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# ‘Crimea will forever be Russian’: dissenting Norwegian media discourses on Russia’s annexation of Crimea

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## ABSTRACT

The scholarly literature on Russia’s influence in Europe has so far mainly focused on Russia’s influence activities, discussed either as ‘disinformation’ or ‘soft power’. Less attention has been paid to understanding the agency of European audiences receptive to Russian narratives. Through discourse analysis of Norwegian media texts (February 2014 – December 2020) where authors or interviewees accepted or were prone to accept Crimea as part of Russia, this paper investigates into the arguments put forward by these constituencies. Why were commentators, representing various political affiliations, willing to accept Crimea as part of Russia, contrary to Norway’s official position? The paper shows that the Norwegian commentators used many arguments coinciding with the official Russian ones put forward to legitimize the annexation, arguments informed by political realism, pragmatism, sovereignty and in some cases anti-Americanism. However, they also used arguments structured by the socio-political and historical Norwegian context. Constituencies abroad sharing opinions with official Russia *may* provide Russia with a certain soft power. In this case, the fact that these dissenting discourses in Norway represent fringes of the debate on the annexation rather than a strong united opposition to Norway’s official stand, speaks quite clearly of the limited scope of this soft power.

## KEYWORDS

Annexation of Crimea; discourse; Norway; Russian influence; soft power

## Introduction

Russia’s influence in Europe has received much scholarly attention. Most of the literature that investigates Russian influence on other states concentrates on the ‘sender’ (Russia) and pays less attention to the ‘receiver end’. Often it ascribes coincidence between particular positions taken by actors abroad and those of the Kremlin to the Kremlin’s manipulation of public opinion abroad overtly through outlets like Russia Today and covertly in social media (Giles, 2016; Iasiello, 2017; Karlsen, 2019). However, when participants in the debate use Russian arguments as part of their own argumentation, one cannot exclude the possibility that they do it ad hoc and for their own opportunistic purposes. The main driving force behind their engagement is not necessarily to defend Russia.

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Defending Russia's positions for the sake of the current Russian regime may be of secondary importance to them or not even a part of their motivation. Although some arguments may be found to coincide with official Russian ones, supporters of Russian positions may have their own reasons and their own arguments with which they defend a cause, influenced by factors that will vary from country to country. While there are former studies that confirm Russia's ties to specific actors in Europe, this paper is to our knowledge the first one to investigate into the receiver side without having a 'preconceived' idea about which actors to look at. Through discourse analysis of media debates where support for Russian positions is expressed, we are able not only to extract the arguments used to support a cause to the Kremlin's favour, but to say something about the constituency expressing these opinions – the receiver end.

This article identifies occurrences in the Norwegian debate of support for, or at least understanding of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and/or willingness to accept Crimea as part of Russia, in the period from the annexation took place until the end of 2020. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has most likely altered the possibilities to align with Russian positions for one's own ad hoc or opportunistic purposes in significant ways that remain to be studied, however, this paper is a testimony of understudied currents in European public debate prior to the invasion.

Most West European political leaders were soon to condemn the annexation and Russia's subsequent military involvement in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In Norway, unlike for example in Germany (Wood, 2020), France (Rosenberger & Morley, 2019), Italy (Makarychev & Terry, 2020) or Austria (Weidinger et al., 2017), no current prominent political leaders have expressed views suggesting that the Russian annexation of Crimea should be recognised. The official consensus, however, has been challenged by some dissenting voices in the public debate.

How is the annexation of Crimea represented in these dissenting Norwegian discourses? What are the arguments used by authors in favour of accepting Crimea as a part of Russia and to what extent do these arguments coincide with official Russian arguments used to legitimize the annexation? Who are the Norwegian actors expressing these views, what political affiliations do they have? What other debates than the actual annexation of Crimea do they link up with and to what extent do they make use of the event in Crimea to underpin their own general argument? Investigating into the arguments employed we are able to address the question of why some Norwegians challenge the official Norwegian position on the annexation.

While some of the arguments coincide or partly coincide with official Russian arguments used to legitimize the annexation (Leichtova, 2016; Dimova & Umland, 2020), we also find arguments shaped by the specific Norwegian context. The types of arguments employed by the critics of the official Norwegian position range from support to Crimea's alleged rightful belonging as part of Russia, via acceptance of a state's legitimate protection of their own spheres of interest, to pragmatic considerations of what serves the interests of Norway given its position as an immediate neighbour to Russia. Our analysis finds that a variety of arguments are often used in combination, though with different accents by different contributors in the debate. We also find that these dissenting views are expressed both in mainstream media and more fringe publications at both the nationalist right and radical left ends of the political spectrum.

## Theoretical approach

In the current literature on Russia's influence or potential influence abroad we find two dominant strands, one discussing Russian influence primarily as being a result of targeted disinformation and the other one as a result of a more elusive 'soft power'. In the literature on Russia's influence in European countries beyond the post-Soviet realm, which is the focus of this article, both strands of literature tend to emphasise the intentions and practices of Russia and pay less attention to how Russia's messages are reflected and made use of by its interlocutors in Europe.

### *Disinformation*

Disinformation has been defined as a socio-technical assemblage, consisting of platform designs, algorithms, human factors and political and commercial incentives (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020). Moy and Gardon (2020) make a distinction between false information intended to cause harm, false information spread by people who are unaware that it is false, and genuine information that is spread to cause harm.

Several authors argue that Russia has gradually improved its capacities for 'information warfare' in the internet age as lessons have been drawn from the conflict in Chechnya to the annexation of Crimea (Giles, 2016; Iasiello, 2017; Allen & Moore, 2018). The disinformation literature contributes insights into the methods used by Russia to 'pollute' discourse not through the dissemination of outright falsehoods but rather by creating doubt about the concepts of truth and objective political facts, among others through outlets like RT and Sputnik (Giles, 2016; Iasiello, 2017; Richey, 2018; Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2018; Moy & Gardon, 2020). The literature on disinformation from Russia-based senders is characterised by being sender-centred. It is primarily concerned with Russia's manipulatory techniques, and it fails to take into account that actors abroad may actually share the opinion of the Russian establishment on certain issues.

### *Soft power*

Exercising soft power is a far more complex operation than disinformation because it draws on the elusive power of attraction. It makes strict demands on the sender. As a concept soft power had a breakthrough with Joseph S. Nye's book and article in 1990 in which he defined it as what happens 'when one country gets other countries to want what it wants' (Nye, 1990, p. 166) through the 'power of attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye, 2004, p. 256). Nye's first writing on soft power was about US soft power and it has been held against the concept that the American global cultural hegemony makes it a unique case that prohibits the concept from travelling to other cases.

However, a large literature on Russia and soft power has emerged, and the concept has been applied for Russia's foreign policy far beyond policies concerning its near abroad and the Russophones worldwide (Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016; Laruelle, 2017; Keating & Kaczmarek, 2019; Fisher, 2021; Tsvetkova & Rushchin, 2021). Common for this literature is that it has embraced the insight that soft power is not just another word for liberalism in the study of international relations but may fit easily into realist analysis as well. As noted by Ohnesorge (2020, p. 64), soft power is not normative in nature. It is a form of power

that can be used ‘with both noble and reprehensible intentions’. With this turn, the soft power literature is a promising point of departure to study the links between non-democratic states and illiberal groups in other countries.

