

The Impacts of Secessionism within the Framework of International Relations: The Cases of Crimea and Donbass

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ABSTRACT

Secessionism is a significant issue in international relations, having persisted throughout history as a driving force behind numerous conflicts. In recent times, this issue has become more prominent as the world observes the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Central to this conflict are the separatist movements in Crimea and the Donbass region, which have played a key role in triggering the escalation of hostilities. This article aims to clarify the definition, characteristics, and impacts of secessionism within the framework of international relations, with a focus on these two practical cases: the Crimean Peninsula and the Donbass region in Eastern Ukraine. Using qualitative research methods and realism, the study will examine how secessionist movements can influence the stability of global political order. Ultimately, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how secessionist ideologies can serve as catalysts for international conflicts, as seen in the cases of Crimea and Donbass, and how they reshape the geopolitical landscape.

Keywords- Secessionism, International Relations, Crimea, Donbass, Ukraine-Russia War.

I. INTRODUCTION

Secessionism, or the desire of a region or group to break away from a larger political entity to form a separate state, has been a recurring issue throughout history and continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape today. This phenomenon often emerges in multi-ethnic or multi-cultural states where groups feel marginalized or seek greater autonomy, and it has led to some of the most protracted and violent conflicts in modern times. Secessionist movements are driven by various factors, including historical grievances, ethnic or cultural differences, economic disparities, and political oppression. In many cases, these movements are not only about independence or self-determination, but also reflect broader geopolitical

rivalries, where external actors play significant roles in supporting or opposing secessionist efforts.

Historically, the consequences of secessionist movements have had a profound impact on international relations. For instance, the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s resulted in a series of wars that destabilized the Balkans for years. Similarly, the secessionist aspirations of South Sudan culminated in its independence in 2011, but this did not bring lasting peace, as internal conflicts have persisted. In many instances, the success or failure of secessionist movements is influenced by external powers who either support these efforts for strategic gains or oppose them to maintain regional stability. The involvement of international actors, either through diplomacy, sanctions,

or military intervention, often determines the outcome of these movements and reshapes the international order.

In recent years, secessionism has gained renewed global attention, particularly in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This conflict, which began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent rise of pro-Russian separatist movements in Donbass, exemplifies the complexities of modern secessionist movements. Crimea's annexation and the ongoing fighting in Donbass have not only escalated tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but have also drawn in the international community, leading to sanctions against Russia and military support for Ukraine from Western powers. These events have underscored how secessionism can be manipulated by external powers to achieve broader geopolitical objectives, further complicating efforts to resolve the conflicts peacefully.

In this context, secessionism in Crimea and Donbass plays a central role in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, serving as both a cause and a consequence of the conflict. The annexation of Crimea and the rise of separatism in Donbass are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger pattern of geopolitical competition in Eastern Europe, where Russia seeks to reassert its influence over former Soviet territories. This study, therefore, focuses on understanding the dynamics of secessionism in these regions, using qualitative methods and a realist approach to explore the historical, political, and international factors that have contributed to these secessionist movements and their broader implications for international relations. By analyzing the cases of Crimea and Donbass, this research aims to shed light on how secessionist movements can alter regional and global power structures, as well as their potential to ignite prolonged conflicts that impact the stability of the international system.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in the realist theory of international relations to explore secessionism, focusing on the cases of Crimea and Donbass. Qualitative methods such as historical analysis, case studies, and content analysis are used to investigate the underlying causes and broader implications of secessionist movements within the international system. By employing realism, the study frames secessionism as a reflection of power struggles between states, where geopolitical interests drive state behavior. In the cases of Crimea and Donbass, Russia's support for separatist movements aligns with its strategic objectives to increase influence in the region. Historical analysis is central to this research, examining the deep-rooted historical, political, and cultural dynamics that have contributed to the rise of secessionism. The study traces the evolution of these movements, focusing on key

events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea and the pro-Russian separatist activities in Donbass, emphasizing the long-term factors that have shaped the conflicts. The case study method offers a detailed examination of the local and external factors that drive secessionism in both regions, highlighting the impact on regional stability. Finally, content analysis of political speeches, official documents, and media discourses reveals how secessionism is framed and justified by various actors, influencing international responses. Overall, the combination of qualitative methods and realism provides a comprehensive framework to analyze the complexity of secessionism, its roots in regional and global power struggles, and its impact on contemporary international relations.

