Instrumentalising Balkan’s recent past.
How Russia is (mis-)using Kosovo precedent to legitimize the annexation of Crimea

Vasile Rotaru, PhD
Post-doctoral researcher
vasile.rotaru@dri.snspa.ro

Miruna Troncota, PhD
Post-doctoral researcher
miruna.troncota@dri.snspa.ro

Department of International Relations and European Integration.
National University of Political Science and Public Administration,
Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The article aims to contribute to the broader scholarly discussions which have comparatively examined the similarities and the differences between the conflict settlement strategies in the Western Balkans (former Yugoslav space) and the Black Sea Region (former Soviet space) in recent years. In particular, we aim to analyse the ways in which Russian foreign policy has used the Yugoslav secession wars and external intervention for the legitimization of its own actions in the former Soviet space; and the consequences of Russia’s ability to exploit the legal ambiguities, more precisely the tension between the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity and between the humanitarian intervention and the illegal military intervention (open or covered) for a particular interpretation of international law.

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The “precedent” created by Kosovo’s secession from Serbia was invoked first by Vladimir Putin when Russia recognized the independence of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It reappeared in the rhetoric of the Russian President again with the secessionist referendum in Crimea and subsequently managed territory’s smooth takeover from Ukraine. Public debates have already questioned the instrumentality of the Kosovo case for the Russian foreign policy discourse.

Within this context, we will assess with both theoretical and empirical instruments the viability of such a comparison, making a distinction between fact-based and “forced” similarities. The article will analyse three main elements underlying the comparative argumentation between Crimea and Kosovo: the contested history, the ethnic composition and the interpretation of the international law. We will also try to critically assess the political consequences in the current international discourses and practices of these strategies for legitimizing the external intervention.

Key words: Crimea, Kosovo, legitimacy, precedent, narratives, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine,
Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, however, its final status is still contested by several countries inside and outside Europe. Russia reacted with condemnation, while Serbia deemed the decision unconstitutional and still considers Kosovo as part of its territory to this day, even if the European Union brokered a ‘normalization process’ between Belgrade and Pristina which led to the Brussels Agreement signed in April 2013. A contested referendum on the status of Crimea was held on March 16, 2014 by the legislature of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as well as by the local government of Sevastopol. During the referendum the people of Crimea were asked whether they wanted to join Russia as a federal subject, or preferred to restore the 1992 Crimean constitution that implied a larger autonomy for Crimea within Ukraine. Both events triggered contradictory narratives, either supporting the change of borders based on the self-determination principle or contesting it as an evident breach of international law. Those narratives have been used by politicians to influence the public opinion and to legitimize their decisions.

On 18 March Russia’s President Vladimir Putin delivered a major speech to Russia’s political elite aimed at explaining Russia’s decision to incorporate Crimea. The article endeavours to assess the impact of this speech for post-factum legitimization not only for domestic audience, but also as a piece of foreign policy rhetoric concerning the annexation of a foreign territory. The difficult task of Russia’s intense legitimization efforts was faced with several inconsistencies. Mainly the fact that the international norms that Russia has upheld sternly in the case of Kosovo (to justify non-recognition) went clearly against the present situation in Crimea (to justify recognition). Those inconsistencies clearly show that the Kosovo-Crimea parallel represents a form of instrumentalizing Balkans’s recent past in a way that favours Russia only in this particular case (unlike the situation in Chechnya for example, where the right of self-determination was violently squashed).

The main aim of the article was to focus on the discourses and processes of Russian foreign policy in instrumentalizing Balkan’s recent past and Western intervention in connection

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2 The independence of Kosovo is not recognized by 5 EU Member States – Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, Cyprus. The name Kosovo is used in the whole article without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
with the contested concepts of *self-determination – secession - independence/annexation* and their various interpretations. The study takes Crimea’s referendum from March 2014 as a turning point. The article analyses primarily the main legitimization discourses – the rhetorical means used for justifying the annexation of Crimea - from the perspective of various actors with contrasting opinions. We were interested in analysing the way Vladimir Putin structured his various arguments relating Kosovo with Crimea in his March 2014 speech and further on and the way he managed to address many different audiences simultaneously. A mix of legal, historical and geopolitical perspectives were used to unfold the distinctions and the similarities between the two situations invoked. The theoretical approach that we assumed for this analysis focused on the uses of policy narratives for post-factum legitimization in foreign policy. The empirical part of the analysis thus tried to assess the instrumentality of the Kosovo case for the Russian foreign policy discourse in the annexation of Crimea.

The article is organised in three parts: First, we discussed a selection of recent theoretical contributions on several main concepts used in our analysis - the strategy of using the past to challenge borders in foreign policy narratives (we mainly relied here on the contribution of Jelena Subotic) and the reinterpretation of the international law (e.g. Thomas D. Grant), how states adapt to contested norms, as well as the importance of legitimacy in international interactions. Then, in the second part, a particular attention was given to the political events and the statements which occurred after the annexation of Crimea in the countries directly involved in this territorial dispute - Russia and Ukraine, and we looked also at the impact of these discourses on the other side of the invoked ‘precedent’ - Serbia and Kosovo. And in the final part together with several methodological remarks about the way we have structured the empirical research, we analysed the findings and drew several conclusions.

1. **The uses and misuses of legitimization discourses in foreign policy**

There are several aspects that determine the actors of international society to respect the international law. States often do not act in a particular way that would bring them short-term gains because those actions could affect the reciprocal tolerance and might bring long-term disadvantages (Shaw, 2014, p. 6). The costs to be a pariah can be also a strong argument for states to observe the international law. Other factors that determine a legal behaviour of states on the international arena are the advantages of ‘rewards’ (e.g. siding with one country involving in a conflict rather than its opponent), the formulation of international business in characteristically
legal terms (e.g. disputes are framed legally with references to the precedent, international agreements or opinions of juristic authors) (Shaw, 2014, p. 6).

A more recent explanation for the law-abiding behaviour of states is based on the role of legitimacy in international relations. It has the meaning of justification of an action (political, juridical) acceptable (socially), perceived as such by the society in the context of its morality (Goudenhoft, 2014, pp. 15-16). Legitimacy constitutes a standard for the testing in the wider political environment of the relevance and acceptability of legal norms and practices. If a rule is seen as legitimate it will benefit from a strong approval from the actors of international community, while a rule, institution or action perceived as illegitimate will be disapproved. It is suggested that a rule or entity which is legal but not legitimate will not be able to sustain its position over the long term, while a practice seen illegal but legitimate is likely to form the nucleus of a new rule (Shaw, 2014, pp. 44-45).

