

# Ethnonationalism or a Financial-Criminal Incentive Structure?

Explaining Elite Support in Crimea for Russia's Annexation

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## Abstract

Russia's annexation of Crimea occurred after twenty years of relative peace and the apex (and failure) of pro-Russian sentiments within Crimea. Annexation is surprising for Putin's willingness to pursue such risky actions, but also because it required elite support within Crimea. This article uses process tracing to test ethnonationalism in explaining support for Russia's annexation against a rival explanation focusing on the role of criminality and crime (financial-criminal incentive structure). By exposing how and which elites defected in Crimea, the article demonstrates that elite breakage and realignments occurred within a financial-criminal incentive structure to motivate engagement in annexation. In turn, this article discusses its broader implications for understanding Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the politics of conflict, nationalism, and the wider former Soviet Union.

**Keywords** Crimea; annexation; ethnonationalism; crime; corruption;

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*“Crimea is the kind of cheese lying in the far corner of the oily mousetrap. It should distract the attention of the population and elites from the unpleasant sound with which it slams.”*

— Rogov (2014)

## Introduction

Russia’s annexation of Crimea – its unexpectedness and ease – has troubled both scholars and policymakers. From the mid-1990s until annexation, Crimea was considered a case of successful conflict resolution (Sasse 2001). Annexation is therefore surprising for Putin’s willingness to pursue such risky actions (Toal 2017, 214), and for receiving the greatest financial subsidy compared to Russian regions (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 322–323). Moreover, annexation is surprising because it built on – and required – support and participation within Crimea. While elite politics was shifting in mainland Ukraine, during and following Euromaidan, so was elite politics shifting in Crimea. The Party of Regions (PoR) fractured in Crimea between those who supported annexation and aligning with existing pro-Russian actors to support annexation and those opting not to support annexation. What explains such elite support?

Existing explanations of annexation focus on why Russia pursued such risky, expensive, and illegal actions. Meanwhile, literature exploring support within Crimea tends to emphasize ethnonationalism but emphasizes less the role of corruption, organized crime, and elite breakage. Rather than ideological, as the ethnonationalism theory suggests, corruption and organized crime pit support for annexation as an exercise for profit and protection. This article interrogates the causal mechanisms behind elite support for annexation by testing the most common explanation – ethnonationalism – against the role of organized crime and corruption (financial-criminal incentive structure) on a most likely case (Crimea). This article is the first to weigh the evidence of ethnonationalism vs. organized crime and corruption via process tracing as motivating factors for Crimean elites to support annexation. Disentangling the roles of ethnonationalism and the financial-criminal incentive structures to explain elite support for annexation within Crimea is not easy. Pro-Russian ethnonationalists in Crimean politics are highly networked in organized crime. But, we can disentangle the role of ethnonationalism from above (via Crimean actors) and below (within Crimean society) to reveal whether ethnonationalism was a necessary and/or sufficient cause versus a financial-criminal incentive structure.

If ethnonationalism fails to explain support fully or partially for annexation, then it is less likely to hold elsewhere, such as Ukraine and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Unpacking the role of elite breakages and the need for an elite that supports and participates – because of a financial-criminal incentive structure – in the conflict goals of an annexing or invading state can help us explain not only how such conflict goals succeed (Crimea) but also why they might

fail. Russia's annexation of Crimea was the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, which has included pertained conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts since 2014 and a full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 24 February 2022, which has included efforts to annex further territory (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts). While Russia succeeded in Crimea, it achieved limited success in Donetsk and Luhansk regions since 2014 (Nitsova 2021; Giuliano 2018), and even less success in turning Ukrainian citizens or elites against Ukraine since 2022.

This article asks: how far does ethnonationalism or the financial-criminal incentive structure help explain elite support within Crimea for Russia's annexation in 2014? I examine evidence of ethnonationalist mobilization from below and from the top-down within Crimea in 2014. Did mobilization begin before Russian special forces emerged in Crimea, and/or the resignation and realignments of Crimean political actors? Is there evidence that Crimean politicians were more ideologically or materially motivated? Did pro-Russian ethnonationalist politicians in Crimea and Russia participate, outside of those involved in criminal networks or without ties to corruption schemes? The article contends that the financial-criminal incentive structure, not ethnonationalism, played a crucial role in explaining how and why elite breakage and realignments occurred in Crimea and determined who came to support and participate in annexation.

First, I review existing explanations of ethnonationalism. Second, I develop an alternative explanation: a financial-criminal incentive structure. Third, I discuss the methods, methodology, and data of this study. Fourth, I overview the failure of Crimea's secessionist movement in 1994 to underline the prior shortcomings of ethnonationalist explanations. Fifth, I test the role of ethnonationalism versus a financial-criminal incentive structure in explaining Russia's annexation of Crimea. The conclusion discusses the broader empirical and theoretical implications of elite breakage and a financial-criminal incentive structure in explaining Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Appendix contains richer (but not separate) evidence for this testing, building elite biographies of key actors, and examining their ethnonationalist, corrupt, and criminal credentials, as the empirical scaffolding of the analysis that follows.

