

## THE SECESSION OF CRIMEA FROM UKRAINE: AN INTERNATIONAL LAW PERSPECTIVE

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### *Abstract*

*The secession of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 was one of the most talked-about issues by the media, politicians, and decision-makers. The secession worsened relations between the West and Russia thereby, threatening international peace and security. This paper looks at the secession of Crimea from Ukraine from an international law perspective. The goal of the paper is to examine whether Crimea's secession from Ukraine was legal or illegal under international law. This paper argues that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is illegal under international law because Russia intervened in Crimea. On the one hand, the findings of this paper support my central thesis/argument. On the other hand, the findings of this study revealed that proponents of Crimea's secession from Ukraine like Russia argue that the secession of Crimea is legal under international law because of international laws on self-determination and because Crimea's secession from Ukraine is similar to Kosovo's secession from Serbia.*

**Keywords:** *Secession, International Law, Self-Determination, Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity.*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper examines whether the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal or illegal under international law. Secession is a concept that is commonly used today in our society. The concept is mainly used in politics and international law. Two inconsistent themes run throughout the academic discussions of secession, one supporting a right to secession and the other denying it (Lea, 1991:177). Secession occurs when people living in a particular country or state declare their independence from the ruling government (Bossacoma, 2020:3). In other

words, secessionists seek to cut political ties that bind them to their current state (Lea, 1991:187). Some of the most famous and significant secessions have been: the secession of Ireland from the UK, the secession of the former Soviet republics from the Soviet Union, the secession of Kosovo from Serbia, the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the secession of South Sudan from Sudan and the attempted secession of Biafra from Nigeria.

In recent years, one of the most talked-about secessions by the media, decision-makers, and political scientists is the secession of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. The secession of Crimea from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into the Russian Federation caused serious tension between the West and the East as many western states were against the secession. Before 2014, Crimea was officially part of Ukraine; however, Crimea had its own parliament and government with powers over agriculture, tourism, and public infrastructure (BBC, 2013). The majority of Crimea's population is made up of ethnic Russians, while Ukrainians and Crimean Tatar make up the minority population. The events that led to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 started in November 2013 when Viktor Yanukovich, who was president at the time and pro-Russian, decided to suspend the signing of the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement (BBC, 2013). He refused to sign this agreement with the EU because he was pro-Russian and because he came to power in 2010 with the support of ethnic Russian voters in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. He openly stated in the media that he was rejecting the EU agreement because "Ukraine could not afford to sacrifice trade with Russia who opposes the deal" (Ibid), proving his strong allegiance to Russia. The protest that started against President Viktor Yanukovich in late November 2013 intensified until early 2014 when he was ousted from power by pro-EU protesters in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital city.

The ousting of Ukraine's pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich angered Russian President Vladimir Putin and he decided to send Russian armed forces to take over control of Crimea from Ukraine (BBC, 2018). After taking control over Crimea from Ukraine, authorities in Crimea with the help of Russia hastily organized an independence referendum on March 16, 2014, for citizens of Crimea to decide if they wanted to become part of Russia. Because the majority population of Crimea was ethnic Russians, the territory voted overwhelmingly (97%) to become part of Russia (Ibid). Following the referendum, Crimea seceded from Ukraine and the peninsula was incorporated into Russia on March 18, 2014. The independence referendum, the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, and its subsequent incorporation into Russia angered

Ukraine and the West; Ukraine and many western states condemned the referendum and the secession as “illegal” under international law. On the other hand, the Crimean authorities and Russia claimed that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine was “legal” under international law (Christie, 2015). Because of this debate, it is therefore important to find out whether Crimea’s secession is lawful or unlawful under international law. Hence, the formulated research question of this study is:

- Was Crimea’s secession from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into Russia in 2014 legal under international law?

As can be seen from above, all parties to the conflict that led to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine (The West, Russia, Ukraine, and Crimean authorities) referred to international law to justify their positions. Thus, I decided to ask the research question above because I thought it would be interesting to know whether Crimea’s secession from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into Russia breached international law. Besides, the Ukraine crisis and the secession of Crimea is an interesting topic because it is one of the worst post- Cold War security crises that have worsened relations between Russia and the West, thereby threatening international peace and security. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section of the paper is the introduction which introduces the research question, problem/puzzle. Section two of this paper is the research objectives and the central thesis of this study. The third section is on the relevant international laws on key concepts, the method, and the scope of this study. Section four of this paper is the results and analysis of this study while the fifth and final section of this paper is the conclusion. The conclusion sums up the main elements of this paper and suggests areas for further inquiry on the research topic of this paper.