From a constructivist perspective, legitimacy is the result of social interaction. As such, it inextricably depends on the social perception and recognition. The actions are legitimate only if they are approved, socially recognized, and the actor has the established right, socially accepted, to make them. One cannot act legitimately without social consecration, without its action to be recognized as legitimate, entitled by others (Goudenhoft, 2014, pp. 19-20, 84).

Sometimes, between legitimacy and legality there can appear large cleavages, as well as between legitimacy and some moral principles. NATO intervention in Kosovo (1998-1999) was described as technically illegal, because it did not have the authorization of the Security Council, but it was accepted by Western community as politically legitimate and moral because it acted to fulfill the resolutions of the Security Council and to stop some crimes against humanity. On the other side, the absence of reactions to the Ukraine crisis and the issue of Crimea was legal (one could not have invoked NATO’s art.5), but immoral, because it created the impression of fear associated with impotence in the face of an act at least debatable from the point of view of borders stability (Goudenhoft, 2014, p. 127).

Legitimacy is sought to strengthen rules or institutions, to make them acceptable or accepted or to justify certain actions. Sometimes this can take unexpected forms, like the circumstance during the events on 2014 in Crimea, when Russian soldiers – the infamous ‘little green men’, were not wearing insignia and were portrayed by Russian politicians and media as “polite men” coming to the Ukrainian peninsula to help elder people and to protect the lives of local inhabitants.

‘Why are states looking for legitimacy when they challenge the international law on the interpretations of the self-determination principle?’ remains a focal question in the field of
contemporary foreign policy analysis. A constructivist analysis usually looks at how international actors reveal their identity in the international arena in discursive interactions with other actors. In foreign policy analysis, constructivist thinking has focused on the tendency to shape the malleable facts of history into self-justifying narrative discourses (Subotic, 2015; Faizullaev and Cornut, 2016).

In the last decades, external intervention, under different forms, has been a predominant way of addressing security issues by great powers. Politically constructed threats were claimed to justify external intervention for humanitarian purposes. The recent IR “narrative turn” has greatly improved our understanding of how narratives influence state policy choices. There are notable constructivist authors who contributed to this topic, showing in a wealth of evidence-based studies ‘the instrumentalisation’ of the past to legitimate foreign policy decisions. Subotic (2015) provided an interesting approach to foreign policy analysis especially in its case study of Serbia’s change in foreign policy behaviour regarding the disputed status of Kosovo. She argues that state narratives can and do guide and influence contemporary policy decisions, showing how myths are often mixed with objective facts in order to legitimate a certain view on international politics. This “meaning-making” process reduces political space or debate and conflict into an area which can be fully controlled by the state apparatus that invokes that legitimating mechanism. In other words, justifying policy narratives are a form of state control over the ‘symbolic’ space of international law.

There is already a well-established practice for several countries to concentrate their foreign policies and states’ behaviour in the international arena on contesting norms. In such cases, the international law is often ignored when vital or strategic interests are involved, and is invoked argumentatively or exculpatory post factum (Goudenhoft, 2014, p. 129). When one state acts in an illegitimate way, its political discourse made after those efforts is meant to legitimate its deeds or to create appearances of legitimacy through rhetorical manipulation: “if power cannot be backed up by legality, it needs to be propped up by something else” (Klabbers, et.al, 2009, p. 37). As such, curious interpretations of international law interact in dynamic ways with domestic politics, foreign policy and a country’s subjective history. Foreign policy narratives are often based on the ways in which direct observers of an international event look to the past to make sense of the present. The action to invoke a ‘precedent’ in order to either contest or sustain the right to self-determination should be understood as an action of ‘cropping’ parts of history and abruptly ‘paste’ them in the present. This construction of the ‘precedent’ is motivated by either narrow, domestic political gains or even international benefits. In other words, invoking a ‘precedent’ in order to contest an international norm that serves a very narrow political goal of a
country against the interests of another country is a political form of de-contextualizing history. Thus, the principle of self-determination, creates a lot of symbolic and political space for international actors (especially great powers) to discursively build a ‘precedent’ in order to justify their claims for the expansion of their territories. The contradictory perspectives focused on the legal arguments of secession point towards the ‘relativization’ of international law and its subsequent politicization.

Referring to the literature on Russia’s foreign policy discourses targeted to the legitimization of its actions in the former Soviet space between 2008 and 2014 (e.g. Morozova, 2009, Burai 2016) the general conclusion of these studies is that the mixture of facts and interpretations is the most used method to contest international norms based on subjective reasoning, often filtered through very narrow political goals. Based on the afore-mentioned theoretical contributions we would place Russia’s post-factum legitimization foreign policy narratives in Crimea at the interstice of those main concepts.

II. The validity of the Kosovo-Crimea parallel

In order to analyse the patterns and the main discursive interactions regarding Russia’s post-factum legitimization for the annexation of Crimea, we started with identifying various sites where those ‘clashes of narratives’ regarding the validity of Kosovo-Crimea parallel have occurred. Based on the observation that the question of Kosovo’s independence is a key factor on which Russia rhetorically justifies the intervention in Crimea and the subsequent annexation, we tried to see how this claim has been perceived by various elites from all sides. As Russia’s actions in Crimea are questioned primarily from the point of view of legality, we decided to analyse the basis of Moscow’s arguments to claim legitimacy for its external intervention on the territory of Ukraine. As such, from a methodological perspective, the main challenge was to select the most relevant legitimization discourses, and to identify the most relevant actors. The analysis put together the main findings of all the three stages, and tried therefore to focus on the overall perceptions towards the parallel between Crimea and Kosovo, outlining the contrasts and the similarities between legitimizing narratives enacted by state actors and observers in the process.

Several methodological remarks have to be made at this point in order to explain how we had designed the research. We were interested to contribute to the efforts of understanding the Crimean crisis, by looking at how were the narratives centred on the so-called ‘Kosovo precedent’ perceived by a different set of actors from the countries directly involved in the
debate – Ukraine, Russia, Serbia and Kosovo. We believe these perceptions of the Kosovo-Crimea parallel invoked by Vladimir Putin are very relevant for revealing the political impact of using legitimization discourses in foreign policy. Specific policy narratives regarding Russia’s parallel between Kosovo and Crimea have been promoted in traditional diplomacy (press releases and press statements), in public diplomacy (experts and think tanks’ online articles and interviews) and in the media (journalists’ comments). The timeline of the analysis was determined by the political events that occurred after the 16th of March 2014 referendum, which led to the final step of the annexation of Crimea. We decided to focus the discourse analysis around the whole year 2014 – both before the concrete date of the annexation and its follow up in order to identify the main legitimization discourses.