To a large extent, however, and similar to the literature on disinformation, the literature on Russia’s soft power so far has failed to discuss the possibility that segments of the population and key actors at the receiver end are receptive to Russian positions not primarily because they are seduced but because they are attracted to key aspects of what the current Russian regime represents, or simply agree with elements in Russia’s argumentation on key issues. The receptive audience outside Russia is close to being deprived of agency.

### ***Receivers having agency***

Building on the insights from the scholarly research on disinformation and soft power our aim is to bring in the aspect of agency among those making use of official Russian arguments, knowingly or not. Research has substantiated the existence of pro-Russian positions, for instance among European political parties. These parties tend to appeal to voters who embrace Euroscepticism, cultural conservatism and anti-immigration (Snegovaya, 2021). Onderco (2019) found that only the parties for which nationalism is the defining feature, tend to have positive views of Russia. Since 2012 and the inauguration of Vladimir Putin as president for the third time, Russia has developed into an increasingly non-liberal state with an explicit conservative ideology (Laruelle, 2017; Diesen, 2020). People who react negatively to what Müllerson (2016) has called the homogenisation of the world as a whole and the heterogenisation of individual societies may feel they have a model in Russia. The existence and growth of these currents, however, does not mean that their positions are results of Russia having identified and made use of internal cleavages and divisions abroad. Marlene Laruelle (2020) sees ‘sovereignism’ as an export product of Russia’s illiberalism, however, as she notes, not all traces of illiberalism and sovereignist thinking in Europe may be traced to Russia. Rather ‘Moscow can take advantage of the confluence of interests that exists between Russian promoters of illiberalism and illiberals abroad’ (Laruelle, 2020, p. 126). In a similar vein, Snegovaya (2021) argues that groups whose positions align with the Kremlin rarely operate with agendas that are set by the Kremlin. Rather, these agendas are the results of opportunistic considerations.

We take issue with the assumption that ‘receivers’ whose positions are close to those of official Russia are by necessity Russian ‘influencers’ as claimed in a report from the Atlantic Council (Bogen, 2018), merely manipulated, attracted by Russia as such or both. The disinformation/soft power assumption may stand in the way of catching sight of important dynamics in which receivers support Russian positions for their own purposes rather than being transmitters of Russian narratives. Our focus, therefore, is less on the ‘sender’ than on the ‘receiver end’. This is in line with a relatively recent turn in the soft power literature, endorsed by Nye (2010, p. 4), to emphasise the role of the receivers (see e.g. Feklyunina, 2016; Hudson, 2015). The very term ‘receiver’ may be misleading. ‘Users’ might be more apt as we have no evidence that ‘receivers’ whose opinions coincide with official Russian ones have consumed Russian media or been influenced by Russia in any other way. Opening up for the possibility that ‘receivers’ possess agency may bring new insight

into how messages sent by Russia are being used by constituencies abroad who knowingly or not refer to them and how Russia therefore may be said to possess certain soft power just by the fact of these constituencies sharing Russian positions. The actual reference to such narratives is likely to be structured by the national context in which the 'receivers' operate, including underlying political conflict lines and historical memories.

### ***The Norwegian receivers***

In several European countries, there are political parties that based on their programmatic statements or statements from leading officials have been identified as pro-Russian. In Norway, no such party may be identified, although as we demonstrate below, the expressed understanding for Russian positions is found among a variety of actors.

The actors referred to in this study are not likely to be unconscious victims of disinformation since they are mostly highly educated profiled debaters and experienced public figures. Therefore, we keep an eye open for the possibility that they do not necessarily support or accept the annexation primarily to support Russia, but to underpin their own general argumentation, e.g. on Norway's best interests or the sovereignty principle in international politics.

### **Data and methodology**

The article is a qualitative single-country case study investigating into the argumentation of participants in the Norwegian media debate, who contrary to the official Norwegian position and the majority of commentators, are willing to accept Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>1</sup> The study is based on a corpus of media texts gathered based on specific criteria as described in detail below. The study takes inspiration from the Discourse Historical-Approach (DHA) which belongs to a broadly defined field of critical discourse studies (Wodak, 2016). In the DHA, discourse is defined as 'a set of 'context-dependent semiotic practises'' and discourses are seen as both 'socially constituted and socially constitutive' (Wodak, 2015, p. 51). By the latter we mean, in line with Jørgensen and Phillips, that 'the discourses, by representing reality in one particular way rather than in other possible ways, constitute subjects and objects in particular ways, create boundaries between the true and the false, and make certain types of action relevant and others unthinkable' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, 145). In short, the way people represent Russia's actions in Crimea could impact on their willingness to accept Crimea as part of Russia and vice versa.

In accordance with the DHA our study is context-oriented and includes four levels of analysis (see Wodak, 2016, p. 3):

1. The immediate language or what Wodak calls the 'text-internal co-text' of the texts in the gathered corpus. In our analysis, we pay special attention to how the annexation and events in Ukraine are referred to and how Russia and Norway are characterised.
2. The intertextual and interdiscursive relationships. In our analysis we specifically look at what debates the dissenting discourses were part of. We also looked for correspondence between Russian official arguments used in defence of the annexation and the Norwegian discourses.

3. The extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of the specific 'context of situation'. In our case this relates to the media outlets that have published the texts, the time of their publication and the position of the people making statements in support of Crimea as a part of Russia.
4. The broader socio-political and historical context which the discursive practices under examination are embedded in and related to. In our study, the socio-political and historical context that informs the texts is to a large extent the history of Norway-Russia relations and the Norwegian and Western official reactions to Russia's annexation.

In accordance with the fourth point, we hold that the discursive framing of support to, understanding of, or opposition to the Russian annexation will be influenced by factors that vary from country to country. As noted by Jørgensen and Philips (2002, 139) discursive practices draw on earlier productions of meaning in order to be understood. Investigating into the dissenting Norwegian discourses on the annexation of Crimea we open up for the possibility that some of the texts mentioning these events are prolongations of already ongoing debates, e.g. about Norway's self-interest or geo-political affiliation, rather than primarily being about the annexation as such.

We were particularly interested in the arguments or 'topoi' used to express understanding of or acceptance for Russia's annexation. The term *topos*, in plural *topoi*, is of Greek origin and means 'place'. In contemporary American English according to Collins dictionary, it designates 1. A common or recurring topic, theme, subject, etc. or 2. a literary convention or formula (Definition of 'topos' 2021). Ruth Wodak describes 'topoi' as 'parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises. They are the content-related warrant or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim. As such, they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, 74 as referred to in Grue, 2015, p. 69). Jan Grue has stated that 'Topoi is somewhere in the intersection of topics, arguments and worldviews. They are not intuitively available in the texts, but they have to be identified through analysis of the functions of the texts. When able to detect them, you can say something about what discourse the text contributes to, thus to what linguistic representation of the world it is contributing' (Grue, 2015, p. 70).

In our analysis of the Norwegian debate on the annexation of Crimea, we identified five clusters of *topos*, some of which were close to the official Russian arguments. The five *topos* clusters help to structure the empirical part of the article. Identifying what warrants/conclusion rules can be read out of the arguments we are able to detect underlying reasons/explanations for the authors' acceptance of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

### **The corpus**

The corpus of texts assembled for further analysis was collected using 'Atekst', a data base of most Norwegian printed and web-based edited news media. The aim was to make a selection of texts from a range of newspapers that would represent opinions from different parts of the political spectrum. The criterion for being counted as dissenting was that the views expressed in the texts not only opposed the dominant discourse on Russia's annexation of Crimea, but explicitly stated that Crimea should belong to

Russia, or that Norway, the West or NATO should recognise or at least accept Russian control over the peninsula.