III. FINDINGS

This study is structured around three central questions to explore the complexities of secessionism and its impact on international relations.

First, the study examines the concept of secessionism, delving into its definition and characteristics. Secessionism refers to the political movement by which a group or region seeks to break away from an existing state to form an independent nation. This concept is closely linked to the principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, often resulting in tensions between the desire for autonomy and the need to maintain state unity. The study also explores the conditions under which secessionist movements arise, such as ethnic, cultural, or economic disparities, and the international legal framework governing secessionist claims.

Second, the study analyzes the practical cases of Crimea and Donbass as empirical examples of secessionism in modern international relations. Crimea's annexation by Russia in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Donbass, where pro-Russian separatists seek independence or integration with Russia, illustrate the complexities of secessionism in a post-Soviet context. These cases provide insight into how historical ties, geopolitical interests, and external interventions shape the trajectory of secessionist movements. The study explores the factors that led to the rise of separatism in these regions and how the actions of both local and international actors have influenced the outcomes.

Finally, the study investigates the effect of secessionism on international relations. The cases of Crimea and Donbass demonstrate how secessionist movements can destabilize regional security, provoke international conflicts, and reshape alliances. The study assesses how secessionism challenges the traditional norms of territorial sovereignty and triggers broader geopolitical rivalries, particularly between Russia and Western powers. These movements also have long-term implications for global power dynamics, as they often prompt international intervention, sanctions, and shifts in

diplomatic strategies, impacting the international system as a whole.

3.1 The concept of secessionism

This study defines secession within the frameworks of international law and relations as the process by which a specific territory—whether colonial or non-colonial—withdraws from an existing state to establish a new sovereign entity. This definition encompasses various aspects while also excluding certain elements that may not be immediately apparent (Glen Anderson, 2013, p.344-345). Firstly, it implies that secession is fundamentally about the act of withdrawal. Secondly, it accounts for both consensual and unilateral forms of secession. Thirdly, it distinguishes secession from irredentism, which involves the incorporation of part or all of an existing state's territory into another state rather than the formation of a new one. Lastly, the definition acknowledges the independence of territories previously under colonial rule as a valid form of secession.

The term "*secession*" has its roots in the Latin words "*se*," meaning "*apart*," and "*cedere*," meaning "*to go*" (Shumet Amare Zeleke, 2023, p.2). This etymology suggests that secession fundamentally involves the act of moving apart or withdrawing. The Oxford English Dictionary reflects this definition, describing secession as "[t]he action of seceding or formally withdrawing from an alliance, a federation, a political or religious organization, or the like". Thus, secession can be understood, in a broad sense, as synonymous with withdrawal.

At this stage, it is important to examine whether the concept of secession necessitates endogenous (internal) or exogenous (external) motivations for the entity seeking to secede. At first glance, the definitions of secession mentioned above appear to emphasize the act of withdrawal itself, without requiring a specific motivational context. However, to delve deeper into this question, it is beneficial to consider the definitions of related concepts such as "*annexation*" and "*cession*". By doing so, we can better understand the nuances of secession and the potential motivations that drive a group or territory to seek independence from a larger political entity.

Secessionist movements typically arise under two common conditions: discrimination against minority ethnic groups and the political activities of a nation's elite or larger groups. These movements can evolve through three distinct stages. The first stage occurs when an ethnic group is dissatisfied with its position within a state, but makes no formal demands. The second stage is characterized by a request for autonomy, while the third stage represents the highest level of discontent, where the ethnic group actively advocates for complete separation (Ryabinin, 2017).

The trajectory of a secessionist movement is influenced by the interplay of various factors, including national interests, international recognition, and

operational strategies. The motivations behind secessionist movements are complex, drawing from a mix of cultural, religious, ideological, ethnic, civilizational, and economic components. Among these, ethnic identity and nationalism stand out as pivotal forces, historically recognized as fundamental drivers of secessionism (Ryabinin, 2017). Additionally, negative sentiments of one ethnic group toward another, or towards immigrants within the same nation, can further fuel these movements. This is evident in cases like BREXIT and referendums in regions such as Hungary, Scotland, Crimea, and Catalonia. For example, the imposition of restrictive policies by progressive Ukrainian political parties against Russian speakers regarding language, cultural traditions, and historical narratives has elicited significant backlash from Russian communities, highlighting the tensions that can arise from such discrimination.