## **2. The Research Objectives and Thesis**

The main objective of this study is to investigate whether the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is legal or illegal under international law. The difference between this study and existing studies on the topic of this paper is that most studies that have been conducted on the 2014 crisis in Ukraine that led to the secession of Crimea focused on the “annexation” of Crimea by Russia and the reasons why Russia intervened in Crimea. However, only a limited number of studies have been conducted on the legality of Crimea’s secession from Ukraine under international law. Therefore, this study will add to the scanty body of literature on the legality of Crimea’s secession from Ukraine under

international law. Moreover, this study will shed more light on how international law can be applied to international phenomena like the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine.

I argue that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is illegal under international law because Russia intervened in Crimea. Russia's intervention in Crimea violates Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity according to international laws on sovereignty and territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter. An alternative argument is that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal under international law because of the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter which gives the people of Crimea the right to choose their own political destiny. However, my preferred approach provides a better insight because of the unlawful role that Russia played in the secession.

### **3. The Relevant International laws on Key Concepts**

#### **3.1. Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity**

The concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity are two important concepts in international law and international relations. The concept of sovereignty was conceived by the European Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Krasner, 1999; Deng, 2010). Stephen Krasner contends that sovereign states are the building blocks of the contemporary international system while Francis Deng maintained that sovereign states have the responsibility to protect their state from outside interference. According to Deng, sovereign states have absolute power to protect their citizens and make decisions for them in their territorial borders without outside interference (Deng, 2010). Following the Peace Treaty of Westphalia, sovereignty states became the primary political units in the international system. The United Nations Charter is the international norm that defines the scope and content of a sovereign jurisdiction. Elements of the UN charter that deals with sovereignty and territorial integrity are Article 2 (1), Article 2 (4), and Article 2 (7) (UNSC, 2021). Article 2 (1) of the UN Charter states that all sovereign states are equal, this means that all sovereign states should be viewed the same. Territoriality is a form of political differentiation based on fixed and mutually exclusive territorial spaces. Territoriality is central to sovereignty because possession of physical territory by a state provides both the domain for exercising supreme authority and for excluding other authorities. The principle of territorial integrity is an important part of international law. It is enshrined in Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter and has been recognized as customary law.

Article 2 (4) prohibits the threat or use of force against the “territorial integrity” or political independence of another state (UNSC, 2021). Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter also calls on all UN member states to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of other states while Article 2 (7) states that the UN has no authority to intervene in matters which are within the domestic jurisdiction of a sovereign state (Ibid). It is worth noting that it might be difficult to have a society of sovereign states unless each state while claiming sovereignty for its self recognized that every other state have the right to claim and enjoy its own sovereignty as well (Keohane, 1988:385). I used the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the UN Charter in my analysis to explain why Russia’s intervention in Crimea’s secession from Ukraine violates international law.

### **3.2. Self- Determination**

Self –determination is a concept of liberation, the concept increased in prominence after the end of World War 1 (Lea, 1991:180). However, the self-determination that emerged after World War 1 applied only to the defeated powers of World War 1 and only people of European descent had a right to full statehood (Ibid). It was only after the Second World War when the UN Charter came into effect that the self-determination principle was applied universally to include all people living under colonial domination. In contemporary international law, the principle of self-determination is enshrined in several international legal instruments such as the UN Charter, the International Covenants on Human Rights, and more (Thornberry, 1989:807).

The UN Charter talks about self-determination in article 1 (2), self-determination is also mentioned in articles 55, 56, 73, and 76 of the UN Charter (Thornberry, 1989: Lea 1991). The principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter guarantee to all “peoples” living under colonialism the right to independent statehood, change the criteria of membership by delegitimizing and delegating colonialism (UNPO, 2017). Under this notion of external self-determination (freedom from aggression and colonial domination), all colonial territories and peoples had an automatic and unqualified right to independent sovereign statehood (Avgustin, 2020). In other words, the right to self-determination is the right of a people to determine its own destiny. In particular, the principle allows a people to choose its own political status and to determine its own form of economic, cultural, and social development (UNPO, 2017). The exercise of this right can result in a variety of different outcomes ranging from political

independence through to full integration within a state. The principle of self-determination is a customary law. I used the relevant international laws on self-determination outlined above in my analysis to explain why the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is legal under international law.

