

Geopolitical Case of Crimea: The Southern Watchtower

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Abstract

This article aims to present the issue of “Annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation in 2014” to the wider audience in a descriptive manner, providing recent historical background of the issue, selected international responses towards the developments of this crisis and to explain it using the theory of structural realism, with its close counterparts of geopolitics and geostrategy. To deepen the understanding of Russian foreign policy in this matter, a theory of “Landbridge & Watchtowers” have been coined and explained by the author as an attempt at analyzing Russian motivations for the annexation. Also, the author would like to argue that Russian Federation used political liberalism, another well-established theory in International Relations field, to further its *realpolitik* agenda.

Keywords: neorealism; structural realism, geopolitics, geostrategy, Crimea, Crimean Peninsula, Russia, Russian Federation.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is to present the geopolitical power transference event, popularly known as the “Annexation of Crimea in 2014” from the scientific perspective of structural realism. As the recent history showed, this event (singularly; although singled out from the broader chain of events known as Ukrainian Crisis) is one of the most important political occurrence that has happened in Europe since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This event had a profound effect on the post-Cold War *status quo* of the European continent, becoming a security risk, straining existing series of international agreements and antagonizing states on both sides of the issue. It is was a very popular topic in the contemporary media, during which a “media war” was being fought between interested parties, in which the portrayal of events was heavily burdened with bias, opinion-making and propaganda.

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Because of this – the importance of the issue and the cloud of manipulation surrounding it – the topic requires a series of academic studies. Annexation of Crimea in 2014 has to be deconstructed, analyzed and described by political scientists in order to fully comprehend the issue and its implications. In this paper, the author will provide an attempt at understanding the issue using a series of tools and scientific theories collected in the broad camp of structural realism (also known as neorealism).

The following research will aim to discuss these points:

To use realist perspective to analyze whether Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea was influenced by the European Union's scheduled expansion into Ukraine and to analyze whether the annexation of Crimea was influenced by geopolitics and geostrategy.

To explore whether perspective of liberalism was used by Russian Federation as a tool of foreign policy.

To present the author's theory of "Landbridge & Watchtowers", which has roots in Russian history and geopolitics.

The first objective directly touches the "spheres of influence" concept, which was one of the elements consisting the classical realism theory and was transferred to the more modern, structural realism theory. This objective presents a view, that the European Union's supposed plans of expanding into Eastern Europe would collide with the Russian Federation's foreign relations paradigm known as *blizhneye zarubezhye* (Russian for "near abroad") - in other words, EU would intrude upon RF's sphere of influence. It also expands to pursue another set of theories considered components of political realism – geopolitics and geostrategy – as a method of explanation of the course of action undertaken by Russia after acknowledging the EU's incursion into Russian "near abroad" sphere of influence. Those theories can explain the annexation as a strategic move to re-consolidate Russia's position in Eastern Europe, even if Ukraine would become closer with the rival Western powers. This objective will explain the geographical importance of Crimean Peninsula as a regional strategic asset. The second objective represents author's perception, that in contemporary international relations, liberal principles (such as the self-determination of nations and international law treaties) are used as a tool of applied political realism, both as a factor strengthening the soft power of a given nation and as a justification for hard power actions. Further in the paper, an explanation will be provided, that Russia has used preexisting precedence of international law to justify its decisions, while at the same time Western powers criticized Russia's annexation of Crimea as being unlawful in the international law context. The third and last objective would be an effort to present one of the possible explanations of the importance of Crimean Peninsula in a wider geostrategical scheme meant to "safeguard" the most historically exploited "route" to Russia by a "bridge of land" and to "keep a watch" on the Western countries.

The research question, which sparked the neorealist analysis of this paper is as follows:

“Why Russian Federation annexed Crimea when Ukraine considered joining European Union?”

The assumption, that Ukraine would join European Union stems from an extended period of progressively

closer relations between the two entities, and the impending signing of „association documents” by Ukrainian Yanukovich government. This will be explained further in the following background section.