The secession process initiates when an ethnic group publicly expresses a desire for separation, and it may culminate in armed conflict if the government opts for either democratic engagement or suppression of discussions. The consequences and impacts of secessionism vary widely depending on the movement's intensity and strategies. Generally, secessionist movements lead to instability, sparking conflicts that affect political, economic, and social aspects at both national and global levels due to their multifaceted nature.

When a secessionist movement concludes, the outcome may create a new international actor that is either an improvement or a detriment compared to the previous state. If the process is resolved through peaceful democratic means, the aftermath might involve only social tensions, policy changes, or non-violent protests. However, if the government chooses to suppress the secessionist group militarily, it could lead to riots, armed conflicts, and economic losses. Furthermore, external interference—such as a secession, leading to 3 annexation by another country or receiving support from a third party—can precipitate regional wars and disrupt global economies, geopolitical dynamics, and the overall order of the international system.

It can be argued that secessionism often manifests in international relations through the emergence of tensions and conflicts between states and regions seeking independence and their parent nations. This pursuit can lead to diplomatic standoffs, economic sanctions, and military confrontations, as governments may respond with force to maintain territorial integrity. For instance, the quest for independence by regions like Catalonia in Spain (Andrea Wagner, Jianna Marin & Dorian Kroqi, 2019) or Scotland in the UK can strain relationships within the European Union, raising questions about sovereignty, self-determination, and the legitimacy of claims to statehood. Furthermore, the international community's reactions can vary, with some countries supporting secessionist movements while

others emphasize the importance of national unity, complicating multilateral negotiations and fostering geopolitical rivalries.

3.2 The practical cases of Crimea and Donbass as empirical examples of secessionism in modern international relations

The historical trajectory of Crimea and Donbass is intertwined with the broader historical narrative of Ukraine, Russia, and their regional interactions. Crimea, located on the northern coast of the Black Sea, has been a strategically significant territory throughout history. Initially settled by various groups, including the Greeks and Tatars, Crimea became part of the Russian Empire in the late 18th century. Following the Russian Revolution, Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921. However, in 1954, under Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Crimea was reassigned to the Ukrainian SSR, a move that would later become contentious as Ukraine sought independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 (Kubijovyč, Volodymyr, 1988).

Donbass, or the Donetsk Basin, is a region rich in natural resources, particularly coal and steel, and has historically been an industrial heartland of Ukraine (Sabine Fischer, 2019. P.7). Like Crimea, Donbass experienced significant demographic changes throughout the 20th century, with a large influx of Russian-speaking individuals from various regions of the Soviet Union. After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Donbass retained a considerable Russian-speaking population, which became a critical factor in the region's political dynamics.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union precipitated the rise of national identities across former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. Although Ukraine established itself as an independent nation, lingering historical ties and the presence of substantial Russian-speaking populations in regions like Crimea and Donbass fueled debates over national identity and sovereignty. Tensions escalated when pro-Russian sentiments emerged in both regions, leading to calls for greater autonomy or even secession.

The issues surrounding secessionism in Crimea and Donbass are rooted in ethnic, linguistic, and historical factors. Following Ukraine's independence, the country's political landscape became polarized, with significant divisions between pro-European and pro-Russian factions. The 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan protests, which aimed to strengthen ties with the European Union, exacerbated these divisions (Peter Dickinson, 2020). Many Russian-speaking citizens in Crimea and Donbass viewed these movements with apprehension, perceiving them as threats to their cultural identity and political autonomy.

The situation deteriorated significantly in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea following a controversial referendum. The Russian government argued that the annexation was necessary to protect the rights of ethnic

Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea, a claim that was widely contested by the international community. The West, led by the United States and the European Union, condemned the annexation as a violation of international law and Ukraine's territorial integrity. This action not only heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but also triggered a broader geopolitical conflict involving NATO and Western powers.