The analytical model, combining foreign policy analysis with discourse analysis, was developed in three stages. The first phase of discourse analysis practically focused on gathering major public statements (both from Russian and English speaking media) referring to the situation in Crimea with a direct or indirect reference to Kosovo by state representatives (the president, the prime minister and the foreign policy minister and, in some cases, other relevant political figures). In the second phase we focused on the main reactions to those legitimization discourses and we selected expert analysis and opinions from relevant think tanks and media outlets (both English and Russian speaking) that have covered the topic. In the end, we revisited the discursive patterns initially formulated, and based on them we structured the main research interviews questions that have been posed in all the 3 main countries included in the analysis – Ukraine, Russia, Serbia (and Kosovo).

We therefore divided the analysis based on the three main sources of policy narratives:

a. public documents and official statements
b. online comments, media reports and expert analyses
c. semi-structured interviews with local experts

From those sources we tried to identify the main arguments pro and against the Kosovo-Crimea parallel, and to highlight a series of recurring patterns and their connection with legitimization, which will be discussed in the following section.

II. 1 Identifying patterns in official documents and press statements

II.1.1 Russia’s view
The main arguments of the Kremlin’s post-annexation discrediting discourse were presented during the famous 18 March 2014 address of President Putin and have been developed afterwards. The “re-joining” of Crimea was interpreted as a reparation of a historic illegality because Khrushchev’s 1954 decision of transferring Crimea to the Soviet Ukraine was made “in clear violation of the constitutional norms that were in place even then,” and if no one was preoccupied about the legal aspects about this transfer that time because no one imagined that Ukraine and Russia may split up and become separate states, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia realized that “it was not simply robbed, it was plundered” (Putin 2014a). Thus, as only the Presidiums of the Russian and Ukrainian Supreme Soviets approved the transfer of Crimea peninsula to Ukraine without the approval of the Supreme Soviets themselves as the Soviet law required that time, this was a flagrant illegality (Putin, 2014b). Within this context, as “Napoleon once said that justice is the embodiment of God on earth. In this sense, the reunification of Crimea with Russia was a just decision” (Putin, 2016).

Besides being a “just” action, the annexation of Crimea was presented by Moscow as legal, in accordance with the international law, occurring after a referendum held in “full compliance with the democratic procedures and international norms,” where Russian military forces – the “little green men”, only helped create conditions so that the residents of Crimea were able to “peacefully express their free will regarding their own future” (Putin 2014a). The proclamation of independence and the entry of Crimea into the Russian Federation were “legal forms of implementing the right of the people of Crimea to self-determination in a situation where a coup d’etat involving the use of force took place in Ukraine with outside support” (Lukashevich, 2016). President Putin stressed then that the right of nations to self-determination is written in the United Nation’s Charter not simply as a right but “as the goal of the united nations” and the international relations “must be based on international law,” which should be based on “moral principles such as justice, equality and truth” without double standards. (Putin, 2014b).

By referring to double standards, President Putin invoked the Kosovo precedent - “created” by “our Western colleagues” in a “very similar situation” (Putin 2014a). Furthermore, Russian leader highlighted that in fact the events in Crimea were more in line with the international law than those in Kosovo: while Pristina declared its independence by parliamentary decision alone, in Crimea, people held a referendum and “its results were simply stunning” (Putin, 2014c). Within this context, “if the Kosovans in Kosovo have the right to self-determination, why don’t the Crimeans have the same right?” (Putin, 2016). The “more legal”
aspect of the referendum in Crimea was highlighted also by reminding that there was no referendum organized for Germany’s reunification either! (Lavrov, 2015).

Referring to the humanitarian crisis that preceded Kosovo’s independence, President Putin dismantled this argument on the ground of “blunt cynicism”: “one should not have make sure every conflict leads to human losses” (Putin 2014a). Other Russian leaders called such references as “an anti-humanitarian statement of the problem,” asking cynically whether it was “really necessary that a lot of blood [was] split in Crimea in order to obtain the consent of the Crimean people to have the right to self-defence” (Lavrov, 2014a).

Even the first impulse of Moscow’s reaction to the argument of humanitarian crisis in Kosovo was to reject it, Russian leaders have tried then to construct a humanitarian argument in case of Crimea as well. However, comparing to other international precedents of humanitarian crises, Russia’s rationale has been constructed around the assumptions rather than facts. President Putin has insisted that after the “anti-constitutional coup in Kiev” Crimean population was in danger because the people there did not support the “illegal takeover of power” by the “nationalist and fascist” forces, and thus, the “population was threatened and these threats were absolutely specific and tangible” (Putin, 2014d). “We had no right to abandon the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol to the mercy of nationalist and radical militants” (Putin, 2014f) given that Crimean residents, “[thinking] about their future [asked] Russia for help” (Putin, 2014d). President Putin has been ‘convinced’ that if Russia had “abandoned” the residents of Crimea under “nationalists boot,” the situation would have been there much worse than in Donbas (Putin, 2015a).

Moscow has emphasized as well that after the “coup” in Kiev Crimea was in particular in danger “because it was more densely populated by Russians and Russian-speaking than other parts of Ukraine (Putin, 2016). The Kremlin went even further implying that it was “very concerned about any possible ethnic cleansing” (Putin, 2014e) in Crimea. The argumentation of Moscow about the discrimination and ‘dangers’ posed to Russian ethnics residing in Crimea was based on the February 2014 decision of the Ukrainian Rada to abolish the 2012 law “On State Language Policy” that gave Russian and other minority languages the status of “regional language.” Even this decision was cancelled eventually, Moscow built an entire argument based on this: “the first thing the new authorities tried to do was deprive the ethnic minorities of the right to use their native language” (Putin, 2014g), “mass violation of human rights in Ukraine, including discrimination and persecution due to nationality, language and political convictions – [making] the existence of the Republic of Crimea within the Ukrainian state impossible” (Lavrov, 2014b).
On the other side, President Putin has insisted that Russia “always respected the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state” that “we do not want to divide Ukraine” and “Crimea was and remains a Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean-Tatar land” (Putin 2014a). Moscow has insisted on the special relationship with Ukraine which it is linked by history, economy, geography, culture, civilizational values and, after all, “by bonds of family and kinship” (Lavrov, 2014c). Ukrainians and Russians are presented as “essentially a single nation in many ways” (Putin, 2014d), “I see no difference between Ukrainians and Russians, I believe we are one people” (Putin, 2015b). Ukraine is a “brotherly country” and “I don’t make any distinction between Russians and Ukrainians” (Putin, 2015c). These assessments have great implications for the interpretation of the sovereignty of Ukraine, suggesting that Russia and Ukraine are not quite separate countries, but have been intertwined for centuries (Lo, 2015, pp. 96, 107) and since Ukraine is not a “real” country Russia’s meddling in the affairs of Kiev should not be portrayed as external interference but fraternal support (Lo, 2015, p. 96).

