, Model 1, in the supporting information.

We created an annual ratio of the host state's GDP per capita over the GDP per capita of the potential irredentist state. To test Hypothesis 3, we collected monadic measures of democracy, autocracy, and anocracy, and then created dyadic indicators, following the trichotomous coding scheme in Epstein et al. (2006, 555), and using data from Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011) and Polity IV (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2014). The four categories are (1) both the irredentist and host states are anocratic (Anocratic/Anocratic); (2) the host is anocratic and the irredentist state is not anocratic (Anocratic/Non-Anocratic); (3) the host state is not anocratic and the irredentist state is anocratic (Non-Anocratic/Anocratic); and (4) both states are not anocratic (Non-Anocratic/Non-Anocratic). The Non-Anocratic/Non-Anocratic category serves as the baseline.

To examine whether irredentism is more likely when there is a status inconsistency between the kin group's demographic dominance and its economic standing relative to other groups in the country (Hypothesis 4a), we use a geocoded measure of asymmetric economic inequality between ethnic groups (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011). The geocoded data measure the degree to which a particular ethnic group's GDP per capita differs from the mean GDP per capita of the other groups in the country. There are two variables—*high* for groups above the mean and *low* for groups below the mean. If a group is twice as wealthy as the country average, the *high* variable has a value of 2, whereas the *low* variable is given a value of 0. If a group is three times poorer than the average, the *high* variable is given a value of 0, and the *low* variable has a value of 3 (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011, 486; Nordhaus et al. 2006).

To assess the argument about political incentives to engage in ethnic outbidding (Hypothesis 4b), we model the interaction between two variables: (1) the ethnic margin (relative group size) and (2) the presence or absence of a majoritarian electoral system. To construct a measure of a country's electoral system, we relied on data collected by Bormann and Golder (2013). The interaction effect between the presence of a majoritarian electoral system and the ethnic margin captures the political situation theorized to be most amenable to ethnic outbidding within the kin group and signaling dominance to the out-groups through irredentism.

Since the decision to go to war also depends on military capabilities, we control for power disparity by using the Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) developed by the Correlates of War in all of our models (Singer 1987; Singer et al. 1972).

To correct for a skewed non-normal distribution, we used the natural log of the ratio of the host state's CINC

score divided by the irredentist state's CINC score. We also control for population size of both the host and irredentist state using the National Material Capabilities (v. 4.0) data set. Finally, we control for whether both the potential irredentist and host states were part of the Soviet Union.¹⁸

There are three main modeling considerations. First, since irredentism is relatively rare across time and space, we estimated rare events logistic regression models (Firth 1993; King and Zeng 2001). Second, because observations about different enclaves are clustered around single kin states, we used robust standard errors clustered on each triad: kin state, host state, enclave (Huber 1967; White 1980). Third, in order to correct for temporal dependence, we used a cubic polynomial (t , t^2 , and t^3) transformation of the number of peace years in each triad since the previous irredentist conflict (Carter and Signorino 2010).¹⁹

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the results of our analyses. We begin with the positive findings. The results are consistent with the economic competition hypothesis (Hypothesis 4a), which suggests that the likelihood of irredentism is significantly increased when the kin group is near economic parity with other ethnic groups in the irredentist state.²⁰ When the group is closer to the mean level of wealth, irredentism represents a distraction from an unfavorable economic situation and status inconsistency by providing the kin group with the primordial satisfaction of making the national unit and the political unit congruent, which bestows ethnic leaders with political legitimacy within the kin group and signals ethnic dominance to the out-groups.

The analysis also lends support to Hypothesis 4b—we find a positive and statistically significant sign on the interaction between the “ethnic margin” and the presence of a majoritarian system in the irredentist state. Under this electoral system, kin groups possessing sufficient numbers (relative to the next largest group) can win by appealing only to their own group's interests and can ignore the second largest group politically. Consistent with this, we find that the probability of irredentism

¹⁸These are defined as Union Republics (SSRs) in 1991.

¹⁹The lack of variation on the dependent variable across time within many triads precludes fixed effects.

²⁰In some specifications, *Asymmetric Inequality Low* does not achieve significance at the 5% level, consistent with the expectation of a stronger effect for economic parity vis-à-vis wealthy groups. See page 4.