#### **4. Method and Scope of Research**

This study was conducted using a qualitative and a non-positivist approach to research. I structured the presentation of my evidence in the results section first by presenting evidence that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 is illegal under international law, next, I present evidence of alternative explanations that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal under international law. This study was conducted using qualitative secondary data collected from publicly available documents. The documents were collected electronically from the internet. Although it would have been nice to conduct this study using other sources of data such as primary data from interviews, I decided to use publicly available documents because it is more time and cost-effective than gathering data from other sources such as surveys or in-depth interviews. I coded my data using Nvivo by identifying major themes used in the articles to explain whether the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal or not under international law. I analyze my data using discourse analysis (DA) because DA has been identified by numerous scholars as one of the best methods to study texts or documents, especially texts that deal with power relations, exploitation, and structural inequalities in domains like politics (Peräkylä, 2008:336). I used DA to look at how language was used in the texts to explain why the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal or illegal under international law. In other to limit the scope of this study, this study focused mainly on the legality of the secession of Crimea from Ukraine from an international law perspective. The study is not interested in other aspects of Crimea's secession, such as the reasons for secession or the legality of the secession under Ukraine's constitution.

#### **5. Results and Analysis**

This section of this paper presents the result and analysis to answer the research question: was Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into Russia in 2014 legal under international law? This section presents and discusses the results of the text analysis of the articles that I examine in this study. As aforementioned, I got the findings of this study by

using discourse analysis (DA) to look at how language was used in my data to explain the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine. My findings reveal that Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its subsequent incorporation into Russia in 2014 is illegal under international law because of Russia's unlawful intervention in Crimea, which violates Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity as enshrined in the UN Charter's principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This finding is in line with the central thesis/argument of this paper. On the other hand, my findings also revealed that there are alternative arguments that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal under international law because of the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter and because Crimea's secession from Ukraine is similar to Kosovo's secession from Serbia. The results will be presented and analyzed below under the following themes that emerged from my data: "Russia's intervention", "Self-determination", and "Crimea versus Kosovo"

## **5.1. Why the Secession is Illegal under International Law?**

### **Russia's Intervention**

As stated earlier, after coding my data with Nivivo "Russia's intervention" in Crimea is one of the central themes that emerge from my data to show that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 is illegal under international law (UN Charter). For example, one article by Van den Driest stated that "Russia's intervention in Crimea and its armed support of Crimea's secession violates international law" (2015:358). Another article stated that "Russia carried out an armed intervention into Crimea during its secession from Ukraine by taking control over key installations such as airports and encircling Ukraine units which violated international law" (BBC, 2014). These statements from the articles show that Russia indeed intervened militarily in Crimea's secession from Ukraine. This finding supports my central thesis/argument that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is illegal because of Russia's intervention in Crimea which violates international law. The question is how does Russia's intervention in Crimea violate international law?

Prior to the Ukraine crisis that led to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, Crimea was part of Ukraine, and Ukraine was recognized as a sovereign state by the UN all its member states including Russia. However, during the crisis that led to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, Russia turned a blind eye to Ukraine's sovereignty and intervened militarily by sending its

military to take over control of Crimea which was part of Ukraine without Ukraine's permission. The fact that Russia sends its military into Crimea without Ukraine's permission, the fact that Russia's military personnel took control over key installations such as airports, and the fact that Russia assists Crimean authorities to hastily organized an independence referendum that was not backed by Ukraine's constitution made Russia to appear as an aggressor and a threat to Ukraine. Russia's use of force in Ukraine without authorization from the UNSC (United Nations Security Council) is illegal under international law. Russia's intervention and armed support of Crimea's attempt to secede from Ukraine violated the principle of non-intervention of the UN Charter.