Kiev’s reaction to the annexation of Crimea came shortly. Prime-minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk called it „a robbery on an international scale,” where Russia „has come and temporarily stolen part of the territory of an independent country,” while Ukraine's interim President, Oleksandr Turchynov, accused Vladimir Putin of "mimicking the fascists of the last century" by annexing Crimea. (CNN 2014). On 20 March 2014 the Ukrainian Parliament adopted a bill that declared Crimea “temporarily occupied territory” but an integral part of the territory of Ukraine where Ukrainian legislation is applied; and that “Ukrainian people will never and under no circumstances will not stop fighting for the liberation of Crimea from the invaders, no matter how hard and long it may be” (rada.gov 2014).

II.1. 2. Perceptions in Serbia & Kosovo

On 27 March 2014 Serbian deputies did not take part in the UN General Assembly vote on a resolution on Ukraine’s territorial integrity, which proclaimed Crimea’s joining Russia invalid. EU member states have criticized the fact that Serbia abstained in this UN vote reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine. As an official EU candidate, Serbia is supposed to align its foreign policy with the EU. Yet, while Montenegro has imposed sanctions on Russia, Serbia has refused to do so.

In order to see the main features of Serbian foreign policy in response to the Kosovo-Crimea comparisons, we reviewed the main Daily Surveys issued by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (documents available in English) for the period March 2014-March 2016. We
found a total of 26 explicit references to Ukraine and the Kosovo-Crimea parallel with 24 references in the spring of 2014, when the events escalated in Crimea, just before and after the annexation, only 2 mentions in 2015 and none in 2016. This shows that for the spring of 2014 the topic represented an important element on the foreign policy agenda in Serbia, but after the summer of 2014 it ceased to be of interest. For the position of Kosovo, we found only 4 mentions of Putin’s statements from March 2014 on the website of the Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs and more statements in a press interview in English given right on the next day after the precedent was invoked by Kosovo’s Foreign Minister at the time, Hashim Thaci.

Serbia’s foreign policy positions towards the annexation of Crimea were mainly expressed by Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, the President Tomislav Nikolic and Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. The official narrative was that Serbia respects the territorial integrity of Ukraine (which was inconsistent with Serbia’s refusal to take part in the UN vote that condemned the annexation of Crimea from 27 March 2014). But looking closely at the public statements from the MFA Daily surveys and the politicians interviews in the local and English speaking media several nuances could be traced in this case.

The main position expressed by Ivica Dacic was that Serbia would maintain a neutral position on the Ukrainian crisis. He often underlined that “Serbia respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of every UN member state, but on the other hand it will certainly not implement measures against Russia” (Dacic, 2014a). He also added that Serbia’s foreign policy activities would in the coming period be focused foremost on its EU membership, with the simultaneous development of relations with traditional friends. In 2014 the relations between Serbia and Russia were still determined by the construction of the South Stream natural gas pipeline, so Dacic also clearly stated that Serbia would remain a “faithful friend to Russia” and would not change its positions. “We have again confirmed our positions. Once again I wish to say on Serbia’s behalf that Serbia will never work against Russia, that it is a question of morality, and that Serbia and Russia will continue their mutual projects” (Euractiv, 2014). Moreover, he also added that Serbia is “reluctant to listen to drawing parallels between Kosovo and Ukraine, regardless of the side it is coming from. Kosovo is a case of violation of international law and everything that followed is the consequence of that violation. For this reason, we are not happy to hear anyone making references to Kosovo in the context of Ukraine” (Euractiv, 2014).

At a meeting of the UN Security Council on 28 May 2014, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic declared emphatically that “the Kosovo precedent had marked the beginning of an era of inconsistent application of international law and created new hotspots in the world. In this particular case there was a paradox and a precedent was made that was claimed not to be a
precedent. Then, there came Crimea, where the people and the authorities of that peninsula, in declaring their independence, invoked "the famous Kosovo precedent which Western countries helped create themselves. It is necessary to come up with a new term to mean a precedent that is not a precedent, which goes against all logic and respect for international regulations" (Nikolic, 2014). Moreover, he directly invoked the importance and the necessity of using the past in present politics and the need for countries to adopt a normative behaviour on the international arena: "Any decision, just or unjust, must follow a certain rule or regulation, while the very existence of international law guarantees legal safety, abolishes voluntarism and arbitrariness and ensures legality. Otherwise, modern civilization would not be any different from the Medieval, and in that event we would have not learnt anything from the past" (Nikolic, 2014).

Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic declared that "Serbia from the beginning supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which includes Crimea" (Vucic, 2014a). He also added "the countries that were now asking Serbia to condemn the behaviour of Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine had better done the same when Kosovo was concerned" (Vucic, 2014a). At the same time, the Serbian Prime Minister stressed that Serbia cannot join in the economic sanctions against Russia, due to the crisis Serbia is facing. Vucic explained that Serbia is "dependent on the Russian gas, and our biggest taxpayer NIS is now majority-owned by a Russian company."

On the same note, Dacic mentioned that "Serbia defended Ukraine's territorial integrity, but it could not defend it any more than it would defend its own territorial integrity". (Dacic, 2014b). Referring directly to the Kosovo-Crimea parallel, Dacic said that the issue of territorial integrity was very painful for Serbia, because it had no support when Kosovo was at stake. That "the thesis that Crimea is not the same case as Kosovo insults our intelligence. However, it did not mean that Serbia would recognize the violation of territorial integrity of other countries" (Dacic, 2014c). Referring to the fact that in the first half of 2015 Serbia was preparing to held the Chairmanship of the OSCE, Minister Dacic declared that "the Ukrainian crisis would be the priority during Serbia's chairmanship. He said that efforts should be made to stop further violence in Ukraine at all costs, as well as that ceasefire and the peace plan of President Poroshenko should be respected" (Dacic, 2014d).