The literature concerning the political ramifications of this occurrence available on the market and in the libraries has been steadily rising – but, due to the fact that the issue is still „fresh” concerning history, the amount of research from neorealist perspective is relatively limited. Books such as *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* by Richard Sakwa, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* by Andrew Wilson take the annexation of Crimea as one part of the broader Ukrainian Crisis – as one of many interrelated issues concerning that country in the period from 2013 up until now (2016), whereas titles such as *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy* by Alexander Sergunin and (notably controversial) *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (Rus. “Foundations of Geopolitics: Geopolitical Futures of Russia”) by Alexander Dugin provide a broader understanding of the Russian side's perception of the whole „Ukrainian affair” [1, 2, 3, 4]. We note that the issue of Crimean Peninsula warrants a separate study on its own, as the problem concerns the IR arena considerably more, while other linked issues, as Euromaidan or the civil war with pro-Russian separatists, were of a more internal nature (although heavily influenced by outside parties and factors). This issue is the focal point of the book *Crimea, Global Rivalry, and the Vengeance of History* by Hall Gardner (which, nevertheless, provides much bigger picture of the situation by showing the cascade of events which led to the annexation) [5]. This paper picks up after the above-mentioned titles and pinpoints the exact nature of importance of Crimean Peninsula.

Following research hypothesis is our deduction based on the literature review:

“The shift in Russian Federation's foreign policy towards Crimea was a response to counter the evolving European Union's expansion into Ukraine.”

Both the question and hypothesis follow the “why” pattern, one of the common in academia to present and tackle the scientific issues. The hypothesis is broken down to variables, which in this case are as follows:

Independent variable: evolution of European Union's expansion policy.

Dependent variable: shift in Russian Federation's foreign policy towards Crimea.

The core, independent variable of the hypothesis assumes that the supposed EU's expansion into Ukraine has been a process, evolving with time and shaped by political and economic events. The variable which is dependent on this deals with the assertive, demonstrates a shift in relations between Ukraine and Russia, following the latter's response to the European encroachment on it's “turf”.

To successfully research the topic, a set of coherent methods and established theories were used. The methodology consists of two main principles: scholarly debate (the paper will put forth a set of arguments promoting the hypothesis; those arguments – and the conclusion – will be crafted as being suitable for a debate) and secondary sources (the research will be conducted using secondary sources; qualitative research will be required and preferred over quantitative due to the nature of theoretical framework presented further). As for the

theoretical framework, the mentioned before theories of neorealism, geopolitics and geostrategy were used to present and maintain the scientific argumentativeness of this paper. What follows is the definition of those theories:

Neorealism - Scientifically proven by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979) [6], where he reformulated the classical realism theory in accordance with the requirements of modern scientific thinking. Also called structural realism, it is a theory of IR which postulates, that the most important factor in IR is power. The amount of power that a state has translates into ability to pursue its interests and acquire relative gains. From a neorealist perspective, the world of IR is an anarchic place, where the position and influence of each actor is determined by its power. Neorealism theory is different from classical realism. Classics argued that state's behaviour is determined by a combination of strategy, motivation and egoism, while neorealists postulate that structural constraints of the nation state are the determinant. This theory is used by the author for the analysis part and as a basis of further theories of geopolitics and geostrategy.

Geopolitics & Geostrategy - a scientific field, researching the impact of geographical factors on socio-political events and processes. Academic geopolitics is an interdisciplinary science, which focuses itself on geographical determinants concerning the creation, functioning and dissolution of states. Applied geopolitics is one of the principal methods of conducting a foreign relations policy, basing itself on geographical determinism and spatial thinking. It perceives the states as locked in conflicts of interests and constant competition to expand their sphere of influence. Geostrategy is an example of such applied geopolitics. Its is a type of foreign policy based on geographical factors, as they in turn influence the military and political situation and possibilities of a specific state. A successful geostrategy would be closely intertwined with the capabilities of a state – in other words, it would be concerned with matching the means (i.e. resources which the state commands) to ends. Both of them are derived from different national perspectives, with different scholars diverging in their theories and view on geopolitics – essentially, they are mainly influenced by the point of view of a specific country. For this paper, Russian Federation's POV on geopolitics has been used.