A step-wise procedure was used for assemblance of the corpus. First, we selected seven leading nationwide newspapers/media outlets (*Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagens Næringsliv* (web edition), *Dagsavisen*, *Klassekampen*, *NRK* (web), and *VG*); three weekly newspapers specialised on politics and culture (*Dag og Tid*, *Morgenbladet*, *Ny Tid*); four regional newspapers from the northern part of Norway closest to the Norwegian-Russian border (*Avisa Nordland*, *Finnmarken*, *Nordlys*, *Sør-Varanger avis*); and four web-publications: two on the nationalist right side of the political spectrum (*Resett* and *document.no*), a conservative (*Minerva*) and a radical left (*Radikal portal*).

We restricted the analysis to start from the date when the first news about unrest on the Crimean Peninsula was reported, i.e. 22 February 2014, when Russian soldiers without insignia took control of strategic positions and infrastructure, and ended our period of analysis on 31 December 2020. To get an overview of the debate we first made a search using the key words *Crimea*, and at least one of the words *Russia* or *Ukraine*.<sup>23</sup> This resulted in an unmanageable amount of hits – in total more than 6,500. In order to target the dissenting texts, that indeed constitute a minor part of the overall debate on the annexation, we then searched only for those that also included different forms of the word ‘recognise’ (i.e. ‘*anerkjenne*’, the Norwegian equivalent of recognising a territory, e.g. recognise Crimea to be Russian), or that included the text ‘Crimea is Russia(n)’ or ‘Crimea belongs to Russia’. Though the latter two gave fewer hits (32 and 12 respectively) than the first (186 hits), they were more precise in identifying dissenting views and actors. We excluded texts that could not be defined as dissenting according to our criteria, but some of these texts referred to dissenting texts that had not been identified through our search, and these were identified and added. Finally, we searched further for texts mentioning or written by the 10 authors/actors with dissenting views identified most often during the previous step, in order to check if they had other texts that gave a fuller substantiation of their arguments; these texts were also incorporated into the corpus.

After removing duplications and texts that were not considered relevant for our study, the 208 original hits had been reduced to 103 texts that promote dissenting views in accordance with our criteria, either by the authors themselves or in which such actors are interviewed. With the aim of reaching saturation of representations, we feel quite confident that these texts cover the main positions within the discourses, and that no additional variety of main representations can be detected (Bauer & Aarts, 2000).

In terms of genre, the vast majority (75 per cent) of the texts are debate articles submitted to the media outlets by external authors; 12 per cent are interviews with stakeholders expressing dissenting views; 11 per cent are expressions of the media outlets’ own editorial or journalists’ opinion or regular guest author columns; while the remaining 3 per cent are regular news reports or unclassified. A classification of the texts according to the year of publication gives the following distribution: In the year of the annexation (2014), 14 texts were published, followed by 17 texts in 2015; 5 in 2016; 26 in 2017; 19 in 2018; 17 in 2019; and only 5 in 2020. We found that the discussion tends to peak when some prominent stakeholders express some controversial views on the topic.

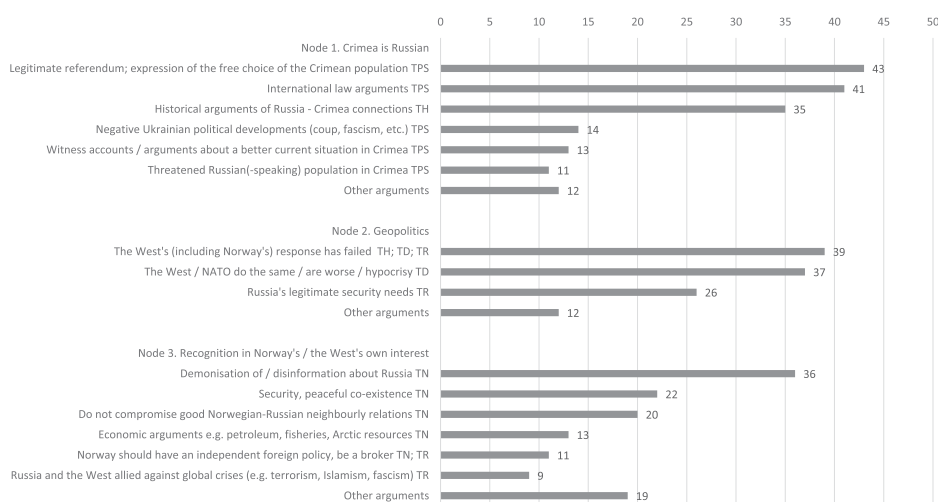
If we look at types of actors behind the texts (or being interviewed), we find that 24 per cent are politicians on the right of the political spectrum; 17 per cent on the left; 18 per cent are academics/scholars; 10 per cent journalists or media commentators; while the



remaining 31 per cent are people unknown to the authors, most of whom express their views in the medias' debate columns. One left-leaning newspaper, *Klassekampen*, stands out with almost one-third (32 per cent) of the texts, followed by the traditionally more conservative *Aftenposten* (10 per cent) and the formerly labour-party affiliated *Dagsavisen* (9 per cent). Of the regional newspapers, *Nordlys* published the largest number (9 per cent) of the texts in the corpus. It is also noteworthy that the annexation itself and/or its implications was the main theme in 46 per cent of the texts, in 32 per cent of the texts it made up a substantial part, while in the remaining 22 per cent it was only briefly mentioned. In texts where the annexation could not be singled out as the main or one of the main topics, the main theme was often Russian – Western relations and international politics. In other texts the general situation in Ukraine, Russian – Norwegian relations, Norwegian foreign policy or, more specifically, Norway's policy toward Russia was in focus.

### Coding and analysis

Coding of the texts started only after the compilation of the corpus had been carried out. Based on preliminary analysis a coding scheme was elaborated in NVivo12/NVivo Release with basis in the following three core nodes: (1) 'Crimea belongs to Russia', representing arguments why Crimea for various reasons should be considered a legitimate part of Russia; (2) 'Geopolitics' with arguments emphasising Russia's alleged legitimate security concerns and western dual standards; and (3) 'Norway's and the west's self-interest' highlighting why recognising Crimea as part of Russia would benefit Norway and/or the west. The coding scheme with sub-codes under each of the key nodes was further elaborated and refined in a gradual and iterative process. Figure 1 gives an overview of the distribution of coded elements according to their core nodes and sub-themes. In the vast



**Figure 1.** Number of corpus texts with coding according to the listed nodes and identified topoi\*. \*Explanation topoi: TPS: Topos of popular sovereignty TH: Topos of history; TR: Topos of Realpolitik; TD: Topos of double standards and western hypocrisy, TN: Topos of Norway's sovereignty and best interest.

majority of texts arguments from several of these categories were combined, so that one single text could contain from only one to as many as 13 of the listed sub-themes, with a median of five.