Leaders from Kosovo also took a strong stance on the matter. Hashim Thaçi, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister in March 2014 and a former Prime Minister of Kosovo (1999-2000, 2008-2014), speaking in a wide-ranging interview with BNE, said that there were no "legal, political or historical" comparisons to be drawn with Russia's unification with Crimea on March 18. Under no circumstances can the cases of Kosovo and Crimea be compared. (...) Russia's annexation of Crimea and Kosovo's secession from Serbia cannot be compared "in
any circumstances" and recent attempts to draw parallels between them are "unsustainable", Kosovo's prime minister, a key player in talks that ended the Kosovo War and who signed Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia as premier" (Thaci, 2014a). Moreover, he underlined that the procedures respected by the international community in the case of Kosovo do not match at all the lack of procedures in the case of Crimea and Russia’s unilateral actions. „Not in legal, political or historical circumstances. We didn't change the borders, we had our borders before. Kosovo was created after genocide was committed by Serbia, after the deportation of 1m citizens of Kosovo, which was done by Serbia. After the humanitarian intervention of NATO, after the peace talks in Rambouillet, but also from the dialogue that culminated in [agreement with] the US and Russia, too. This means that Kosovo's independence was created after negotiations which followed the war. Therefore, comparisons between the Kosovo and Crimea case are not sustainable at all.” (Thaci, 2014b).

Putting all those policy narratives together, we organized the recurring patterns and arguments in three main categories which structured our following online discourses and experts' interviews. Three main issues were invoked to legitimize the annexation of Crimea in connection with Kosovo’s independence:

1. “the precedent of Kosovo” - the Western intervention
2. “reinterpreting the past” - the clashing versions of history
3. “ethnicization of territory” - the correlation between ethnicity and territory

II.2. Views from the Agora

“Russia's actions in Ukraine put Putin on the 'wrong side of history'.“

(Barack Obama, March 2014, quoted in The Guardian)³

The majority of Western experts have categorically dismissed any comparisons between Crimea and all the countless secessions, coups and undemocratic regime changes around the world (not just Kosovo, but also Scotland’s referendum and others). In the case of Crimea - Kosovo parallel, most analysts have pointed at three areas of difference: the time-frame, the context, and the international process. They commented also from the self-determination perspective and consider that this debate might have great impact not only in the region, but also

³ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/russian-sanctions-likely-putin-ukraine-crimea
far beyond it because of the sensitive issues it tackles, which go far beyond the ex-Soviet space or the Western Balkans (e.g. Phillips, 2014).

Drezner (2014) tried to deconstruct the „forced similarities” by arguing that the ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo feared Serbian repression, just as Russians living in Crimea feared the newly-empowered Ukrainian nationalists that had assumed power in Kiev. He states that those fears may be valid, but the exploitation of those fears and their consequences makes one claim of self-determination more legitimate than the other. What is most striking in his view is that the guiding principles between the two processes were completely different - Russia acted unilaterally in Crimea, whereas Kosovo’s independence was a matter of diplomacy and “giving a chance to negotiations” in which all parties were involved. By sizing control of peninsula, Russia gave up on any chance for multilateral diplomacy, and developed a policy of “occupy first and negotiate later” (Drezner, 2014).

Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe for NATO during Kosovo crisis clearly opposed any possible comparison between Crimea and Kosovo. He stated that “What Russia is doing in Ukraine is not in any way parallel to what NATO did in Kosovo because in Kosovo you had a group of people who were fighting to preserve their own culture against the Serb repression. What is happening in Ukraine has nothing to do with this. Russian population is not under any repression in Ukraine whatsoever. Instead, what we got is a manufactured crisis by Mr. Putin who is trying to draw similarities but there are no similarities whatsoever” (Clark, in Voice of America, 2014). Cooper considers that “Kosovo is used by Russia to justify Crimea because it works well in propaganda. It builds on pre-existing international criticism, anti-Americanism and narratives familiar in Russia and the West, so that it would seem consistent and logical to a lot of people, i.e. fit their worldview” (Cooper 2015).

Talking about the differences between the cases of Crimea and Kosovo, Somin (2014) assesses Russia’s attempts to link the two issues as “an unusual blatant exercise in false moral equivalency.” He reminds that Moscow vehemently opposed Kosovo’s secession naming it illegal and unjust, which further undermine Russia’s attempts of legitimizing its action in Crimea by comparing the situation in Ukrainian peninsula with Kosovo.

David Philips argued that there are fundamental legal and political differences between the internationally sanctioned process, which culminated in Kosovo’s independence, and Russia’s land-grab in Crimea (Phillips, 2014). He puts it very straight forward – “Kosovo’s independence is based on international law; Russia’s annexation of Crimea is not. He added that Russia’s attempt to draw parallels between Kosovo and Crimea is convoluted and Kosovo’s situation was unique (sui generis). On the same note, Peter Baker showed that “Kosovo’s
independence ensued after a long process of international mediation, under management by the 
UN, which enforced strict criteria. Crimea’s annexation is being engineered by a foreign power — Russia’ (Baker, 2014). Moreover, he defended NATO’s intervention by arguing that “NATO, a multilateral alliance, intervened so that Kosovars could realize their dream of independence. Masked Special Forces from Russia are creating conditions to justify Crimea’s annexation by Russia.” (Baker, 2014). Other commentators saw the whole debate as a direct confrontation between the US and Russia in a sort of „new cold war paradigm“ (e.g. Crawford, 2014).

Compared to the above views, Russian experts are more inclined to agree with the Kremlin’s positions when it comes to the comparison Crimea-Kosovo. Lukyanov (2014) reminds that it was the West that did not rest until Yugoslavia, a large, prosperous and independent country, was transformed into a bunch of small, deprived of their own ambitions states. It is especially the final phase of the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, the military intervention in Kosovo, that represents for Moscow the benchmark of the West’s “boundless appetite.” Karagnov (2014) accuses also the West for misusing the chance for a normal relationship with Russia after the Cold War when bombed Yugoslavia. Then the expansion of the West’s area of its own military, political, and economic control and influence, pushed Russia towards the “Weimar syndrome”, a condition that once led a humiliated Germany to Nazism, a syndrome that made Russia to look for revenge. This syndrome had to be cured by fighting in Chechnya and Georgia, and later by taking over Crimea.