The paper is divided into six sections: this Introduction, Background, International Response, Concept of “Landbridge & Watchtowers”, and Analysis from Geopolitics Perspective. The Background section aims in informing the reader about the foundations of the issue at hand, while the second deals with ripples in the International Relations arena that has been felt as a consequence of the annexation. Those are followed by a brief observation made by the author concerning the supposed existence of a “landbridge” between Russia proper and Central-Western Europe, secured by Russian-controlled “watchtowers” on the northern and southern sides. The last chapter deals with the author's attempt at political/diplomatic analysis from the neorealist perspective.

This research is expected to provide an original contribution to academic knowledge by presenting the author's theory of „Landbridge & Watchtowers”, and to present nowadays situation in Europe as essentially realist (in terms of structural realism and geopolitics), while at the same time acknowledging the liberalist point of view (and indeed using it as a tool to further national interests). It has been written to provide a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, to closely look on contemporary power balance in Eastern Europe region – and the clash of

interests of parties involved. It should also extend the understanding of realist theory to contemporary times and use it in explanatory manner, to analyze the problem of Crimean annexation – proving, that the IR system is still the domain of conflicting national interests.

2. Background

As defined by the most popular internet encyclopedia: “The Crimean Peninsula is a major land mass on the northern coast of the Black Sea that is almost completely surrounded by both the Black Sea and the smaller Sea of Azov to the northeast. The peninsula is located south of the Ukrainian region of Kherson and west of the Russian region of Kuban. It is connected to Kherson Oblast by the Isthmus of Perekop and is separated from Kuban by the Strait of Kerch. The Arabat Spit is located to the northeast, a narrow strip of land that separates a system of lagoons named Sivash from the Sea of Azov.” [7].

Crimean Peninsula has been described as a multicultural region with no indigenous people, settled throughout time by different peoples coming from different groups and nations. As a “neutral” region, settled in a distinct strategic location (controlling the Black Sea from its northern side), it has been a highly contested place in history – spurring many regional entities to stake their claim on the peninsula (from Byzantine and Genoan colonists, through Tatar vassals of the Golden Horde [later forming independent Crimean Khanate], Cossack sietches, Kingdom [later Republic] of Poland, Ottoman Empire, Tsardom [later Empire] of Russia, to modern time Nazi Germany [during the Second World War] and Soviet Union, to contemporary republican Ukraine and currently Russian Federation) either through colonization, vassalage, conquest or modern “soft” political practices.

After Second World War, the peninsula remained as part of Soviet Union (as the Crimean Oblast of Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, main part of the USSR) up until year 1954 – it was then, when the Supreme Soviet of USSR transferred Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (technically still a part of USSR, but with limited internal power as a distinct “province”) under the direction of the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, Joseph Stalin's successor. It was described both as a personal gesture by the General Secretary (as quoted by sources: “It was somewhat symbolic, somewhat trying to reshuffle the centralized system and also, full disclosure, Nikita Khrushchev was very fond of Ukraine, so I think to some degree it was also a personal gesture toward his favorite republic. He was ethnically Russian, but he really felt great affinity with Ukraine.” [8]) and economical (with the construction of hydroelectric dam on Dnieper River; supposedly to bring the local administrations together to remove the unnecessary bureaucracy [9]). The city-fortress of Sevastopol, home of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, was left as an enclave of Russian SFSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimean Peninsula remained in the Ukrainian borders as Autonomous Republic of Crimea, with Sevastopol controlled by the newly-formed Russian Federation.

The roots of the conflict came from the eventual expansion of Western powers towards the Eastern Europe – Finland (also qualified as Northern Europe), the Baltic States and, lately, Ukraine. As a designated priority partner in the European Neighborhood Policy [10], a foreign relations policy aiming at fostering cooperation

between European Union and its neighboring states, Ukraine has been looked on favourably by the EU. Throughout the post-Soviet decades, trade between the two entities grew, consisting of one third of all Ukrainian-foreign trade in 2012 (another one-third of the deals was made with Russia). In that year, both parties made their intentions known to sign an agreement, which would bring the relationship to a higher level – the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement. It was supposed to be a step at coordinating economical and legislative concepts, such as economic policies, legislation, abolishment of visas, equalization of worker's rights, judicial cooperation (as in exchange of personnel and information), provision of access for Ukraine to European Investment Bank and modernisation of that country's energy infrastructure. It was also to establish, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area” between the parties involved (extraterritorial free trade zone in league with Georgia, Moldova and now Ukraine; similar to European Free Trade Association, a free trade zone made between EU, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland [11, 12]). Despite the political will, dialogue and regular summits of soon-to-be signatories, suddenly, on 21st of November, 2012, the signing of the Agreement was stalled by Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) due to political concerns over releasing former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko from custody and transferring her to EU for medical reasons – as was demanded by EU [13].