Similarly, Russia's unlawful intervention in the secession of Crimea from Ukraine undermines Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity according to international laws on sovereignty and territorial integrity enshrined in Article 2 (1) and Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter. Territorial integrity is a cornerstone of contemporary international law, and the prohibition on the threat or use of force against territorial integrity is perceived as a *Jus Cogens* norm (Compelling law). Article 2 (1) of the UN Charter states that all sovereign states are equal, Article 2 (4) prohibits the threat or use of force against the "territorial integrity" or political independence of another state while Article 2 (4) also calls on all UN member states to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of other states (UNSC, 2021). Evidence from this study suggests that the Russian military entered Crimea and took control of strategic areas and buildings in Crimea during the crisis that led to the secession of Crimea without respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. This particular action by Russia means that Russia did not see Ukraine as an equal state. Russia would not have sent its military into Ukraine if it sees Ukraine as an equal sovereign state like Russia. The fact that Russia entered Crimea, which was part of Ukraine without recognizing the fact that Ukraine was an equal sovereign state like Russia violates article 2 (1) of the UN Charter that states that all sovereign states are equal under international law (UNSC, 2021). Also, the obligation to respect territorial integrity is a legal obligation stemming from peremptory norms of international law. Russia's intervention and its use of force in Crimea during Crimea's secession from Ukraine violates article 2 (4) of the UN Charter that calls on member states to respect the territorial integrity of other states and prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of other states.

Russia argued that its intervention in Crimea was to protect the people of Crimea whom it identifies as Russians because of their strong historical and ethnic ties (Fisher, 2014). However, this argument is not very convincing because Francis M. Deng explained that sovereign states



have absolute power to protect its citizens and make decisions for citizens in its territorial borders without outside interference (Deng, 2010). Therefore, it was the responsibility of Ukraine to protect its citizens and make decisions in its territorial borders without outside interference; it was not the place of Russia to protect the people of Crimea who at the time were citizens of Ukraine. Besides, there is little evidence that suggests that the people of Crimea were under harm from the government of Ukraine. If these people were indeed under any harm from the government of Ukraine, any humanitarian intervention in Crimea was supposed to be authorized by the UN Security Council (UNSC) as stipulated under international law. All in all, the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is illegal under international law because Russia intervened in Crimea during the secession, which violates international laws on sovereignty and territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter.

## **5.2. Other Findings**

### **5.2.1. Self-determination**

On the other hand, several major themes emerged from my data to show that there are alternative arguments that suggest that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 is legal under international law. One of the central themes that emerged from my data to support this alternative argument is “self-determination”. For example, one article by Vaseqi and Kouzehgar stated that “Russian and Crimean authorities defended the secession of Crimea from Ukraine by arguing that the people of Crimea have the right to self-determination” (2015:197). Another article stated that “Vladimir Putin in his address to the Federal Assembly stated that Crimea’s referendum and secession was consistent with international law and constituted an exercise of the right to self-determination” (Dronova, 2014).

These statements obtained from my data show that proponents of Crimea’s secession such as Russia believe that Crimea’s secession is legal under international law because of the population’s right to self-determination. The question is how does the right to self-determination make the secession of Crimea from Ukraine legal under international law?

The Proponents of Crimea’s secession from Ukraine contend that the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter makes the secession of Crimea legal under international law because it gives the people of Crimea the right to choose their own political status and to determine their own form of economic, cultural, and social development (UNPO,

2017). In other words, proponents of Crimea's secession from Ukraine believe that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal under international law because the people of Crimea lawfully exercise their right to self-determination enshrined in international law by deciding to secede from Ukraine. According to these supporters of Crimea's secession from Ukraine, the people of Crimea had the right to choose their own political destiny as enshrined in the UN Charter on self-determination and they exercised that right by choosing to secede from Ukraine and joining Russia.

This argument advanced by supporters of Crimea's secession from Ukraine is somehow convincing because the population's right to self-determination was reflected in the independence referendum in which the people of Crimea voted overwhelmingly (97 %) in favor of independence ((BBC, 2018). However, it is worth noting that the complete implementation of the principle of self-determination undermines the principle of territorial integrity. In other words, only a legal secession of Crimea would not undermine the territorial integrity of Ukraine (the parent state). For a legal secession to take place, Ukraine the parent state had to give its support for an independence referendum just like it happened in the UK in September 2014 when the UK government gave the people of Scotland the right to hold a legal independence referendum. Similarly, the legality of Crimea's secession from Ukraine would have increased if the secession had the backing of the UN. Although proponents of Crimea's secession from Ukraine argue that the secession is legal under international law because of the right to self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter, critics, however, disagree with them. Contrarily, critics argue that the principle of self-determination cannot be applied to Crimea's secession from Ukraine because the people of Crimea were not under colonial domination and Crimea is not subject to decolonization as stipulated in the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter, which makes the secession illegal under international law (Stepanowa, 2014).