There were also Western experts that expressed their support for Russia’s actions in Crimea. Mike Walker accused the Western analysts for being pro-Ukrainian and of overlooking that “Crimea's legal and historical status makes it more apt for removal from its parent state than Kosovo” (Walker, 2014). In judging the legitimacy of Crimea's decision to break away from Ukraine, Baker recalls the International Court of Justices Opinion from 2010 on Kosovo, which he considers as favouring the case of Crimea. He concluded that “Russia's interest in Crimea is one of honouring Crimea's own wishes and attempting to remedy a historical mistake. The "symbolic gift" of Crimea in 1954 was ceremonial, unnecessary and useless to the Crimean people” (Walker, 2014)

Other critical perspectives showed that in evaluating the two cases on the basis of the legality of their secessions or the influences of surrounding powers, the two situations are not as different as they may originally seem. They argued that Russians and Albanians are minorities in Ukraine and Serbia, but they comprise the majority in the regions of Crimea and Kosovo. This regional disparity, with the ethnic and cultural tensions that substantive difference from each nation’s main population entails, makes them conducive to secessionist movements. „But
regardless of its legitimacy, the referendum remains unconstitutional under Ukrainian law, which states that such referendums must be nationwide. If the West had not ignored Serbia’s concerns about Kosovo’s legitimacy, Russia may not have been given the green light to do the same in Crimea. Russia’s publicized concern for the future of Crimea’s Tatar population under a new Ukrainian government justified their intervention under human rights concerns similar to those noted by the West in Kosovo.” (Pandiloski, 2014).

II.3 The ‘uncomfortable comparison’. General views regarding the Kosovo – Crimea parallel from local experts

Even though it triggers different interpretations, one thing is clear – the Kosovo-Crimea comparison has touched several sensitive ‘hot spots’ of the unsettled elements between Serbia and the West regarding the final status of Kosovo. Overall, the informants confirmed that this comparison is controversial from the Serbian point of view, especially because most of the EU countries are supporting Kosovo, but not supporting Crimea’s secession. “This is an uncomfortable comparison because this reference to Kosovo, which, again, was pretty much against the principles of international law, and a precedent was set and this precedent it's being now used by different countries around the world, most notably by President Putin, of course. So I see it more as a political thing (Savkovic, 2016).

There are both similarities and huge differences between the situation of self-determination in Kosovo and in Crimea. But which of them are predominant? Who actually benefits from the Kosovo-Crimea parallel? Based on possible answers to these intriguing question, various scholars, journalists, influential experts in foreign affairs and international law either confirmed or condemned Russia’s attempt to legitimate its actions in Crimea. We analyzed a selection of this contributions to the debate because we considered their arguments relevant for a broader understanding of the legitimization mechanisms developed by Russia in Ukraine. Because Serbia has an interest in supporting Ukraine and opposing the secession of Crimea, and Russia annexed Crimea, but opposes the independence of Kosovo and backs Serbia in the UN Security Council, this tension and the paradoxical position of Serbia in the dispute was the main element analysed by the interviewees from Belgrade and Prishtina.

When comparing the cases of Kosovo and Crimea the majority of both Russian and Ukrainian experts agreed that there are two obvious differences: Kosovo was not annexed by Albania and Albania did not pretend this; and in Kosovo it was an attempt of genocide while in Crimea there was not even an interethnic dispute. Then, the Ukrainian experts insisted on the fact...
that Kosovo took 10 years to become independent, comparing to Crimea where the events occurred in only three weeks, and the date of referendum was changed thrice, each time shortening the preparatory stage. „Or who is sure that is right, waits the date of the referendum and conducts an information campaign” (Marga 2016). All the interviewed Ukrainian experts assessed the referendum as illegal, because it did not respect neither the legislation of Ukraine nor the legislation of the Russian Federation: in Ukraine a referendum can be held only on national level, while Russian legislation does not even mention the issue of referendum (Smeljanski). Moreover, the referendum in Crimea took place under gun control and it was not organized by the local authorities but by Russian analysts (Buzarov).

A part of Russian experts was more nuanced about the referendum. They admitted that its legality is questionable but at the same time assessed that there were legal elements as well: Russia sent invitation to the OSCE observers who refused to come, but there was a delegation from the European Parliament; and the presence of Russian military (вежливые люди) would have been necessary for securing the region so that population could vote. Some Russian experts highlighted also that the referendum made the case of Crimea’s secession more legal than that of Kosovo, where there there was not organized any referendum for independence.

Makarkin (2016) argued that in Crimea there occurred first a separation of the territory and only after it joined Russia, which is a different issue, a secondary one. While Oznobishchev (2016) underlines that during the events in Crimea Russia was preoccupied with the legitimization of its actions: first it was the voting, then the region separated, and then the local authorities addressed Russia. For each stage there are documents, even if the way these documents were obtained can be discussed. For Russia it is important to create a façade of legality of its actions, “to present all its actions as responding to the international law” because Russia wants to be part of the Western democratic community and is looking at the West for examples of behaviour, for cases which it can reinterpret and use for justification. Thus, “Russia is not creating new justifications, it just reinterprets and repeats Western justifications” (Nikitina 2016).

When asked to comment the feasibility of the Kosovo-Crimea comparison, the informants from Serbia confirmed the main positions expressed also in the online analysis of experts and think tanks - most of them denounced the misleading similarities between the cases, but several rose important aspects in favour of the comparison and have underlined the dangerous impact of the precedent that the Kosovo independence has set. The Kosovo-Crimea comparison has touched several sensitive ‘hot spots’ of the unsettled elements between Serbia and the West regarding the final status of Kosovo. Overall, the informants confirmed that this
comparison is controversial from the Serbian point of view, especially because most of the EU countries are supporting Kosovo, but not supporting Crimea’s secession.

The discursive pattern which unravels the ‘uncomfortable comparison’ was present in several positions of the interviewees. For example, it was argued that “Russia’s position is intriguing because it tries to show the limits of Western actions as forms of external intervention. They are using the case of Kosovo to legitimate the independence of Crimea or the taking in military intervention of Russians. Because you can see it in both ways”. (Ostoje, 2016).

Other relevant issue mentioned in almost all interviews with Serbian experts was the topic of the Serbian foreign fighters who went to fight with the Pro-Russian rebels in Donbass. “The number of Serbs fighting in Ukraine may be no more than 100, but their alleged exploits are widely reported. Mr Vucic calls them mercenaries who are “harmful” to Serbia,” (Joksimovic, 2016). This issue was very present on the Serbian public agenda in the last months, especially when some visible public persons were arrested and will be prosecuted for that. In this context, people expressed clear critical views towards the issue, part of a wider phenomenon, connecting it also with their enrollment in ISIL, not just in the paramilitary groups in Eastern Ukraine.