While Node 1 outlines arguments for why Crimea is rightfully Russian, Node 2 and 3 outline arguments that support acceptance of Crimea as Russian. Through further analyses of the nodes we identified five clusters of topos, thus arguments that were repeatedly drawn on in the debate. Some of the arguments were underpinned in several of the nodes as indicated in [Figure 1](#). In the following subsection we outline the relevant socio-political and historical context before we move on to a presentation of the clusters of topos identified.

### **The socio-political and historical context: Norway's policy vis-à-vis Russia and official Norwegian reactions to Russia's annexation of Crimea**

In order better to understand the Norwegian dissenting discourses on Russia's annexation of Crimea a backdrop of Norway's relations to Russia and official Norway's reactions to the annexation is necessary. The asymmetric relations with the Soviet Union and since 1991 with Russia have been a central theme in Norway's foreign policy (Rowe & Hønneland, 2010). Sharing an almost 198-kilometre-long border with Russia in the north and being a NATO member since the establishment of the alliance in 1949, Norway has in the post-WW2 period sought to pursue a policy vis-à-vis Russia aimed at balancing deterrence with reassurance. The deterrence element has mainly been based on being a loyal and consistent NATO ally. A policy of reassurance, on the other hand, has been pursued through Norway's so-called 'self-imposed restrictions' in its security policy, for example by refraining from arranging NATO exercises close to the Soviet/Russian border, and by prohibiting the deployment of nuclear weapons on Norwegian soil in peacetime (Friis, 2018; Heier, 2018). Nonetheless, in the early 1960s an undercurrent in Norwegian politics launched the idea of a Third Way between the two military blocs, as they saw it, as a remedy to reduce the risk of nuclear war. The Socialist Left Party has been the major proponent of this position.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Norway and Russia intensified their cooperation in many areas of practical benefit to both countries, like rescue at sea and protection of the joint cod stock in the Barents Sea. A high point in the two countries' relations came in 2010 when the parties signed an agreement on a maritime delimitation line in the Barents Sea after several decades of negotiations. The relations had already started to deteriorate, however, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Russia was, among other things, concerned with Norway's involvement in NATO operations and associated Norway with US policies of extending its sphere of influence closer to the Russian borders. At the same time, Norway criticised Russia's authoritarian turn and in particular its domestic policies in areas such as human rights and civil society (Wilhelmsen & Gjerde, 2018).

Norwegian official reactions to the Russian annexation of Crimea were in line with those expressed by most political leaders in the EU and among Norway's NATO allies. Arguments about Russia's transgression of international law, often underlining the importance for small nations of binding international rules, have been the most prominent in the Norwegian criticism of Russia. Thus, in a press release on 18 March 2014 the

Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Børge Brende, condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea to be in violation of international law (MFA Norway, 2014). His statement read that 'the use of military force by Russia to redraw national boundaries is unacceptable', that 'the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine must be fully respected', and that 'Norway will continue to view Crimea as part of Ukraine'. Norway's prime minister on several occasions, among them in a speech to the UN Assembly in September 2014, also criticised Russia for violating international law in connection with its annexation of Crimea (Holm, 2014). Her first visit to Russia after the annexation took place in February 2019.

The Norwegian Minister of Defence at the time of the annexation, Ine Eriksen Søreide (Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2017 to 2021), in an interview with CNN, went so far as to say that Western relations with Russia would 'never be the same' after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, and that there is 'no going back to some sort of normality or some sort of back to normal business. Because that normality does not exist' (Krever, 2015). Even though Søreide at the same time stressed that the practical and pragmatic cooperation that Norway and Russia have had for decades would continue, her statements in the CNN interview evoked many critical reactions from the Russian side (Rowe, 2018) but also in Norwegian mass media (see e.g. Tallaksen & Lysberg, 2015).

Based on an analysis of statements of Norwegian ministers on the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Nilssen (2015) identified two main discourses; one that she named 'western' and which is consistent with the EU sanctions and NATO policy, and a 'northern, neighbouring discourse', that emphasises the importance of maintaining a good relationship with Russia in the north. She also found that although the two discourses often appeared in parallel, the relationship between them was hierarchic, dominated by the 'western' one.

All Norwegian parliamentary political parties publicly condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea. However, while most party spokesmen from the moderate conservatives (Høyre) to the Labour party (Arbeiderpartiet) unconditionally blamed Russia, the two socialist parties SV and Rødt, gave statements that also placed some of the responsibility for the situation that had developed in Crimea on other parties of the conflict: Ukrainian authorities and western countries (Moxnes, 2014; Melgård, 2014). And, as we shall see below, spokesmen from the right-wing populist Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) gave divergent messages, some of whom expressed an understanding of, or even defended, Russian actions.

Norway, following the European Union, imposed sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and subsequent destabilisation of the situation in Eastern Ukraine. These included, among others, financial restrictions, prohibition of imports of certain goods, and restrictions on Russian oil industry's operations in Norway, and the sanctions have been tightened and prolonged several times. Russia responded by banning the import of vegetables, fruit, meat, fish and dairy products from the EU, the USA, Canada, Norway and Australia. Before 2014, Norway was by far the biggest single exporter of fish and seafood to Russia (Wegren & Elvestad, 2018).

Norway has also after the annexation of Crimea rebalanced the two elements of deterrence and reassurance in its Russia policy, paying more attention to the first of the two (Godzimirski, 2017). This includes Norway's participation in NATO's defence operations in the Baltic states and Poland close to the Russian border, the deployment of US B-1B

bombers at Norway's Ørland Main Air Station in February–March 2021, and the Norwegian parliament Stortinget's approval in June 2022 of an agreement with the United States on bilateral defence cooperation (SDCA) which facilitates US presence, training and exercises in Norway. Critics argued that some or all of these actions represented a significant change of direction for Norway's Russia policy, contravening a long tradition of successful appeasement policies, and with potentially serious negative implications for the country's bilateral relations with its eastern neighbour (Bakken, 2016; Skurdal, 2021). In the following, we turn to the dissenting media discourses on the annexation of Crimea and the five different but partly overlapping topos identified.

### **The free will of Crimea and the topos of popular sovereignty – 'If the people/majority says so, so it shall be'**

One of the most frequent arguments used in the Norwegian dissenting discourses was one presenting the Crimean referendum as people's legitimate and free will to 'reunite' with Russia. Professor of law at the University of Tromsø and active member of the agrarian and anti-EU Centre Party, Peter Ørebech, stated that:

The people chose Russia and not Ukraine as their motherland. This is correct under international law. It is scandalous by NATO's Jens Stoltenberg and Børge Brende [at that time minister of foreign affairs] to characterise the people of Crimea's choice as an annexation and a violation of international law (Radikal portal 2017).<sup>4</sup>

According to Ørebech, the basic rule of international law is popular sovereignty. The population on the Crimea were not consulted during the 1954 transfer to Ukraine and therefore the population is not bound by it. He calls the foreign minister's constant reference to 'Russia's violation of international law' a 'strong propagandistic statement'. His interpretation of international law is picked up by other participants in the debate

While in the official Norwegian discourse on the annexation Russia is the acting part, in the 'dissenting' discourses the role of Russia is changed to one of a passive receiver, that simply respected the choice of Crimean residents to be reunited with Russia. In their descriptions of the annexation, several authors emphasised that Crimea had been annexed voluntarily. In line with this, Gunnar Nerdrum who is a lawyer with Supreme Court qualification stated that Russia 'just accepted' what the population in Crimea and in Sevastopol themselves had decided to give them' (Folkediplomati Norge, 2017). The referendum, although not recognised by the international community, is referred to as an expression of 'the will of the people of Crimea' (Nordlys 2018a) and 'Crimea's choice to join (*slutte seg til*) Russia' (Klassekampen 2017d). Crimea is thus represented as a unified actor 'choosing' to become part of Russia. Several authors are explicitly critical towards the use of the word 'annexation', for instance profiled psychiatrist since the 1960s, Hans Olav Fekjær:

In the media, they write that Russia 'annexed' Crimea. This evokes associations of a bloody invasion that forced the unwilling people on their knees. However, it was a bloodless reunification (*tilslutning*) following a referendum where more than 90 per cent voted to become a part of Russia, as prior to 1954 (Klassekampen 2018a).