## **Nationalism as the Cause: A Dog Waiting to Bark?**

The main thrust of literature that explores support for annexation within Crimea posits the strength of Russian ethnonationalism and support for the Russian state within Crimea, whether nascent since the 1990s or exploding in relation to Euromaidan (2013–14). Historically, ethno-linguistic cleavages in Crimea were not “clear-cut” and were uneven during secessionist moves in 1994 (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 318, see also Sasse 2007). By 2014, Hughes and Sasse (2016, 320, 331) argued that Russian ethnonationalism could mobilize “a broad section” of Crimea's population.

Others argue that PoR was a pro-Russian and pro-Soviet party that left their strongholds – Crimea and Donbas – vulnerable to conflict (Kuzio 2019). Even accounts placing agency within Russia still rely on shorthand explanations whereby “a mostly pro-Russian local population” made annexation possible in Crimea (Treisman 2018, 282), without demonstrating how or whether this was the case. Many of these accounts take a deterministic approach as if annexation was inevitable and overlook the decisions and agency of Crimean elites.

Most scholars using opinion polls and survey research also align with the ethnonationalism explanation. For example, O’Loughlin and Toal (2019) Toal indicate a large – and potentially increasing – minority (but not majority) supporting Crimean secession from surveys in December 2014.<sup>1</sup> Also using surveys from December 2014, O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov (2016) suggest broader support for Russian citizenship and trust in Putin and Russia in Crimea than other Ukrainian regions, especially among those identifying as ethnic Russians for *Russkii Mir* (“Russian world”).

But, the mechanism of ethnonationalism is often unspecified. Hughes and Sasse (2016, 321) explain the “emotive” role and appeal of ethnonationalism. However, neither they nor Kuzio (2019) probe how and why 2014 was a moment of enduring, growing, or exploding ethnonationalism in Crimea sufficient to explain how political elites and masses radically transformed. After all, ethnonationalist and secessionist sentiments and movements had declined before 2014. If ethnonationalism was a dog waiting to bark, why was 2014 the moment the bark mobilized? As I analyze below, this explanation elides ethnonationalism as a *justification* with ethnonationalism as a (causal) *explanation* (Allison 2014), with ethnonationalism approximating both Russia’s version of events and justification for its actions (Grant 2015).

Finally, with Crimea a most likely case, revisiting the role of ethnonationalism is worthwhile because ethnonationalist explanations often determine how scholars view politics and political outcomes, such as elections and conflict, across much of the former Soviet Union. Collectively, this literature leaves the impression that politics is infused with ethnonationalism, as if these states and societies are democratically weak because they are ethnically or linguistically divided (Way 2016; c.f. Beissinger 2008). But, political elites have often mobilized ethnonationalism to veil their own interests (Gorenburg 1999; Treisman 1996), such as rent-seeking and corruption. As we struggle to understand Russia’s 2022 war against Ukraine, we tend to focus on the geopolitical (spheres of influence, stemming democratic diffusion) and ethnonationalist. Less do we analyze the links between conflict, business, and crime and how they cooperate within an incentive structure that offers personal and regime rewards.

## The Financial-Criminal Incentive Structure

This article presents an alternative theory – the financial-criminal incentive structure – that prioritizes actors’ rational actions and personal material motivations over ideology. The theory emphasizes that prior clandestine organized crime links can be a tool of mobilization with opportunities opening up new routes to personal protection and profit, such as financial rewards from liquidation and redistribution of assets, and immunity from prosecution provided by another state rather than a new regime within the existing state.

I contend that existing criminal links within Crimea, and between Crimea and Russia, made annexation look profitable. The primary evidence for this theory comes from observing elite breakages with links severed between business-politics-organized crime in Crimea (‘locals’) and the dominant Donetsk/Yanukovych clan in Crimea (‘Macedonians’).<sup>2</sup> Euromaidan shifted the opportunity structure and provided incentives for forming new, more profitable, political-business-crime linkages between ‘locals’, pro-Russian Crimean elites, and Russia. Crimean elites (e.g., PoR and pro-Russian politicians) were neither homogenous nor unitary actors regarding their material interests or ideologies. Rather, they were actors capable of fluidly redefining their networks to suit their interests, with elite defection neither individual nor en masse, but cleaved along a ‘local’ vs. ‘Macedonian’ axis.

### Crime and Crimea

Before annexation, Crimea’s “criminogenic” nature was emphasized (Chernetsov 1998), with known links between organized crime and politics, and “banditry” merging with business and politics (Zhdanov 2002; Kapatadze 2012; Kuzio 2014).

