



How Motherlands — Homes to Transnational Ethnic Groups — Can Sabotage the Democratization of Neighboring Countries

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Over the last several decades, the United States has spent billions of dollars and sacrificed thousands of American lives in efforts to promote democracy from Eastern Europe to Afghanistan, where each new election is cheered by Democrats and Republicans alike. Yet these same U.S. leaders are slow to recognize and deter threats to America's democracy promotion efforts. Since 1989, U.S. democracy promotion programs have had a range of outcomes. For every tentative success such as the Czech Republic, there have been even more cases of authoritarian regimes like Iraq that have managed to entrench themselves via the ballot box.

Why do some efforts to support democracy abroad fail when others succeed? Many analysts argue that democracy promotion fails for structural reasons – such as the absence of qualified agents or foreign allies able to implement necessary changes. My research, however, suggests there is another important reason why promotion of democracy may falter: namely, sabotage by an ethno-nationalist *motherland*. A motherland is the national homeland of a transnational ethnic group whose members reside in areas divided by an international border. Russia, for example, is the motherland of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Scholars frequently overlook the actions taken by motherlands in neighboring countries with co-ethnic residents, but those actions can have a major impact on the success or failure of transitions to democracy in the neighbor countries.

Motherlands Threatened By Democracy

Since the end of the Cold War, efforts to promote democracy have been one of the pillars of U.S. foreign policy. However, successes have been sparse, and many shortfalls can be traced to the unwillingness of U.S. authorities to accept that motherlands often try to sabotage democracy to expand their own territory or influence. U.S. democracy promoters are often reluctant to recognize the built-in reluctance of motherlands to accept democratization for bordering ethnic kin. Instead, U.S. authorities often treat the motherlands as major stakeholders in the democratization processes and may even grant them veto rights over key steps. Such naiveté can be costly. Where democracy promotion has worked, the United States has reaped significant economic and political benefits. However, in regions where motherlands have sabotaged democracy promotion, affected areas have spun into political instability, state failure, civil war, mass refugee migration, and terrorism. All of these outcomes are, of course, threats to U.S. security.

With these considerations in mind, my research can be informative for U.S. policymakers facing an assertive Russia, a rising Iran, and a stubborn Serbia. All three of those ethnic motherland countries aim to thwart U.S. democratization efforts – aimed, respectively, at the Ukraine, Iraq, and Kosovo.

How prevalent are possibilities for motherland resistance to democratization? Research shows that countries have lower average democratization scores when they have a border that splits an ethnic or religious group. Of the 195 sovereign countries in the world, 160 countries (roughly 82%) have at least two distinct ethnic groups among their populations. In turn, among all the countries with at least two ethnically distinct blocs of citizens, 87 (or nearly half) sit beside the motherland of one of their internal ethnic groups. Seventy-two countries can themselves be classified as motherlands (with some of these states laying claim to territories in more than one neighboring country).

The Importance of Motherland Motivations and Opportunities

A motherland can aim to aid or spoil the democratization of a co-ethnic neighbor country depending on whether it recognizes political borders and has the capacity to bring about border changes through armed force.

My research findings show that the predicted probability of a country becoming a democracy is only 13% when a motherland is motivated to expand its political borders and has the capacity to do so. Analogously, a state has a 25% predicted probability of becoming a democracy if a motherland has demonstrated no territorial ambitions and cooperates with the neighbor state. Usually, this benign situation happens when the motherland is itself a democracy and the border separating kindred ethnic groups was set in place long in the past. In contrast, higher levels of disruptive motivation are typical for undemocratic motherlands that are homes to ethnic groups very recently split from their cross-border kin.

A motherland with high levels of motivation but low opportunity for territorial aggrandizement may support an armed rebellion to carve out a territory where its kin can govern autonomously. In exchange for peace, the motherland then coaxes the international community and the target state to allow it to exercise some degree of sovereignty over its neighbor kin. Serbia, for example, deployed this strategy in Bosnia, and in the process frustrated democracy there.

When both motivation and opportunities for territorial expansion are high, motherland often use military intervention and occupation to seize areas held by their kin – as, for example, Russia did in its recent annexation of the Crimean region of Ukraine. In such scenarios, U.S. sponsored democratization is unlikely; and a threatened target state may even resort to non-democratic measures to counter separatism encouraged by the hostile motherland.

How the United States Can Respond to Democratization Challenges

The United States has a spectrum of options for dealing with motherlands that seek to spoil its democratization efforts abroad. Where a motherland is a great power like Russia, there may be no good military option or workable sanctions. But in most instances, U.S. officials can use arms sales or military interventions to prevent ethnic cleansing and block territorial concessions; and they can facilitate constructive motherland behaviors and peace processes that encourage cross-ethnic cooperation. As Western liberalism finds itself increasingly challenged by authoritarian models, the United States cannot afford to forsake democracy promotion – even in regions with transnational ethnic communities and aggressive motherlands that must be constrained.

Read more in Elis Vllasi, "Sabotage: When Motherlands Ruin Foreign Democratization Efforts," (working paper, 2019).