According to several commentators, like peace activist Mons Lie, it was the events in Ukraine, referred to as the coup d'état in Kiev, that made the referendum in Crimea legitimate (Klassekampen 2017d; 2017e). The 'coup' is described by Lie as not only being supported by the USA and the EU but also prepared by them. Another author, the artist Thor Krefting Nissen, goes as far as claiming that since the USA 'initiated and supported the coup in Kiev' it follows that it was the US that infringed international law; '... and unfortunately Western and Norwegian media in unison with Western politicians have supported the USA's lying propaganda that it was Russia that infringed international law' (Oppland Arbeiderblad 2019).

Some of the authors claim evidence from Crimea that people are happy with the Russian take over and share observations from their recent travels there. Norway's former National Librarian, Kirsten Engelstad, notes that what is represented in Norwegian/Western media as an annexation, locals in Crimea refer to as a 'reunion' (Aftenposten 2017). The leader of Peoples Diplomacy Norway, a pro-Kremlin association working for 'peace and dialogue between Russia and Norway' (folkediplomati.com), Hendrik Weber, stated that: 'The pride of a Russian passport and a ditto vehicle registration number is great and visible everywhere' (Ny Tid 2017b).

### **'Putin had no choice'. Pragmatism and fait accompli. The topos of Russian Realpolitik – If a state's interest is threatened, a state must act accordingly**

The opinion that 'Russia had to react' to the events in Ukraine was shared by several commentators. The potential NATO takeover of Russia's naval base on Crimea was understood by them as unacceptable for Russia. In this perspective Russia's annexation of Crimea was done out of necessity for securing Russia's interests. The well-known politician and former leader of the right-wing populist Progress Party, Carl I. Hagen (Aftenposten 2018) described the annexation as a 'reconquering' in order 'to secure the Black Sea Fleet and the Russian population in Crimea'. The daily Dagbladet (2018) referred to an interview with him in Russia Today where he argued in line with the above-mentioned topos of the majority that the West should have respected that Russia 'took Crimea' based on the results in the referendum.

The main editor of the left-wing daily Klassekampen wrote in an editorial: 'It is a fact of Realpolitik that the Kremlin could not accept that their most important naval base be taken over by NATO. One could just imagine a similar situation where Russia established a military base close to the American mainland' (Klassekampen 2018c). Pål Steigan, formerly an active anti-Soviet Maoist and currently editor of his own news outlet wrote that 'Any rational pragmatic politician (*realpolitiker*) would realise that Russia will not let go of Crimea if they are not forced to it by military force' (Dagsavisen 2014).

The chairperson of the small, ultra-conservative party, The Christians (De kristne), pentecostalist pastor Erik Selle, wrote on Resett, a right-wing online newspaper: 'No matter what has happened in Ukraine, the West will have to understand that based on practical political considerations (Realpolitik) Russia would never accept that Crimea came under the rule of the EU or became a NATO territory' (Resett 2019). Professor in Russian history Åsmund Egge claimed that Russia's annexation of Crimea and support to the rebels in East Ukraine must be seen as a defensive answer to the coup in Kiev and not as an expression of Russian 'imperialism' or an 'aggressive' Vladimir Putin: 'What is

happening now has little to do with Putin. Any Russian leader would have had to react to what has happened and what is happening in Ukraine.’ (Aftenposten 2015).

According to these authors Russia could not have acted differently. Perhaps the most prominent of the authors advocating this view was Kåre Willoch, prime minister from the Conservative party from 1981 to 1986. Although stating that ‘I do not want to excuse any annexations’, he continues;

... nevertheless, it is a bit strange that one [the West] did not see that there would be reactions to statements about Ukraine becoming part of NATO, in the same way as Americans reacted to Soviet military bases too close to the US’. [...] Crimea was the pearl in the Russian empire, and the only Naval base in the south is situated there. If it were to be situated in a NATO country, there had to be reactions. One ought to have understood that earlier and not created the current difficult situation (VG 2016).

In Willoch’s view, as represented in VG, the west has little to gain from punishing Russia over Crimea – he seems to think that while pragmatic interest to some extent justifies Russia’s actions, pragmatism could also be used by the West as a justification for recognising Crimea as part of Russia. Thus, the West ought to recognise Crimea as part of Russia for the sake of its own interests.

Ola Tunander, professor emeritus at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, wrote in *Ny Tid* that ‘The talk of forbidding Russian was a threat against East-Ukraine and a Western presence in Crimea was a direct threat against the Black Sea fleet. Russia is not a hungry bear that waits to attack, but a dog forced up into a corner that can bite those who kick it’ (*Ny Tid* 2015). Referring to Russia’s 1000 years of shared history with Crimea and the importance of the Naval fleet, parliamentarian spokesperson for the Progress Party on foreign relations and defence, Christian Tybring-Gjedde similarly argued that ‘losing Crimea would have been completely unacceptable for Putin. If we do not accept Russia’s actions, we should at least try to see the logic behind them. I will go as far as claiming that Russia was pushed by the West to annex Crimea’ (Dagbladet 2015).

According to Tybring-Gjedde the harsh rhetoric against Russia would hardly change anything: ‘I believe most people realise that Crimea is a lost cause’. In his opinion Russia could be a good ally for instance in the fight against the Islamic State, so ‘NATO and NATO’s member states ought to soften the rhetoric against Russia’ (Dagbladet 2015). He is willing to accept the annexation of Crimea as a *fait accompli* and move on with business as usual.

### **The topos of history – ‘Crimea is historically Russian (it is therefore still naturally part of Russia), and there are many historical examples of territories changing hand’**

History is frequently drawn on in the Norwegian dissenting discourses in order to explain why Crimea could be seen as rightfully part of Russia, and to defend the annexation. This is being done both with reference to Russia and Ukraine’s common historical roots and past and by drawing historical parallels between the conflict over Crimea and other conflicts throughout history. Among others, historical examples of what we above referred to as the topos of popular sovereignty are turned to.

Former Norwegian ambassador to the OSCE, Mette Kongsheim, who in several pieces stressed the importance of trying to understand Russia's actions, stated that Crimea was important for Russian nation-building as the place where prince Vladimir in 988 made orthodoxy the official religion for Kiev Rus (Radikal Portal 2016). More frequently, the length of time that Crimea was part of Russia/the Soviet Union and the circumstances under which it became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic are used as arguments in support of Crimea being part of Russia. The transfer of Crimea by Khrushchev in 1954 is seen by some as questionable because the people in Crimea was not asked (Klassekampen 2017d). Several participants in the debate quoted the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev's comment in relation to the referendum in Crimea, that the people in Crimea had 'corrected a historical mistake' (Nordlys 2018b), that the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had been conducted in a rush and that the question of Crimea had never been discussed (Ny Tid 2015). Ola Tunander argued that in Soviet times it did not matter much what republic Crimea belonged to since all republics were under Moscow's control:

In 2014 Crimea had in practice been separated from Moscow for only 23 years (shorter than the period East Germany was parted from West Germany), while Crimea had belonged to Russia for more than two hundred years. From the perspective of the Russian majority in Crimea, it was just as natural to belong to Russia as it was for most residents of East Germany to belong to one Germany. For the Russian elite, Crimea is as Russian as Florida in the US is American (Ny Tid 2015).