TABLE 1 Rare Events Logistic Regression Model

| Variables | Model 1 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Irredentist State: Margin of Largest Group over Second</i> | −0.48 (0.68) |
| <i>Majoritarian Electoral System</i> | −4.13* (1.39) |
| <i>Margin × Majoritarian</i> | 7.09* (2.13) |
| <i>Enclave in Host State: Ethnic Dispersion</i> | −0.22 (1.38) |
| Asymmetric Inequality High | −3.17* (0.88) |
| Asymmetric Inequality Low | −2.23* (0.90) |
| Enclave Discriminated | −0.92 (0.66) |
| Country Wealth Ratio | −0.20 (0.33) |
| Anocratic/Anocratic | 2.16* (0.61) |
| Anocratic/Not Anocratic | 0.90 (0.49) |
| Not Anocratic/Anocratic | 0.24 (0.30) |
| Population (Host) | 0.00 (0.00) |
| Population (Irredentist) | 0.00* (0.00) |
| Power Disparity | −0.09 (0.12) |
| Includes Former Soviet (Irr.) | Yes |
| Includes Former Soviet (H) | Yes |
| t, t ² , t ³ Included? | Yes |
| Constant | 2.52* (1.25) |
| Observations | 3,057 |
| BIC | 531.97 |
| AIC | 411.46 |
| Log likelihood | −185.73 |

Note: The dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator of irredentist conflict.

Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses below coefficients.

*p < .05.

significantly increases as the kin group's relative size grows under majoritarian systems.²¹

²¹We present a graph of the predicted probabilities and discussion (pages 28–29 in the supporting information) to visualize the interpretation of the interaction effect. We save the interpretation of the

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, regime type is important. The results suggest that anocratic dyads are much more likely to experience irredentism than non-anocratic dyads. As Mansfield and Snyder (2002a) argue, transitions from autocracies to democracies are particularly perilous because elites have strong incentives to drum up mass support by making nationalist appeals rather than painful reforms or delivering on economic promises that may alienate some of the selectorate.

Contrary to some popular accounts of irredentism (and Putin's justification for annexing Crimea in 2014, and for seizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008), our analysis indicates that neither the ethnic structure (Hypothesis 1b, ethnic dispersion) nor the ethnic discrimination (Hypothesis 1c, ethnic discrimination) of the coethnic enclave matters much for explaining irredentism. This finding is consistent with arguments that irredentism is mostly exercised when domestic political dynamics make such efforts appealing, rather than when coethnics are discriminated against (Saideman and Ayres 2008) or geographically concentrated. We also find little empirical support for the argument that irredentism is driven by a desire for greater economies of scale at the country level (Hypothesis 2, country wealth ratio)—relative wealth between the initiator and the target is not systematically related to irredentism.

In sum, irredentism is more likely when the kin group suffers from status inconsistency between its middling economic position and its demographic importance in the irredentist state, and when the political environment encourages politicians to compete on nationalism by appealing only to their own group. These two results (Hypotheses 4a and 4b) underscore the domestic roots of irredentism. At the dyadic level, the analysis also indicates that irredentism is more likely when the irredentist state and host states are anocratic, consistent with the literature on democratization and conflict. The results are less encouraging for explanations that treat irredentism as an economic merger or that focus on discrimination against coethnics, ethnic heterogeneity in the enclave, or relative power between states as motives for irredentism.

We examine the robustness of these results through a variety of checks in the supporting information, which also provides summary statistics (Appendix Table 2) and reports on colinearity (Appendix Table 3). We examined the potential interaction between the size of the largest group in the irredentist state and the heterogeneity of

constitutive terms of the interaction (margin and majoritarian) for the supporting information. Appendix Table 7B (Model 6) in the supporting information assesses the effect of ethnic margin without the interaction term (Hypothesis 1a) and shows that it is not statistically significant on its own.

the targeted enclave, but we did not detect any effect (Appendix Table 4). We also assessed the robustness of our results with an alternative conceptualization of majoritarianism, as described in fuller detail in Appendix Table 5. We further considered the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between the size of the largest ethnic group in the irredentist state and the probability of irredentism (Appendix Table 6). In addition, we examined our results with different measures of ethnicity for both the host and irredentist states (Appendix Table 7). The interaction effect we present between ethnic margin and majoritarian systems holds under all these checks.