However, few accounts explore the role of organized crime in Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Galeotti (2014), in an op-ed, describes Crimea’s annexation as a “case study” of the entanglement between the “underworld and upperworld”, where connections between crime and the Russian state are “complementary” rather than “parasitic”. He suggests annexation might be “the first conquest in history conducted by gangsters working for a state”, viewing annexation as providing “business opportunities” rather than driven by historical or ethnonationalist injustice (Galeotti 2018). It is no coincidence that Ukraine’s two regions with “entrenched [...] old-style” criminals with links to Russian organized crime groups – Crimea and Donbas – are the two regions in which Russia focused, prior to 2022, violent territorial and political control (Galeotti 2018). Kuzio (2016, 193–194) also points to the links of organized crime of those installed as leaders in Crimea by Russia’s annexation (citing Galeotti), namely Sergei Aksenov and his “footsoldiers” that comprised Crimea’s “self-defense” forces

Both authors emphasize Aksenov's role, whether as a "puppet" (Kuzio 2016) or Russia's "ideal choice" for leading annexation (Galeotti 2018, 246). However, Russia's meandering route to recruiting Aksenov suggests he possessed more power than a 'puppet' (discussed below). Moreover, this narrow focus obscures the involvement of other actors within Crimea's Communist Party and PoR DeBenedictis (2021), Matsuzato (2016), and Fumagalli and Rymarenko (2022). Yet, those emphasizing the fallout between 'locals' and 'Macedonians' within PoR, (DeBenedictis 2021; Matsuzato 2016; Fumagalli and Rymarenko 2022), overlook the role of organized crime and corruption in such fallout and realignment.

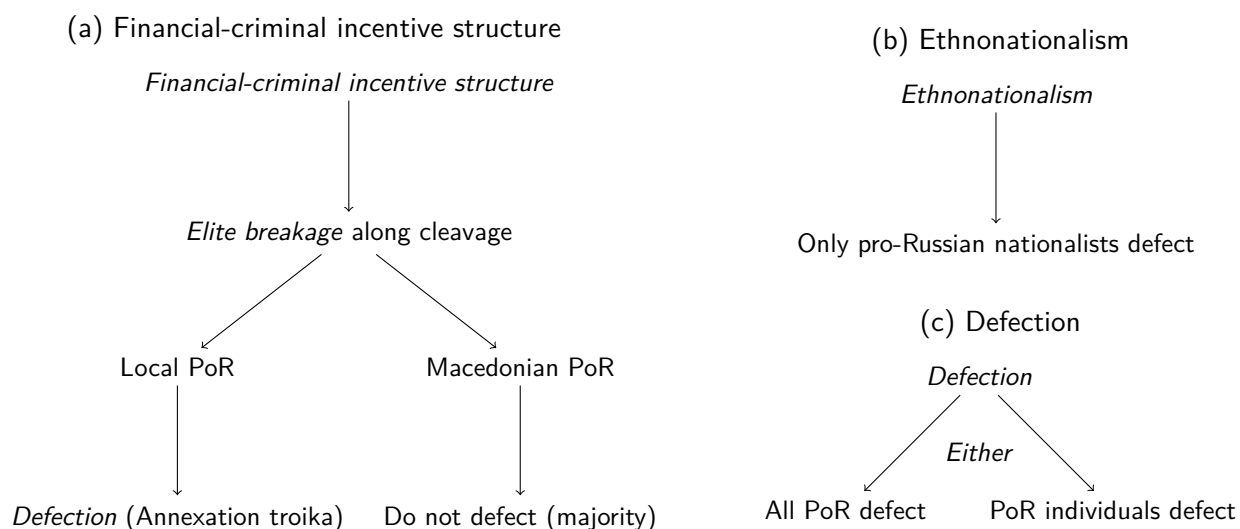
## **Crony Capitalism and Violent Entrepreneurs**

The financial-criminal incentive structure theory aligns with a broader analysis of Russian and Ukrainian politics and conflict/civil war literature. For example, scholars point to conditions of state weakness or low state presence and "haphazard" privatization of assets as causal factors explaining participation in conflicts, e.g., in Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Chechnya (Sambanis 2004, 269, see also Mueller 2003; Lessing 2021; Barnes 2017; Aliyev 2019). Similarly, the involvement of separatists in organized crime and the gains of "personal enrichment" via conflict have also been leveraged to explain the lack of support for separatism in Donbas (Aliyev 2019; Laryš and Souleimanov 2022).