Tunander is far from the only author who draws parallels between the Russian annexation of Crimea and other historical events. Several authors even draw parallels to events in Norwegian history. The historian Bjørn Nistad, who runs a pro-Kremlin blog, sees the annexation of Crimea as 'a realisation of the UN principle of the right of peoples to self-determination' and compares it to the Norwegian secession from the union with Sweden in 1905 as well as 'various peoples, who had been colonised and their secession from their European masters in the first decades after the Second World War' (Ny Tid 2017a).

Another author, the philosopher and professor emeritus Gunnar Skirbekk, finds similarities between the Russian 'conquering' of Crimea and the Norwegian military conquering of parts of what is today the region of Trøndelag, in 1658. He notes that Norwegian history books refer to the event as a 're-capturing' and finds that a more suitable term than 'annexation' also in relation to Crimea. Although he admits that the answer to whether Crimea is Russian or Ukrainian could be that it is Ukrainian legally speaking, from a historical, demographic and cultural perspective, he stated, it must be seen as a Russian territory (Dag og Tid 2015).

### **The tops of double standards and Western hypocrisy or the tops of equal treatment for equal wrongs/rights**

The 'annexation of Crimea' is a recurring topic in texts on Western – Russia relations, and arguments of Western hypocrisy are repeatedly articulated in the material. Helge Lurås, chief editor of the right-wing online newspaper *Resett* from 2017 to June 2022 represents this view: 'When western leaders accuse Russia of interfering in Ukrainian matters it is not

without truth, but the accusations come from governments that time after time have infringed international law and other countries' sovereignty' (NRK 2014). Several authors agree that what Russia did in Crimea prior to the referendum was wrong, however, as the West also on several occasions has acted in ways that could be seen as breaching international law, they do not see how the West is in the position to judge Russia's actions. Thus, international law, according to these authors, is selectively used in the case of Crimea whereas other violations of international law are not paid attention to by the West. One example is Arild Rønsen:

I admit that to me it is not so important if Crimea is Russian or Ukrainian, but it makes me angry when commentators and politicians make use of international law in relation to Crimea while they usually completely ignore the longest infringement of international law of our time: Israel's occupation of Palestine (Klassekampen 2017b).

Under the headline 'Double standards', editor in chief of Klassekampen, Bjørgulv Braanen, who recognises the annexation as a breach of international law, still expresses that 'Western principles of international law have been bendable' (Klassekampen 2014) and gives as examples the war in Irak and Libya and the Israel/Palestine conflict. A frequent example used to underline the inconsistency of the West and its representatives is Kosovo; 'Norway recognised Kosovo's liberation from Serbia which was also an infringement of international law. Infringements of international law are bad if they are committed by Russia but obviously ok when committed by Norway' (Klassekampen 2015).

Historian Bjørn Nistad argues that if a country has committed wrongs, it is not in the position to judge others:

Countries that have supported the bombing of Serbia, the attack on Irak and the establishing of Kosovo as a sovereign state [...] and other actions that infringe international law have no moral authority to judge the Russian annexation of Crimea that was peaceful and in accordance with people's wishes (Klassekampen 2014).

Some authors argue that the actions of Russia in Crimea were not worse or even in some cases of lesser harm than actions committed by other states. Former prime minister Kåre Willoch, in an interview with Klassekampen, stated that: 'NATO countries have interfered very much in other countries' internal business. Neither the war in Libya nor the second war in Iraq happened under international law mandate. I cannot see that Putin is interfering more in other countries than Trump is doing' (Klassekampen 2018b).

In several texts Russia's situation and ways of acting are juxtaposed with those of the US. Mette Kongsem asked the question: 'Why is it so difficult to understand that Russia has the same strategic interests in its near abroad as another great power, the US?' (Aftenposten 2015b). Peace activist Helge Jenssen wonders why the US interferences in other countries are 'not mentioned when Russia is pointed at as the scoundrel/villain?' And as he continues:

Crimea is far from coloured by war and terror attacks, but of course somewhat coloured by Putin's surveillance and authoritarian governance. And similarly, the US makes sure to secure itself influence in its 'occupied' territories, directly or indirectly in governments and systems of governance (Avisa Nordland 2018).

Carl I. Hagen made the following comparison: 'A US that always went far militarily in order to bring American prisoners of war and hostages safely home to the US, ought to



appreciate that Russia stood by and defended the interests of the large Russian population in Crimea that feared the undemocratic and gradually fascist rulers in Ukraine' (Aftenposten 2018). What follows from the argument of Western hypocrisy is that the West's reactions towards Russia due to the annexation of Crimea are seen as disproportionate.

### **The topos of Norway's sovereignty and best interest – A state should act out of its own interests and based on its own experience with other states**

Many authors provide arguments that are based on concern for Norway's self-interest and that are informed by Norway's experience as a neighbour to Russia. Just like the topos mentioned above about Russia's need for security, this topos is about Realpolitik. The annexation of Crimea is mentioned in several texts that cover the topic of Norway – Russia relations or Norway's policy on Russia in particular. As shown above, Norway naturally appears also in texts covering the relationship of the West and Russia more broadly.

According to these authors, who promote sovereignist views on international relations, Norway should be more concerned with its own interests, not least with regard to its relations to Russia. As here expressed by Stein Ørnhøi a former parliamentarian from the Socialist Left party:

The tension between NATO and Russia is tragic and dangerous. The fact that Norway is obediently following [NATO] creates an unnecessary tension in the relation to a neighbour that never committed any wrongs against Norway. We should take the initiative to calm relations with Russia. We could for instance suggest a referendum in Crimea controlled by the UN to remove all doubt about the wishes of the peninsula. I would not be surprised if Putin said, yes, please (Klassekampen 2017c).

The historian Øystein Rian, whose research has been centred on the negative consequences of the loss of Norway's national sovereignty between 1536 and 1814, wrote:

'Despite Norway's positive relations with its Russian neighbour, the Norwegian government adopts a rhetoric of condemnation echoing Brussels and Washington. Why should Norway be an independent state if the country does not base its policies on its own experiences and interests? Norway has without reservations supported the coup against democratically elected president Viktor Yanukovich and has accused Russia of being the aggressor in the conflict in Ukraine' (Klassekampen 2014c).

Both authors above are clearly dissatisfied with Norway's policy toward Russia and moreover seem to think that Norway could play a role in Europe when it comes to improving relations with Russia.

The historian Åsmund Egge (Aftenposten 2015a) followed a similar line, emphasising Norway's neighbourly relations with Russia: 'Instead of following the EU blindly and wasting a thousand years old good relations with a neighbouring country, the Norwegian government should work to facilitate a solution where NATO commits itself not to include Ukraine as a member and where the Kiev government will have to accept some sort of federalisation of the country'.