Since we use each year of irredentist conflict as a positive instance of irredentism, there is the possibility that many repeated conflicts might unduly influence the results. To address this, we systematically excluded each triad that had experienced at least one irredentist event (Appendix Table 8B in the supporting information). This did not alter our main conclusions. We added regional controls as an additional check on potential omitted variables in Appendix Table 9, which did not alter the results. In Appendix Table 10, we replace our capabilities measure with expected utility measures (Bennett and Stam 2000b; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992), but we did not find any noteworthy differences.

In Appendix Table 11, we provide additional robustness checks on ethnic homogeneity, relative wealth of the coethnic enclaves, and monadic rather than dyadic regime type. Table 11 excludes islands, removes the control variables indicating whether the irredentist or host states were part of the Soviet Union, and examines only cases where the dominant ethnic group in the irredentist state comprises at least 50% of the population. Finally, to illustrate the substantive impact of the key independent variables, we calculated their effects on the predicted probability of irredentism (Appendix Figures 1–3).

Just as it is difficult to generalize from specific cases, the reverse is also true. We should exercise caution in applying our results to a specific case, but it is worth asking what light our analysis might shed on Russia's decision to annex Crimea in 2014 when Yeltsin had deliberately decided not to do so 20 years earlier. The first observation is the trend in regime types. The Polity IV scores for Ukraine show that Ukraine has had an anocratic regime type for years (Beissinger 2013). As observers have noted, Russia has become more anocratic over time as well, and this transition toward anocracy in both states is consistent with the aggregate results that associate an increased risk of irredentism among anocratic dyads. Second, although Russians dominate politically and are the largest ethnic group in power by a large margin, they are in fact near economic parity with other ethnic groups, which is consistent

with the aggregate results.²² On the one hand, Russians are the largest ethnic group in Russia, and its leaders have appealed to internal threats faced by ethnic Russians, especially from Central Asians and Caucasians. However, it has also moved away from a majoritarian system over time, which seems to go against the aggregate results. In 2001, however, Moscow outlawed regional parties²³ and a few years later abolished the direct election of regional governors in favor of a system of direct presidential appointment, decreasing the political influence of regionally concentrated ethnic minorities, and allowing the Kremlin to appeal more directly to Russian nationalism.²⁴

The null results are also worth examining in light of this case. The fact that Crimea is ethnically heterogeneous and that Russians are not spatially concentrated did not dissuade Russia from pursuing irredentism, consistent with what we find in the analysis. Russians in Kazakhstan and the Baltics suffer from more discrimination. The fact that this played no role—except rhetorically—is consistent with our global analysis. Other aggregate negative findings do not comport with the Russian case, however. For instance, Ukraine is much poorer in terms of GDP per capita and weaker militarily than Russia, whereas our aggregate results are ambivalent about the effect of relative wealth and military power.

Conclusion

The “mismatch between cultural and political boundaries” is pervasive, affording ample opportunities for border changes, but the international community does not condone irredentism. To mitigate international censure, kin states often legitimate their actions against neighbors by alluding to humanitarian intervention and by claiming to protect discriminated ethnic kin. Hitler's irredentist action toward the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia was justified in terms of protecting coethnic Sudeten Germans. Armenia's intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, Serbia's invasion of Croatia, and Russia's annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Crimea were characterized by similar rationalizations, which blend

²²Russians were 1.22 (just above the mean) but have dipped down to 1.06 since the early 1990s, putting them at parity with other groups.

²³Federal Law N-95, passed in June 2001, outlawed regional parties.

²⁴Federal Law N-159, was passed in December 2004 (see <http://base.consultant.ru>). In 2012, elections were reintroduced under popular pressure, but North Caucasian republics were excluded. See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2013).

realpolitik with humanitarian and *jus bellum iustum* reasoning (Siroky 2016).