This politically motivated wrangling did not only stall the signing of the Agreement (and put to question the 20 years of gradually developing relations between Ukraine and European Union), but also ignite the ire of the Ukrainian populace, which showed their displeasure with President Viktor Yanukovich's government in a protracted event known as Euromaidan. This was a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest. Yanukovich's government attempted a dispersal of protesters on 30th of November, which had an exact opposite effect, igniting the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. Yanukovich was ousted from power and fled to Russia. This, in turn, sparked resentment in the Russophone populations of Eastern and Southern Ukraine, Donbass and Crimea in particular, with counter-demonstrations and other actions, displaying pro-Russian sentiments.

The Autonomous Republic of Crimea's parliament called for extraordinary meeting on 21st of February, 2014 – just one day after the oust of Yanukovich from Kiev. Given, that the Russophone Crimean populace was in support of him and his Party of Regions rule and against Euromaidan and its claims for strengthening ties with European Union, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke words about „returning Crimea to Russia” [14], it was to be expected that Crimea will explode in separatist tendencies. Starting from Sevastopol, anti-Ukrainian demonstrations spread throughout the peninsula, with civil unrest and open disobedience, going as far as to create “self-defence” or “civil defense” groups, assaulting pro-Ukrainian demonstrations in Simferopol (capital of Crimean Oblast) and attacking local governmental institutions which still declared themselves for the interim Ukrainian government [15]. Starting from 28th of February, the situation took a new turn, when the so-called „little green men” (or „polite people”) - organized and heavily armed paramilitary forces (in reality, units hailing from Russian Special Forces – the Spetsnaz) started to take over key points of the Crimean Peninsula – civil administration buildings, energy infrastructure, air and naval ports – and blocked Ukrainian military installations, eventually taking them over one by one, ousting Ukrainian soldiers – effectively pacifying any chance at organised resistance (especially considering that the interim government issued non-resistance directives, while the Ukrainian military units present on Crimean soil were demoralised – even to an extent, that up half of troops defected to the Russian side). On 17th of March, despite being deemed unconstitutional by the

Constitutional Court of Ukraine and despite its lack of international recognition, Autonomous Republic of Crimea held a referendum for the Crimean political status. The results were overwhelmingly in favour of rejoining Russia. A day later, Crimea has declared independence and immediately signed a draft treaty with Moscow. On 21st of March, President Putin signed the final version of the document, making the annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation a reality [16].

3. International Response

In general, the international community reacted very poorly towards Crimea's annexation. Official stance by the EU was condemnatory of RF decision and in full support of Ukrainian territorial integrity. On 1st of March, EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, issued a statement condemning Russian military intervention in Ukraine, urged all parties to seek options through dialogue and that, quoting: "The unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected at all times and by all sides. Any violation of these principles is unacceptable. More than ever, restraint and sense of responsibility are needed." [17]. This statement was in league with the one issued by Council of Europe on 7th of March, legitimizing the new Ukrainian government and the territorial integrity of its land [18]. Later that month, the council condemned the referendum itself [19].

On 2nd of March, Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, called a meeting of North Atlantic Council, which expressed condemnation of Russia's military escalation in Crimea and said it was a breach in international law – UN Charter, Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and Treaty on Friendship and Communication of 1997 between Russia and Ukraine [20].

The Visegrád Group, one of the most important international organizations in the Central-Eastern European region, consisting of four former Red Bloc countries: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, issued a joint statement on 4th of March addressing both sides of the conflict – Russia, to act in accordance with international (namely the Budapest Memorandum) and Ukrainian law in the issue concerning Ukrainian territorial integrity and Ukraine, to take its minority groups (i.e. Russophones/Russians) into consideration. The Visegrád countries also commented on the issue from historical viewpoint: "The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are appalled to witness a military intervention in 21st century Europe akin to their own experiences in 1956, 1968 and 1981."