In Donbass, the situation escalated into armed conflict as separatist movements gained momentum, with pro-Russian groups declaring independence in Donetsk and Luhansk in April 2014. The subsequent armed conflict between Ukrainian forces and separatists has resulted in significant loss of life and widespread displacement. The conflict has drawn in external actors, with Russia accused of providing military support to the separatists, while Ukraine has received backing from Western nations.

As of now, the situation in Crimea and Donbass remains fluid and highly contentious. Crimea, now effectively administered by Russia, has undergone significant changes, including the imposition of Russian laws and the integration of its economy into the Russian Federation. The international community, however, largely continues to view Crimea as part of Ukraine, and sanctions have been imposed on Russia in response to its actions. These sanctions, coupled with diplomatic isolation, have strained Russia's economy and international standing, but have not resulted in the reversal of the annexation.

In Donbass, the conflict persists, albeit with fluctuating intensity. The Minsk Agreements, established in 2014 and 2015, aimed to facilitate a ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict (Marie Dumoulin, 2024). However, these agreements have seen numerous violations, and the situation on the ground remains volatile. Efforts to negotiate a lasting peace have faced significant obstacles, including the entrenched positions of both Ukrainian authorities and separatist leaders, as well as external influences from Russia and Western powers.

The humanitarian impact of the conflict in Donbass has been severe, with thousands of casualties and millions displaced (Aleksey Filippov, 2024). Civilians have borne the brunt of the fighting, facing dire conditions, including lack of access to basic services and economic instability. The international community continues to grapple with how to address the humanitarian crisis while navigating the complexities of international law and state sovereignty.

The cases of Crimea and Donbass highlight the intricate interplay between secessionism and international relations. The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Donbass illustrate how secessionist movements can provoke significant geopolitical repercussions, affecting not only regional stability but also international alliances and relations. The response of Western nations to Russia's actions has been marked

by a reaffirmation of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, leading to increased military assistance and economic sanctions against Russia.

The implications of these cases extend beyond Ukraine and Russia, influencing broader international norms regarding sovereignty and self-determination. The principle of territorial integrity is enshrined in international law, yet the dynamics of nationalism and self-determination present complex challenges. Situations in Crimea and Donbass raise important questions about the legitimacy of secessionist claims, the role of external actors in such conflicts, and the potential for future secessionist movements in other regions.

The secessionist movements in Crimea and the Donbass region serve as two illustrative cases of secession influenced by external factors. Crimea sought to break away from Ukraine to join Russia, while the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Donbass aimed for greater autonomy and subsequently declared themselves independent republics. Both secessionist groups received military support and intervention from Russia to resist the Ukrainian government. In 2015, Russia agreed to annex Crimea, and more recently, it recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, citing the need to protect these separatist regions from the Ukrainian government. This marked the beginning of what Russia describes as a "special military operation" rather than an act of aggression.

When a secessionist movement benefits a particular nation or group, that entity will support the insurgents and their secessionist activities. Conversely, if the movement does not align with their interests, they will argue that the secessionists and intervening parties are violating the principle of national sovereignty (Ryabinin, 2017). In the cases of Crimea and Donbass, Russia represents one side, while the opposing side consists of the United States and its Western allies. The secession of these two regions is not merely a territorial issue for Ukraine; it also has significant implications for the interests and security of both sides. The geographical positioning of Ukraine and these two regions plays a crucial role in ensuring Russia's national security and interests.

3.3 The effect of secessionism on international relations

Examining a historical period from the early 20th century to the present, Europe has experienced considerable upheaval characterized by two catastrophic world wars, as well as the unification and eventual the fragmentation of various nations. This tumultuous history reveals a range of serious issues that have arisen or continue to harbor latent risks, making them difficult to resolve swiftly. Key examples include the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Germany.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, many countries achieved independence; however, a significant number of these newly independent states soon faced internal divisions, as seen in Georgia, Ukraine, and

Moldova. Similarly, Yugoslavia fractured into multiple nations, experiencing brutal ethnic and religious conflicts (Astrid S. Tuminez, 2003). Within Serbia, further fragmentation occurred, with Kosovo symbolizing the victory of secessionism and extreme nationalism. Longstanding demands for independence from groups such as the Kurdish people in Turkey, the Basques in Spain, and Corsicans in France have persisted for decades, resulting in extensive human and material losses without arriving at a clear resolution.