The literature provides a variety of explanations for irredentism, but these theories have not been assessed against each other in a comprehensive, comparative manner. This article approaches the problem of irredentism within a comparative theory-testing framework. It investigates three main schools of thought—(1) ethno-demographic, (2) economies of scale, and (3) regime types—and then proposes and tests its own explanation based on intergroup economic competition and ethnic outbidding in the kin state. Using a new disaggregated data set that covers all actual *and* potential irredentist actions between states around the world from 1946 to 2014, the analysis indicates that economic competition and political incentives within the irredentist state are fundamental. Specifically, irredentism is more likely when there is a status inconsistency between the demographic dominance of the kin ethnic group and its relative economic standing in the irredentist state, since this fosters grievances within the dominant ethnic group. These grievances are more likely to find an outlet (and are less likely to be countered by other groups) under majoritarian systems in more ethnically homogeneous irredentist states. This creates an opportunity for the kin group to pursue an explicitly irredentist foreign policy agenda—to unite the “unredeemed” part of the nation in one state. Where these grievances and opportunities intersect, irredentism is most likely as political elites, responding to their electoral incentives under majoritarianism, seek to divert attention away from status inconsistency through the promise of ethnic unification. At the dyadic level, the analysis suggests that anocratic regimes are more prone to be the initiators and the targets of irredentism, compared to consolidated democracies and autocracies.

At the same time, the analysis provides little support for the importance of ethnic discrimination, ethnic homogeneity of the enclave, or economies of scale. While “protecting discriminated ethnic brethren” may help mobilize citizens to rally around the flag and justify actions, the effect is not significant. Similarly, poorer states may have stronger economic incentives to annex richer territory, but these considerations are not dispositive. Power does not deter as much as might be presumed. Although this study shows that irredentist foreign policy behavior is most likely when economic and political interests are at play in the kin state, the rhetoric of discriminated ethnic kin and the humanitarian intervention remain the dominant discourse to discuss irredentism.

This article has several implications for research and policy. The analysis suggests that a productive path forward involves further study of the domestic economic and

political dynamics that shape incentives for leaders to pursue irredentism. Second, kin states can support coethnics without direct military intervention and can impose costs on the host state in other ways. Future research should explore the conditions under which each of these options is chosen. Third, although we find that discrimination of ethnic kin in the host state does not increase the likelihood of irredentism, future research should examine how irredentist states respond to sudden (negative) changes in group status in the enclave (Siroky and Cuffe 2015).

Moreover, in order to develop better theory, there is a need for more conversation between quantitative studies and case studies of irredentism. These quantitative results, which hopefully start this conversation, also point to some policy implications. While ethnicity is sometimes viewed as a problem in itself, our results suggest that the effect of ethnicity on irredentism depends on how it maps onto economic competition and the electoral system, which affords institutional designers with some choices to influence the likelihood of irredentism. Similarly, the fact that economic competition between the kin group and other groups in the irredentist state positively predicts irredentism indicates that policy makers would do well to address the domestic sources of irredentism in the initiating state, and not only the conditions of the coethnic enclave in the target state. Finally, given the results indicating that anocratic dyads are most prone to irredentism, promoting democratization—especially when transitions remain incomplete and do not lead to consolidated democracies—may have the unintended consequence of increasing the incidence of irredentism.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

- Appendix Table 1:** List of Actual and Potential Irredentism Cases
- Appendix Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics
- Appendix Table 3:** Correlation Matrix
- Appendix Table 4:** Irredentist Ethnic Margin/Host Ethnic Dispersion Interaction
- Appendix Table 5:** Electoral System Check
- Appendix Table 6:** Ethnic Quadratic Relationship – Margin and Proportion
- Appendix Table 7:** Alternative Ethnicity Variables
- Appendix Tables 8A-8B:** Systematically Excluded Triads
- Appendix Table 9:** Regional Controls
- Appendix Table 10:** Expected Utility Model Control
- Appendix Table 11:** Additional Robustness Checks
- Appendix Figure 1:** Margin/Majoritarian Interaction
- Appendix Figure 2a:** Asymmetric Inequality High
- Appendix Figure 2b:** Asymmetric Inequality Low
- Appendix Figure 3:** Predicted Probability of Irredentism by Anocratic Dyads