As for the United Nations, there was a two-pronged reaction towards the problem. The UN Security Council (actually United States of America, one of the permanent members of the council) proposed a draft resolution in condemnation of the 2014 Crimean referendum, calling it invalid and urging other states to not recognize it. The draft was vetoed by Russia (another permanent member), which resulted in scrapping of the resolution [21]. Another venue of counter towards the annexation from the UN's perspective was through the General Assembly. It has gathered on 27th of March on an 80th Plenary (and 68th session) meeting to put to vote Resolution 68/262 "Territorial integrity of Ukraine". The Resolution was to be a reaffirmation of General Assembly's commitment towards Ukrainian territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and a declaration of international invalidity of the 2014 Crimean referendum. The Resolution was adopted, with 100 member-states

for, 11 against, 58 abstaining and 24 absent. However, the Resolution had a non-binding character, not consisting of the international law regime. It was nonetheless introduced by Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine itself [22].

4. The Concept of “Landbridge & Watchtowers”

In accordance with the theory of “Landbridge & Watchtowers”, the geostrategical reason for annexing Crimea by RF was its peculiar position on the map of Europe. It has to be noted, that all of the conflicts with Russia on the defending side, and among them all conflicts which seriously threatened contemporary Russian states with conquest by a foreign power, were perpetuated on its European part, in a strip of “bridge” land extending from nowadays Kaliningrad Oblast to Crimean Peninsula. Starting from the times of Principality of Muscovy's and Tsardom of Russia's wars with contemporary powers (Kingdom of Poland / Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Ukrainian Cossacks, Crimean Khanate and Ottoman Empire), through wars during the Empire of Russia period (with Kingdom of Sweden, Napoleonic France and German Empire), to World War II (with Nazi Germany). Of these, conflicts with Poland, France and Germany were particularly dangerous and costly to the Russian states, oftentimes won only through attrition, adverse natural conditions and a great sacrifice in blood, sweat and steel. All of those conflicts left Russian state with a defensive mentality towards Western Europe. The securing of Königsberg (later Kaliningrad) and its vicinity (formerly part of East Prussia, now Kaliningrad Oblast), and now Crimean Peninsula, while still holding Sevastopol, is a clear geostrategical move to secure the extremes of Eastern European “Landbridge” towards Russia proper using heavily militarized and fortified exclaves – the “Watchtowers” with access to two seas most important for Russian trade and naval forces – the Baltic and Black seas, respectively. Those exclaves provide a series of benefits in the geopolitical mode of thinking: they serve as trading hubs, “gates to the West”, military bases with defensive and offensive capabilities, and deterrents towards any foreign power which would be poised to attack Russia proper from the “Landbridge” direction.

5. Analysis from Geopolitics Perspective

In author's opinion, the problem of Crimea in 2014 and its annexation is a model contemporary case study of applied realpolitik. From the EU perspective, the entirety of the last two decades of deepening contact with Ukraine was a battle of wills with the RF. Ukraine was “traditionally” considered by Russia and many other parties as its “backyard”, one of the biggest recipients of the Russian chief foreign relations policy of “near abroad” – a policy which postulates, that RF and other former Soviet Socialist Republics (with a partial exception for Baltic States) share a special “link” and should foster cooperation and partnership between themselves. In reality, it is a form of reaffirming Russia's sphere of influence in post-Soviet times. Without the distinction between “near” and “far” abroad, Russia would have to rebuild its connections with the outside world from scratch. “Near abroad” and the Commonwealth of Independent States were an attempt at securing Russia in an uncertain transitory time (i.e. the collapse of the Soviet Union) future legitimization of potential geopolitical movements and re-acquisition of a status as a regional/global power. Ukraine was considered key element in Russian foreign affairs as a vital trade partner and “buffer state”, separating weakened, post-Soviet Russia from the Western powers, victorious in Cold War. While Russia was dealing with political transformation, civil unrest and conflicts in Caucasus Mountains (especially Chechnya), it could not (and,