### **5.2.2. Crimea Versus Kosovo**

Another major theme that emerged from my data to show that Crimea's secession from Ukraine can be legally justified is "Crimea versus Kosovo". For instance, one article by Scheindlin and Abazi stated that "Russian President Vladimir Putin has tried to justify Russia's intervention in Crimea by insisting that NATO did essentially the same thing in Kosovo which led to its secession from Serbia" (2014). Another article states that "Putin argued that one can't refuse in Crimea what was once allowed in Kosovo" (Deutsche Welle, 2014). Also, another article by

Linden-Retek and Brewer stated that “ Russian authorities cited the International Court of Justice 2010 opinion allowing Kosovo to declare independence as justification for Crimean Separation” (2014:1) The statements above obtained from my data shows that Russian authorities used events in Kosovo as an example to justify Crimea’s secession from Ukraine. The question is what happened in Kosovo?

In 1999 NATO intervened in Kosovo, NATO’s ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Kosovo was prompted by Yugoslavia’s bloodshed on ethnic Albanians which drove the Albanians into neighboring countries. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>,1999, NATO began a three-month-long bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, allegedly to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians in the semi-autonomous region of Serbia (Wise, 2013). NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, later on, led to Kosovo’s declaration of independence from Serbia in February 2008. The legality of Kosovo’s declaration has been disputed. Serbia sought international validation and support for its stance that the independence declaration by Kosovo is illegal and in October 2008 Serbia requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ determined that the declaration did not violate international law (Vaccaro-Incisa, 2017:132).

Russian authorities have used NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the ICJ ruling on Kosovo’s independence to justify its intervention in Crimea and to argue that the ICJ ruling on Kosovo means that Crimea’s secession from Ukraine in 2014 did not violate international law. I do not agree with Russia's argument because I believe that although the secession of Kosovo from Serbia has a little similarity with the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, the cases are however very different. For example, as of 2017, 108 UN member states out of 193 have recognized Kosovo’s independence (Vaccaro-Incisa, 2017:132). In contrast, in the UN’s General Assembly Resolution 68/262 on March 27, 2014, a vast majority of UN members voted not to recognize Crimea’s declaration of independence (Vaccaro-Incisa, 2017:135). Though recognition is not a legal act, it is, however, a political act with legal consequences. Similarly, while Kosovo obviously sought independence outside colonialism and foreign occupation, historical events clearly indicate that the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo was in effect not dissimilar to these contexts.

Factually, the Security Council and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), among others, explicitly recognized occurrences of mass human rights violations, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (Forsythe, 2012: 841-842). Kosovo's ability to exercise 'internal self-determination' within Serbia was severely limited to the point of being unimaginable. In contrast, there exist no comparable, verifiable allegations that grave violations of fundamental rights have occurred in Crimea (Linden-Retek and Brewer, 2014). The facts on the ground do not show a degree of oppression compelling Crimea to secede to protect its population, and Crimea's 'internal self-determination' was, therefore, not self-evidently threatened. Indeed, the very existence of a Crimean Parliament able to shepherd the Crimean referendum undermines the argument that the Crimean people are being denied their right to self-determination. All in all, because of the reasons mentioned above, I believe that Crimea's secession and Russia's role in the secession violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity under international law. In other words, Russia's support for Crimea secession from Ukraine in 2014 was illegal and Russia's justification of the secession is unjustified.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summation, this paper has examined whether the 2014 secession of Crimea from Ukraine is legal or not under international law. The paper argued that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is illegal under international law because of Russia's intervention in Crimea. The results of this study support my central thesis/argument stated above. However, the result of this study also revealed that proponents of Crimea's secession from Ukraine like Russia argue that the secession of Crimea is legal under international law because of international laws on self-determination and because Crimea's secession from Ukraine is similar to Kosovo's secession from Serbia. One implication of these findings is that it highlights how the secession of Crimea from Ukraine can be seen as both legal and illegal under international law. The results of this study were analyzed based on the relevant international laws on key concepts such as "self-determination", "sovereignty" and "territorial integrity." As this paper suggests, it is possible to argue that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into Russia is illegal under international law because Russia intervened in Crimea. Future research on the topic of this paper can look at the changes that have taken place in the Crimean peninsula after it seceded from Ukraine and was incorporated into Russia.

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