



# Continuity and change in instrumentalizing 'The Precedent' How Russia uses Kosovo to legitimize the annexation of Crimea

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## ABSTRACT

The article contributes to the efforts of understanding Russia's legitimization endeavours by looking at the policy narratives centred around the so-called Kosovo precedent and the way they were perceived by different actors from Ukraine, Russia, and international experts. The aim of the paper is to scrutinize the process of politicization of contested international norms (in particular, territorial sovereignty and the right to self-determination) in the case of Russia's legitimacy claims in Ukraine. In assessing the instrumentalization of the 'Kosovo precedent' in the Crimea crisis, we focused on three main elements identified in the selected policy narratives: the reinterpretation of history, the humanitarian and ethnic factor and the reinterpretation of Western actions in the Balkans.

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## 1. Introduction

On 16 March 2014, the legislature of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the local government, Sevastopol held a referendum on the status of the Ukrainian peninsula. 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. According to the organizers of the referendum, 97% of valid votes were in favour of unification with Russia, a fact that occurred several days after.<sup>1</sup>

Six years earlier, Kosovo declared its independence. Both the cases of Kosovo and Crimea have triggered contradictory narratives, either supporting the change of borders based on the principle of self-determination or contesting it as an evident breach of international law. Those narratives have been used by politicians to influence public opinion and legitimize their decisions to the international community. Based on those premises, the present article focuses on the main legitimization discourse (understood as the rhetorical means used for justifying the annexation of Crimea) from the perspective of various actors with contrasting opinions. We were interested in the discourses and processes of Russian foreign policy in