indeed, was unwilling) stop the declaration of independence from its Eastern European and Central Asian parts – but it could still exert a considerable influence on them and, given time, escalate this in conjunction with a supposed renaissance of Russian power. As for the EU during the Cold War period: the organization was not on the frontlines against the Soviets, being a fledgling concept which would take decades to mature into the political and economic entity as it was in the beginning of 21st Century. After the crumbling of Warsaw Pact, former socialist countries made their political transformations and began a full drive towards the West, represented by EU and NATO. When the EU acquired most of those countries, it faced a much tougher prospect. A test. Ukraine, which was already a prominent trading partner for the Union and a future prospect for membership. This time however, the Union upped the stakes – aside from economical and legislative cooperation (and requirements from Ukraine, if it was to expand its relations with EU), which was made with all former prospective members before accession, this time EU has proven, that it had grown from just an economical coop/free trade zone to a political entity with its own geopolitical plans. The European Union demanded, that the political leaders of the failed pro-Western “Orange Revolution” be transferred to EU territory for “medical reasons” (effectively ending their incarceration). This was a huge dilemma for Yanukovich's government – in the eyes of Russia, Russophone Ukrainians and other parties, the release of political prisoners (with guilt proven by Ukrainian judiciary) most likely would result in political suicide. At the same time, Russia has presented a counter offer to Ukraine in terms of a new partnership between select countries of the CIS. It can be assumed, that those were the official reasons for suspension of the Association Agreement with the EU. In short, Europe played a gamble: testing its political power on a “contested” state which lied on a verge of a late and dormant superpower (which had begun to rise into realpolitik prominence again – see the Russo-Georgian War of 2008), while Russia tried to salvage the situation by pulling its “buffer state” closer to itself once again, offering supposedly better economic incentives. From the late Ukrainian government's perspective, the situation was unwinnable – politically and economically torn between two great powers of the European continent, with sizable fractions of populace supporting one over another and with dubious practices concerning their political prisoners, it was to be expected that the situation would deteriorate. And indeed, it had – with Euromaidan. And indeed, it has escalated with the counter-demonstrations and eventual civil disobedience towards the revolutionary interim government and pro-Russian separatism. And indeed, this separatism meant actual civil war in Eastern Ukraine.

It is important to note however, that Russia had to consider all viable options in this power play with the West, falling back to more violent “plan B” if the economic incentive would prove to be either not enough or irrelevant. RF had a noted tendency to issue its national passports to eligible Russians living as citizens of neighboring countries, which was coupled with another useful (both from a realpolitik and legitimization/soft power viewpoint) foreign policy – the declaration of protection of Russian citizens outside the borders of Russia. Precisely this declaration was used to legitimize the use of the military and to annex Crimea in times of civil unrest and war in Ukraine. Russian passports to Crimean Russophones were issued as far as in 2008 – this could indicate, that RF was laying groundwork for a possible action in Crimea (and/or other “near abroad” regions), using their established foreign policies and Russophone public opinion to justify it [23, 24, 25].

One of the avenues of criticism of the annexation was Russia's violation of numerous international law treaties concerning the territorial integrity of Ukraine, especially the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 (which concerned

itself in moving the post-Soviet nuclear arsenal found in Ukraine to Russia in exchange for assurances of Ukrainian territorial integrity by signatories of the memo). In the eyes of Russia however, the responsibility for its citizens took precedence over other considerations. Indeed, the people of Crimea made their political will known as to rejoin Russia as opposed to remain in a “new” Ukraine. Those sentiments were confirmed by third party sources [26, 27]. As for the legality of the issue, Russia responded with a two-pronged statement: that the transfer of Crimea from Russian SFSR to Ukrainian SSR in 1954 violated the constitutions of both Russian SFSR and USSR; the second was the usage of similar situation concerning partly-recognized state: Kosovo. This Balkan state was one of the prime places for violence between disparate parties after the collapse of Yugoslavia and subsequent civil war of 1998 between its constituent members. The Republic of Kosovo (supported by EU and USA) declared its independence from Serbia (supported by Russia) in 2008 in a bloodless (at least this time, considering two separate conflicts fought over in the region before) action. Nevertheless, Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as a fully independent state. The situation was similar enough with Crimean Peninsula, so Russia used it as a reinforcing argument for Crimean declaration of independence – effectively turning the liberalist ideal of self-determination of peoples against their political enemies (and getting somewhat poetic revenge for the fiasco in Kosovo). All of the above-mentioned arguments show, that Russia is using liberalist principles: usage of international law (albeit in a distorted fashion), “soft” power declarations and, most of all, self-determination of nations, to further its realpolitik.