One contributing factor to the rise of extreme nationalism associated with secessionist movements in Europe is Kosovo's declaration of independence, which has received recognition from the United States, the European Union, and several other nations (Mirsad Krijestorac, 2016). The recent military actions by the Georgian government aimed at reclaiming the breakaway region of South Ossetia have highlighted the significant risks simmering within the continent, with the potential to ignite conflict at any time. This situation raises alarms about the possibility of similar developments occurring in Moldova, intensifying concerns among observers.

Although extreme nationalism and secessionist tendencies are evident in some regions of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, these challenges are also significant within Europe (Hossein Akbari, 2023, p.160-161). Despite the ongoing process of European integration, which was anticipated to cultivate the lasting peace following World War II, extreme nationalism and secessionist movements continue to emerge within individual nations. This persistent reality fosters conflicts that may remain concealed or erupt into violent confrontations, claiming the lives of millions of innocent individuals. This complex issue is particularly challenging to address, given the intertwined interests of superpowers and alliances that are reluctant to yield to one another.

In this context, the situations in Crimea and Donbass are critical factors contributing to regional security instability in Europe (Tetiana Berkii, 2020, p.117). These areas exemplify the broader challenges facing the continent, showcasing the ramifications of external intervention and the intricate dynamics between national sovereignty and the desire for self-determination. The ongoing conflicts underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive and inclusive strategy to tackle secessionism and its implications for European security.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Crimea Peninsula and the Donbass region have become central flashpoints in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting the crucial role of secessionism in contemporary international relations. This war, which has already spanned several years, continues to have profound consequences for

security, political, economic, and social landscapes not only in Eastern Europe, but globally. The conflict, now a focal point of international diplomacy and geopolitical tensions, underscores the importance of understanding secessionist movements and their far-reaching impacts on the international system.

The secessionist movements in Crimea and Donbass reflect the broader dynamics of ethnic and cultural divisions, power politics, and regional ambitions. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the subsequent rise of separatist movements in Donbass have not only deepened the divide between Russia and Ukraine but also reshaped alliances and power balances in Europe and beyond (Jonathan Masters, 2023). These movements, rooted in historical, ethnic, and political grievances, demonstrate how secessionism can be a slow-burning process that escalates into full-scale regional conflicts. As seen in the case of Ukraine, secessionist movements can serve as triggers for large-scale wars, especially when external powers are involved, further complicating the search for lasting peace and stability.

One of the key takeaways from this conflict is the complex, multifaceted nature of secessionism. There is no single, comprehensive solution that can be applied uniformly to all secessionist movements. Each case must be examined within its unique historical, cultural, and political context. In the cases of Crimea and Donbass, the involvement of external factors, such as Russia and the broader international community, has been a significant factor in shaping the course of the conflict. The situation illustrates how international relations are often shaped by power struggles and geopolitical strategies, with secessionist movements playing a pivotal role in these dynamics.

Looking to the future, it is likely that other secessionist movements will emerge or intensify, potentially leading to further regional conflicts or shifts in the international system. As we live in an increasingly multipolar world, where ethnic diversity, cultural complexity, and historical grievances are ever-present, secessionism will remain a critical issue that demands constant attention and analysis. The international system, transitioning from a bipolar to a multipolar order, is inherently volatile, and as Ryan Griffiths (2016, p.1) aptly stated, “*we are living in an age of secession*”. In this era of shifting global power dynamics, secessionist movements have the potential to significantly alter the geopolitical landscape.

However, it is also important to recognize that not all secessionist movements will result in major geopolitical changes. While some may lead to the creation of new states or political entities, others may fail to gain traction or remain unresolved for long periods. Regardless, the persistence of secessionist ideologies in many regions around the world means that this issue will continue to influence international relations, whether through conflict or diplomacy.

Due to space constraints, this paper has not been able to provide an in-depth analysis of all the aspects of secessionism or the full complexities of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. However, it is hoped that this study serves as a valuable contribution to understanding the role of secessionist movements in modern international relations, particularly through the lens of the Crimea and Donbass cases. Moving forward, continued research into secessionism will be essential for both scholars and policymakers to navigate the ever-evolving challenges of global politics, as secessionism remains a dynamic and often unpredictable force in shaping the future of international relations.

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