Norway's official opinion on the annexation, as reflected in the above-mentioned statements by the Minister of defence to CNN, is by some seen as damaging the relationship with Russia to no avail. In the document.no article 'Putin should also have been invited', former editor of several mainstream local newspapers, Ragnar Larsen, expressed his

regrets that president Putin was not invited to the 75th anniversary of the Red Army's liberation of the eastern part of Finnmark county.

The Norwegian government's rejection of the recommendation to invite Russia's president is supposedly a reaction to Russia incorporating the Crimea peninsula in 2014. Because western countries reacted with political and economic sanctions a harsher [political ] climate was created after 20 years of appeasement. If someone thinks Russia will return Crimea to Ukraine, they will have to think again. Crimea will remain Russian, also because the majority there is Russian. Norway and Russia have nothing unsettled between them. It is in our country's interest to have orderly and well-functioning neighbourly relations (Document no. 2019).

While the historically friendly relations with Russia are a recurrent topos, in some texts economic reasons for keeping good relations with Russia are also stated. Carl I. Hagen opined that 'In my view, Norway is best served with both good neighbourly relations with Russia and a close relationship with the US and an active membership in NATO. It is unwise to provoke Russia. Norwegian authorities first and foremost ought to defend the interests of Norway and our people. Good cooperation in fishery, oil and gas and tourism with our big neighbour to the east is to our benefit.' (Aftenposten 2017a).

Responsible for international affairs in the party Rødt (Red), Stian Bragtvæd, wrote in Dagsavisen, that Rødt

repeatedly had condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and criticised both Western and Russian interference in the conflict.[...]the question is not whether or not Russia has infringed international law, but why they do it, what internal forces in Ukraine underpin Russian policy and what can be done to de-escalate the conflict. We call attention to the fact that NATO's expansion and the US support for the coup in Kiev and the new regime's brutal warfare in the Eastern parts of Ukraine provoked a Russian counter reaction. Our argument is not that Russia is on the right side of the law, but that Norway should not contribute to NATO's and the US's increased military presence in East Ukraine because this contributes to escalating the conflict (Dagsavisen 2015).

The image that several authors draw of Norway is that of a weak country in the sense that its authorities blindly follow the US and EU policies of sanctions against Russia, but at the same time, a potentially influential country in their faith that Norway could make a difference in international politics by contributing to calming the West's relations with Russia.

## Concluding discussion

As shown in the review of the Norwegian debate over the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the arguments put forward by supporters and 'understanders' of official Russian positions can be clustered into the following topoi: popular sovereignty, Russian realpolitik, historical continuity, alleged Western hypocrisy and Norway's best interest and good Russian–Norwegian neighbourly relations. With a possible exception for the latter topos, they all partly coincide with central official Russian arguments used to legitimise the annexation centred on history/identity, events in Ukraine and geopolitics/Western 'hypocrisy'.

The legality of the Crimean referendum is a key argument for official Russia as well as the representatives of the dissenting Norwegian discourse. While the Russian narrative puts more emphasis on the spiritual meaning of Crimea for Russia, Russia's historical sacrifices through wars in order to sustain the territory, and Russia's duty to defend 'compatriots' (Leichtova, 2016), in the Norwegian discourses emphasis is put on 'the free will' of

the citizens of Crimea and the perceived legality of the referendum according to international law. The representation of the transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 as an 'historical wrong' is also an official Russian argument that resonates in the Norwegian dissenting discourses. The threat of NATO encroachment and even the risk of a potential NATO takeover of Russia's naval base in Sevastopol were also common Russian arguments in defence of the annexation. President Putin made statements such as 'I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors' (Putin, 2014). The position that Russia in this way was defending its interests found understanding among some Norwegian authors. The argument about supposed western hypocrisy, punishing Russia for behaviour that the West allows only for itself, 'calling the same thing white today and black tomorrow' (Putin, 2014), is also an argument frequently used by official Russia which several participants in the Norwegian debate voice. While several of the official Russian arguments are represented in the Norwegian debate, our analysis does not allow for claiming direct influence from Russia. Neither does it exclude such influence, but we have no evidence that the commentators cited in this study have consumed Russian media in order to find material to underpin their arguments. What *is* possible to draw from the material in this study is information on who those expressing views that partly coincide with/support official Russian ones are, and what underlying worldviews the arguments they put forward are carrying.

The actors that at times repeat official Russian arguments, are highly diverse. The arguments are found on a continuum between whole-hearted justification of the annexation to condemnation combined with an understanding of the act as a *fait accompli* that should be accepted for pragmatic reasons. Both system-critical to the far left and right as well as mainstream intra-system commentators are represented. Thus, the supporters and 'understanders' of the official Russian positions are diverse as to their political affiliation. They otherwise often find themselves on the opposite side on domestic political conflict lines, but as shown above, their views on certain aspects of international politics collide.

Grue (2015) defined *topoi* as being 'somewhere in the intersection of topics, arguments and worldviews'. In the subheadings above we presented 'conclusion rules' that can be read out of the *topoi* identified. Several of these speak directly of the authors' view of international relations. We saw, for instance, that very different left-wing commentators, as well as right-wing populist politicians, were receptive to a *Realpolitik* argument of Russia having to secure its naval base against NATO encroachment – that a state must act accordingly if its interests are threatened. This argument, however, was also endorsed by commentators close to the political centre, like former prime minister Willoch. Our material shows that both commentators from the right and left, knowingly or not, apply a realist perspective on Russia's behaviour in Crimea. In their view, Russia just defended its vital interests.

Along with political realism, a sovereignist view of international relations shines through the texts. 'Sovereignists' – who promote stronger roles for the national states are found all over the left–right continuum of the political spectrum. Several commentators expressed their dissatisfaction with Norway 'obediently following' NATO and the EU not only in its sanctions against Russia, but on a general basis. One of the commentators even questioned why Norway should be an independent state if the country does not base its policies on its own experiences and interests (Klassekampen 2014).

Several authors juxtaposed Russian actions with those of the US in what in effect resulted in these authors being willing to recognise Crimea as part of Russia. While anti-imperialism is compatible with condemnation of Russia's annexation of a neighbouring country's territory and claim to have the right to dominate within 'zones of influence', strong currents on the Left traditionally see US global policies as a greater imperialist evil than Russia's attempts to have a say in other post-Soviet states. However, also former prime minister for the Conservative party, Kåre Willoch, uttered that he could not see that Putin is interfering more in other countries' business than Trump.

Although Norwegian foreign and security policies are consensus-based in the sense that major political parties refrain from accentuating disagreements, the geopolitical 'Third Way' undercurrent still exists. After the Cold War, it mainly manifests itself as anti-unilateralism and with a sceptical attitude to mainstream Western narratives on international conflicts. The motivation of those rejecting the Western narrative on Crimea as a mere legitimisation of US interests, therefore, may be less driven by an affinity to Russia than it is an opportunity to underpin one's general views on foreign and security policies.

Often Norway's deep-seated historical memories of encounters with Russia were referred to by commentators. Unlike many other countries bordering Russia, there is in Norway no national memory of Russia as an aggressor. On the contrary, the Soviet Army liberated parts of Northern Norway in October 1944 – and withdrew. Some participants in the debate believed Norway, also due to its good relations with Russia, could have contributed positively to reshaping Russia-Europe relations, thus, advancing a more liberal idea of Norway as a peace promoter internationally.