Two interesting elements have distinguished during the interviews with the Ukrainian and Russian experts also: the repositioning of the Crimean Tatars in Ukrainians’ mentality after the annexation of Crimea; and the “colonization” of peninsula by the Russian Federation after 2014. Thus, according to Magda (2016), until the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine perceived the Tatars by inertia as potential traitors. Kiev was afraid that the Crimean Tatars were looking towards Turkey where live more Crimean Tatars than in Crimea itself. After March 2014 this perception was changed, however. It was only after that event that the Crimean Tatars have experienced a full process of rehabilitation (Magda 2016).

Smelianski (2016) drew attention that after the annexation of Crimea, Russia started a process of colonization of the Ukrainian peninsula, which is considered a crime by the military law. In 2015 in Sevastopol would have been relocated around 25.000 Russians, which represent 7% of the city population. In addition, other 10.000 Russians would have been relocated in the rest of Crimea. They are Russian ethnics, mainly officers, prosecutors, public servants with their families and some pensioners from Baikal region and Siberia. Evseev (2016) talks also about the increasing of the population of Crimea after 2014, with about 600.000 inhabitants! However, according to him these are people from different regions of Ukraine who moved to Crimea because “they see a future” there.
Next, we have structured the interpretation of the interview findings based on the three main discursive patterns and types of arguments identified in official discourses, as we asked our interviewees to comment them.

a. “The Kosovo precedent” and the Western intervention

The discussion about the comparison Crimea-Kosovo was more nuanced during the interviews. While all the Ukrainian respondents consider that this juxtaposition is not appropriate and Russia’s invocation of the violation of the international law by the US should not be interpreted as an exemption for or as the legal base of Moscow’s rationale to intervene in Ukraine and to annex Crimea; many Russian experts inclined to agree with the Kremlin’s draw of attention to “what Americans are doing.” They explained that as the US has been allowed to intervene in other states, Russians should be allowed to do the same. In fact, it was not Russia who started it. For Russians what Americans and other Western countries have done on international arena is a precedent to be used. “All these infringements of international law by the US and other Western countries gathered and when occurred the moment of Crimea, [Russians] perceived with satisfaction that finally [they] were defending [their] interests” (Oznobishchev 2016). These experts consider that Russians appeal to the international law but reinterpret it as do the Americans. “We [Russians] do not love America in the geopolitical mentality, but on the other side, we are copying America very much” (Makarkin 2016).

Part of Serbian respondents consider that the whole ‘precedent’ argument is a form of rhetorically constructing ‘the precedent’, distorting the facts only for them to fit with the reality that would justify Russia’s interests. Other, however, argued that in fact Putin was building on a pre-existent ‘relativisation of international norms’ created by the West when the ‘sui generis’ clause was invoked for the case of Kosovo. „That is the definition of a precedent – it creates other possibilities for invoking the precedent” (Sokic, 2016). The informants from Serbia, and especially the one from Kosovo drew attention also that the double standard approach which Putin uses to accuse the West is in fact replicated to the case of Crimea. „But if his arguments would be valid, that would also imply that Russia should recognise Kosovo as an independent state” (Krasniqi, 2016).

Several respondents pointed towards the ambiguity of Russia’s arguments when invoking Kosovo as one of the most slippery elements of this Kosovo-Crimea debate. They referred to the mix of real facts with stretched politicized interpretations. “Russia’s insistence is against the
facts, against logic and against its own interests. Since Russia does not accept that Kosovo is in fact independent, if it were a precedent it would be a bad one from the Russian point of view” (Kranisqi, 2016).

Nikitina (2016), considers that in fact from legal perspective Crimea created a new precedent in international relations. Russian expert argued that Kosovo example could be used as a precedent for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while the Ukrainian peninsula is a different case, a new precedent - when a territory joins the territory of another state.

b. Reinterpreting the past. The dividing symbols attached to a territory

The invocation of the history of Crimea in the aftermath of the annexation of peninsula is considered generally by both Ukrainian and Russian experts as targeting first of all Russian domestic public. Within this context, the historic past was a very important factor to demonstrate that Russia did not occupy Crimea but returned it to Russia, especially by putting it in contradiction with the actions of Americans that “occupy foreign territories”. The idea promoted by the Kremlin was that Russians came in Crimea as liberators (Makarkin 2016). On the other side the Russian experts acknowledged that Moscow omits to remind the population that Russian Empire conquered Crimea from the Ottoman Empire or that the Tatar Khanate had a longer history in Crimea than Russia. In other words, Moscow “stops the train of history whenever it suits it better” (Oznobishchev 2016).

Zadorozhnyi (2016) considers that the historic arguments are part of a psychological war and are not legally substantiated. He highlights that the moment of transferring of Crimea to the Soviet Ukraine, in 1954, should not be brought into discussion by the Kremlin, as the Russian Federation does not have the right to question an act of a different state. Furthermore, in 1954 not only Crimea was transferred to the Soviet Ukraine, but parts of the Ukrainian SSR, the Rostov region, were transferred to the Russian SFSR as well, and the surfaces of the two regions were comparable. Then, as long as the former Soviet republics recognized their borders of 1991 at Belavezha Pucha, Moscow’s questioning of the administrative act of 1954 is not legitimate. This would lead to the opening of a Pandora Box if every state tried to question the historic evolution of their borders. Some experts highlighted also that during the referendum for independence of Ukraine of 1991, the inhabitants of Crimea voted to remain part of Ukraine.
Thus, the historic arguments used by the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea, had an instrumental role of justifying Moscow’s actions especially for the domestic audience. They are part of a post-factum rationalization, more than real justification for the events (Nikitina 2016).

A part of Ukrainian experts consider also that the role of Crimea in Russian history was rather embellished. Both the allegedly large role that Crimea played for the Russian nation (e.g. the place where prince Vladimir was baptized) and the references to the peninsula as the land of Russian glory, are seen as exaggerations from this perspective. In fact, they consider it to be ironical that after Russians were defeated in Crimean War and during the WWII in Sevastopol, the city is still called the city of Russian Naval Glory.