6. Limitations of the study

As with most forms of scientific study, this research paper has a set of potential limitations and research gaps, which are as follows:

Disinformation: as a highly politicized issue, the parties involved present their own point of view in form of propaganda and carefully distilled information, heavily burdened with bias.

Difficulty in obtaining reliable first-hand information.

Omission of sources in Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar and Russian languages, which would be required for a fully comprehensive study from the point of view of all parties involved.

7. Conclusion

Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is still fresh in memory, especially considering that the Ukrainian Crisis is still ongoing at the time that this paper has been written. The whole issue was a great controversy in the contemporary International Relations theater – a bold move by resurgent Russia to salvage its geopolitical “prize” from the perceived deteriorating situation in Ukraine, responded to by a flurry of condemnations and attempts at negating the effect of Crimean referendum. While Russia had lost a lot of its soft power and legitimacy on the IR arena, it achieved its geostrategical aim of controlling one most important part of Ukraine (and one of two most important features of the Black Sea, with another being the Bosphorus Strait).

It is obvious, that Russian Federation acted in accordance of its own national interest, using its own

interpretation of international law, liberalist principles (upon which, supposedly, the nowadays international system is based) and “soft” political tools to legitimize its re-acquisition of Crimean Peninsula as a strategic asset in the name of security. The European Union also attempted a power play, although extended in time (which would lessen the perceived impact and forcefulness of such an attempt) and using different set of tools to further its own expansion into Eastern Europe, and reacted negatively to the annexation, claiming that Russia is demolishing the existing peace and stability on the continent.

And this is where both sides of the issue speak about the same thing, but with different practicalities – security. In author's opinion, both the European Union and Russian Federation are responsible for the situation at hand: RF for the obvious reasons of using controlled violence and violation of international treaties (of which it was one of signatories); EU for “quiet” opposition towards RF in Eastern Europe and Balkans, creation of precedents which would be thrown back by Russia (problem of Kosovo) and provoking the “Sleeping Bear”.

As such, it is in author's observation, that Europe – and the rest of the world, considering USA's involvement and tensions between it and Russia in the Middle East – stands on the brink of another Cold War, this time different in that both parties are confronting themselves on a diplomatic table with similar arguments and justifications – another round of the great chess play between West and East in their struggle for political domination. One of the way to circumvent this situation – however naive – would be a series of protracted diplomatic engagements between all parties involved, determined on solving the issues of Ukrainian civil war and annexation of Crimea amicably, creating a political compromise and new series of (hopefully) binding legal documents, for example: an agreement of mutual re-affirmation of problematic territories (Donbass region stays in Ukraine, whereas Crimean Peninsula is accepted as part of RF). Another would be to create an international peacekeeping force (under the auspices of either United Nations or a new, *ad hoc* organization), consisting also of Russian and Ukrainian troops, to put an end to hostilities and to safeguard the said territories. One thing is crucial – to avert an advent of a new Cold War, serious re-conciliatory diplomatic actions have to be taken.

8. Recommendations

The author recommends further research into the area of Russian geopolitics, especially in light of recent actions taken by Russian Federation in Ukraine, Crimea and Syria. It would be important to provide both cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of different schools/trends/opinions concerning geopolitics in Russian academic and public discourse. Of special significance would be to scrutinize Alexander Dugin's book *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (the *Foundations of Geopolitics*, mentioned in the literature review). It may be plausible, that Russian powers-that-be did not discard it's geostrategies – if that is so, this warrants a close research (not only through the lens of political realism). Also, it would be beneficial to do research in different case studies, both contemporary and historical, to look for patterns of Russia's governments behaviors concerning geopolitics.

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