The fact that the annexation was a breach of international law was the main argument used by Norwegian/Western authorities in their denunciation of Russia's actions. In the dissenting Norwegian discourses, 'International law' is a contested concept, but crucial for the argumentation both in the 'topos of popular sovereignty' and in the 'topos of Western hypocrisy'. As used in the former, authors reject that the annexation was a breach of international law and see the referendum in Crimea as a legitimate expression of the people's will. As often used in the latter topos commentators recognise the annexation as a breach of law, however, they find the reactions toward Russia as disproportionate compared to how international society has responded to what they see as other incidents when international law has been violated.

In order to sum up, while our analysis shows that elements of the official Russian arguments used to legitimise the annexation are echoed by participants in the Norwegian debate, the arguments are not necessarily reflexions of commentators passively receiving Russian messages. They are most often elements in broader reasonings linked to underlying political concerns and conflict lines. In line with this, only few commentators seem to have defence of Russian positions as their main concern. However, whether or not commentators support Russian positions partly or fully for their own purposes rather than for the sake of the Russian regime, the Kremlin may still take advantage of commentators abroad sharing or being acceptant of their stand on certain issues. Local voices may enjoy more legitimacy locally, thus Norwegian voices supporting a Russian argument may be more effective than a state representative of Russia articulating the same in front of a Norwegian audience. In this respect, it is possible to argue that such colliding arguments and opinions among constituencies abroad do provide Russia with a certain soft power. However, the fact that these dissenting discourses in Norway are representing

fringes of the debate on the annexation rather than a strong united opposition to official Norway's stand speaks quite clearly of the limited scope of this soft power. However, Russian authorities pick up what news items they like and use them for their own purposes. They make references to them on any platform they find suited and from their chosen angle – be it on the RT or in the briefings of the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman. This way, an inflated image of Russia's impact among citizens in other countries is created. While a few of the authors of the texts we have analysed are likely to be pleased with this attention, most of them would probably consider it an undesirable side effect of their public engagement. This is again an indication of the limits of Kremlin's soft power in Europe, a soft power which is likely to have diminished radically after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

## Notes

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2. Some of the newspapers have their own debate forums, such as Dagsavisen's *Nye Meninger* and Nordlys's *Nordnorsk debatt*, and these were also included in the analysis.
3. The Norwegian word for Crimea is Krim, which can also mean 'criminality' or 'crime literature', leading to some disturbance while searching and making combinations of words a necessity.
4. All quotations from the Norwegian newspapers have been translated by the authors. The newspaper articles cited are listed in an appendix by year and date of publication with title and name of author provided.

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## Appendix

### Newspaper articles

Newspaper/Journal	Year of Publication	Date of Publication	Title	Author	Interview object
Aftenposten	2015a	Feb. 11	Norge bør bryte med sanksjonspolitikken	Åsmund Egge	
Aftenposten	2015b	Feb. 14	Kunnskap om Russland er mangelvare	Mette Kongshem	
Aftenposten	2015c	March 3	Det kommer en tid etter Putin	Mette Kongshem	
Aftenposten	2017a	Jan. 16	Jeg, en putinist?!	Carl I. Hagen	
Aftenposten	2017b	Nov. 17	Krim – der påstand møter påstand	Gunnar Nerdrum	
Aftenposten	2018	Dec. 18	Krim er Russisk	Carl i Hagen	
Avisa Nordland	2018	Dec. 19	Redaktørens opportuniste	Helge Jenssen	
Dagbladet	2015	Oct. 1	Frp:-Russland kan være en god alliert mot IS	Kristen Karlsen	Christian Tybring-Gjedde
Dagbladet	2018	Dec. 10	Åpner for å godta at Russland beholder Krim	Tori Aarseth	
Dagsavisen	2014	Aug. 13	Hvorfor lyver Børge Brende og hvorfor finnes det ingen opposisjon på Stortinget?	Pål Steigan	
Dagsavisen	2015	Feb. 23	Ukraina og Norge	Stian Bragtvedt	
Dag og Tid	2015	Dec. 24	Krim og Trøndelag	Gunnar Skirbekk	
Dokument.no	2019	Oct.25	Putin burde også vært bedt	Ragnar Larsen	
Folkediplomati Norge	2017		Krim – Russland eller Ukraina		
Klassekampen	2014a	March 25a	Doble standarder	Bjørgulv Braanen	
Klassekampen	2014b	April 12b	Absurd vedtak	Bjørn Nistad	
Klassekampen	2014c	Oct. 25	Vår historie med Russland	Øystein Rian	
Klassekampen	2015	Aug. 21	Krigsfareoppøpet	Hallvard Bakke	
Klassekampen	2017a	Feb. 21	Dørslamringsdiplomati	Mette Konsheim	
Klassekampen	2017b	June 9	Hvilken folkerett?	Arild Rønsen	
Klassekampen	2017c	Oct. 24	Jeg har sett en russer le	Stein Ørnhøi	
Klassekampen	2017d	Nov. 10	Sanksjonene mot Krim	Mons Lie	
Klassekampen	2017e	Nov. 17	Siste svar om Krim	Mons Lie	
Klassekampen	2018a	Dec. 10	Enoyd om Kiev-styret	Hans Olav Fekjær	
Klassekampen	2018b	Dec. 21	Kåre Willoch aviser rapport-stempling av Frp, SV og Rødt som 'pro-russiske': Vil bli kvitt sanksjoner	Jo Røed Skårderud	Kåre Willoch
Klassekampen	2018c	Dec. 24	VGs krokodilletårer	Bjørgulv Braanen	
Nordlys	2014	Nov. 19	Putin og vi	Gunnar Nerdrum	
Nordlys	2015	May 2	Ingrid gav aldri opp kommunismen		Ingrid Schanke

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Newspaper/Journal	Year of Publication	Date of Publication	Title	Author	Interview object
				Magnus Aamo Holte	
Nordlys	2018a	Dec. 18	Forakten for folkeavstemninger	Peter Th. Ørebech	
Nordlys	2018b	Dec. 19	Carl I. Hagen, Nordlys og Krim-konflikten	Johannes Hansen	
Ny tid	2015	Dec. 17	Brevet til Jeltsin	Ola Tunander	
Ny tid	2017a	Feb. 16a	Krim er Russisk	Bjørn Nistad	
Ny tid	2017b	Feb. 16b	Sju dager på Krim	Hendrik Weber	
NRK	2014		Overmodige hyklere	Helge Lurås	
Oppland arbeiderblad	2019	June 19	Russland er vår venn	Terje Nilsen	
Radikal Portal	2016	July 27	Ukraina: sluttpunkt eller vendepunkt i øst-vest-forholdet?	Mette Kongshem	
Radikal Portal	2017	June 8	Folkeretten og Krim	Ørebech, Peter	-
Resett	2019	Jan. 2	Trump, Willoch og Carl I. Hagen har et poeng om Russland	Erik Selle	
VG	2016	Dec. 23	Kåre Willochs oppgjør: Trump, Syria, terror, Listhaug og Russland	Kari Aarstad Aase	Kåre Willoch
VG	2018	Dec. 18	Carl I. Hagen: – Det er i hovedsak på grunn av vestlig uklokskap at verden nå er i konflikt	Carl I Hagen	