Referring to the interpretation of the historical facts for their use as legitimacy devices, some Serbian interviewed confirmed that the symbolic arguments still work in the Balkans as well. The view that ‘Crimea is special for Russia easily appeal to the minds and the hearts of people in Serbia when it comes to the importance of Kosovo. The recurrent mentioning of the 1389 Kosovopolje battle being the most obvious example in this regard. Nevertheless, several informants also drew attention to the fact that these types of ‘emotional’ arguments of the past cannot replace international regulations. “Its 21st century. You cannot use historical arguments of this kind to challenge borders” (Sokie, 2016). History should not be invoked to justify changing borders, especially not after the horror of the WW2. “You can always manipulate with history. Everywhere, around the globe. When you need some arguments, it is easy to take them from history. When you need to prove something else, you choose other events from the history” (Minic, 2016). However, Bogdanovic (2016) highlights also that “Serbian politicians have abused the Kosovo narrative. And what are the results? You have Serbia as it was in the XIX century. Those methods and those discourses proved inefficient on long term”.

c. “The ethnicization of territory”. The correlation between ethnicity and territory

All the Ukrainian experts and a part of Russian one agreed that Russian ethnics in Crimea have not been subjected to policies of assimilation or Ukrainization. In fact, there were about 500 Russian schools and less than 10 Ukrainian in Crimea. Indeed, the Ukrainian was the only official language, the documents and the advertisements were written in Ukrainian and the foreign movies were dubbed in Ukrainian, however, this created some discomfort not oppression (Baunov 2016). Russian and Ukrainian languages are mutual understandable. Russian has always been used as a second language not only in Crimea but in the whole Ukraine. In everyday life and even in state institutions Russian has been largely used, in real practice one can choose which language wants to speak. Even nowadays the language of communication in many
volunteer battalions that fight on behalf of Kiev authorities in Donbas is Russian. In an odd way, Russians fight against Russians on Ukrainian territory. “Probably Ukraine is the only territory in the world where you have Russians that became Russophobes” (Myroshnichenko 2016).

Referring to the right of the local population to decide their future, the Ukrainian experts consider that in Crimea only the three indigenous populations: Tatars, Karaims, and Krymchak have the right to self-determination. Russians came in Crimea especially after 1945 and their “mental roots” remained in Russia (Smeljanski 2016). On the other side, there were no ethnic conflicts in Crimea, no open clashes, no vivid separatism no real pro-independence party. All the interviewed Ukrainian and part of Russian experts agreed also that there were no physical threats for the Russian population in Crimea, after the Euromaidan.

Evseev (2016) and Oznobishchev (2016) stroke a discordant note, though. The two Russian experts are convinced that the Crimeans were in danger in February-March 2014. However, comparing to Oznobishchev who invokes the Ukrainian nationalists, Evseev believes that the danger came from the local Tatars. He drew attention that in March 2014 the Tatar families sent their wives and children in Ukrainian mainland, and the men suddenly disappeared. This was a warning that they were preparing some battalions to destabilize Crimea, to take the power. Moscow was aware of that. The actions of Crimean Tatars were only prevented by the men sent by Kadyrov in Crimea who threatened the Tatars. Evseev considers also that even if it would have been more legal for Russia only to recognize the independence of Crimea not to annex it, the fact that there were Ukrainian military bases in the peninsula, would have created the risk of military clashes. That is why Russia had no choice but to accept Crimea to join Russia (Evseev, 2016).

When asked to comment on Russia’s rhetoric referring to its duty to defend all Russians citizens wherever they live, several Serbian respondents made a parallel with the previous use of this argument also in the Balkans. „This was the essence of the Milosevic doctrine at the end of 80’s. He was saying that it is their duty to protect all Serbians wherever they are. And then he took all the rights of Albanians living in Kosovo.” (Krasniqi, 2016). Most Serbian informants contested the power of this type of rhetoric “I don’t think that this type of legitimating arguments could revive some secessionist projects in the western Balkans, at least not for the moment. The only country which could use this argument of ‘protecting its own citizens is Serbia. But that’s not realistic. And plus, Serbian nationalism is very different than the Russian one.” (Ostojic, 2016). The example of Milorad Dodic from Republika Srpska (BiH) has been mentioned for several times as the principal exponent of this way of thinking “But he had his own agenda. And we should be aware of the fact that Russia affords this type of behaviour, that Serbia cannot
afford. Plus, the presence of the international organizations and missions, of the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans cannot allow for that type of revisionist behaviour” (Krstic, 2016). Finally, Umland (2016) concluded that the invocation of the right of Russia in Crimea based on ethnic factor reminds the argument that Hitler used when Sudeten territory was annexed.

**Conclusions. Reasons for the instrumentalization of Balkan’s recent past**

The recent events in Ukraine, and especially the annexation of Crimea by Russia through the contested change of borders have challenged the Post-Cold War European order. As such, they offer a new opportunity for studying strategies of instrumentalizing the past in determining foreign policy decisions. The purpose of the research was to analyze the conflict of narratives regarding the secession/annexation of Crimea and the geopolitics embedded with it. Inside the study we tried to look at the impact of Russia’s policy narratives referring to the Kosovo-Crimea parallel in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. As such, we formulated the main hypothesis to be tested in the present article is as follows: Russia has used the precedent of Kosovo’s self-determination process to legitimize the annexation of Crimea.

The article was grounded on a series of constructivist theoretical tools of analysis in order to outline how official state discourses justify foreign policy decisions. Especially in the context of foreign policy making, where the strategy of selecting and then using one version of the past which fits short term political purposes, or the reinterpretation of the international law have become common practices for the legitimation of certain decisions.

The starting point of our analysis was the observation that two main opposing narratives have emerged in the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian Crisis – one that confirmed the validity of the Kosovo-Crimea parallel made by Vladimir Putin in March 2014, and one that contested the validity of this parallel. After putting together official statements, experts’ opinions and interviews our analysis showed that even these two stories dominate the rhetorical space of the 2014 Crimean crisis, many more perspectives exist.

The article showed that in designing and performing foreign policy narratives, Russia refers extensively to legal norms and international law instrumentalizing them as legitimacy mechanism. Russia’s incorporation of Crimea opened a Pandora’s box of historical references both from the Russian and the Western side. Many considered that the Russian-Western oppositional binary triggered by the annexation of Crimea was a re-ignition of the Cold War
rhetoric. We therefore assumed that, just as in the case of the Cold War, the confrontation took
place in two battlegrounds - the proxies with the military side, and the symbolic space, where a
subtle war of meanings unfolded. The purpose of the research was to analyze this conflict of
narratives regarding the secession annexation of Crimea and the geopolitics embedded with it.
As such, a foreign policy analysis directed towards the competing claims referring to the
annexation of Crimea show that those narratives influence not only diplomatic practice, but also
experts perceptions on the subject.

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