Informal links between business and politics have been paramount when analyzing Russian politics (Gel'man 2004; Szakonyi 2020), and Ukrainian politics under Yanukovich (Huss 2020; Kudelia 2014). Concepts such as a "collective Putin" (Ledeneva 2013, 77) or "power vertical" (Dawisha 2014) describe the personalized, vertical, and informal networks through which (corrupt) governance, racketeering, and embezzlement operate in the Russian state. The "embodiment of crony capitalism" is the "economic-political networks" that informally link business and government, which were kick-started by property redistribution following Soviet collapse by forging advantageous connections between politicians administering land and property and business people (Sharafutdinova 2010, 12, 39–40). The patronalism and cronyism of post-Soviet politics (Hale 2014), particularly in Russia, are not separable from how crime and business intersect; instead, this system is the extension of patronal politics (Sharafutdinova 2010; Yekelchik 2007).

As much as links are informal and clandestine, they are also violent and criminal. For example, "violent entrepreneurs" convert "organised force (or organised violence)" into financial and business resources (Volkov 1999, 741). Power verticals are as diffuse and uncoordinated as vertical, especially within regional politics (Sharafutdinova and Turovsky 2017). Regional administrators have become "regional barons" as the primary "violent entrepreneurs", given their advantages in

Figure 1: Causal Mechanisms of Financial-Criminal Incentive Structure and Alternative Hypotheses



using violence and their formal power (Blyakher 2019). For example, contracts are both awarded as “obligations”, as a “tax” on business, and as “rewards” for loyalty to the system (Ibid 46).<sup>3</sup>

## Elite Breakage

Elite breakage – between ‘locals’ and ‘Macedonians’ – is a critical part of the causal story of the financial-criminal incentive structure. Relatively little is written theoretically or conceptually about what is more commonly referred to as “elite fractures”, i.e., splits within elite groupings, such as political parties (c.f. Semenov 2017). Limited literature theorizes and conceptualizes why defections occur – when a “regime-affiliate elite[s]” leaves voluntarily “the ruling coalition [...] to challenge the regime” (Reuter and Szakonyi 2019). Typically, the costs of defection are high (Andrews and Honig 2019), but en masse defections can occur due to exogenous shocks, such as economic crises (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Meanwhile, individual defections can occur among those with higher autonomous political and business resources, and where elites perceive their opportunities to rent-seek might decrease (Reuter and Szakonyi 2019).

Building on these conceptions of defection, I use the concept of elite breakages to emphasize that defections may neither always be individual nor en masse. Sometimes, they can be cleaved and collective, where a stream of intersecting interests collectively switch from one grouping to another. Moreover, as Crimea demonstrates, defections can occur not only within national contexts but also by defecting from one state to another.

Figure 1 demonstrates the expected implications of each hypothesis. For ethnonationalism, we would expect ideology to be the key mechanism of defection and mobilizing, primarily, those

to whom this ideology speaks (Figure 1b). For defection alone, we would expect either all of PoR in Crimea to defect or individuals in PoR to defect (Figure 1c). Instead, we observe the cleavage indicated in Figure 1a, with Euromaidan lowering the costs of defection and splintering PoR, and encouraging the realignment of PoR within the financial-criminal incentive structure along the 'local' vs. 'Macedonian' axis.

## **Case Selection, Methodology, and Data**

Using theory-testing process tracing, I interrogate these rival explanations in explaining, primarily, elite support in Crimea alongside actors in Russia and Ukraine. Theory-testing process tracing enables the researcher to make transparent within-case causal inferences by evaluating evidence around actors' decision-making (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015). Specifically, this approach helps disentangle the likely empirical fingerprints of each theory, evaluate evidence for each theory, and examine the presence, absence, and sequencing of causal mechanisms being tested. Crucial for this approach is the side-by-side presentation of both theories, not only the under-analyzed theory (financial-criminal incentive structure).

Analyzing Crimea as a most likely case of ethnonationalism follows, first, the prominence of ethnonationalism in explaining annexation. Second, this framing highlights how Crimea is different from other Ukrainian regions. Ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are a local majority in Crimea, compared to other Ukrainian regions where they are not. Third, pro-Russian politics and local pro-Russian parties – separate from PoR – were more established compared to other Ukrainian regions where they were not. Fourth, Crimea's status as an autonomous region of Ukraine led to, for example, the institutionalization and protection of the Russian language in Crimea versus other Ukrainian regions, which were oblasts.

Testing ethnonationalism in a most likely case can shed light on how far it should hold prominence in explaining politics in the former Soviet Union, compared to, for example, the role of criminal networks and shifting elite networks during, but not only, periods of conflict. Doing so fills two gaps: first, in terms of offering alternative explanations to ethnonationalism in explaining support for annexation within Crimea, and second, in shifting attention to actors within Crimea whose role is often obscured, downplayed, or homogenized. If ethnonationalism does not fully explain annexation, this implies a need for greater scrutiny of this theory in understanding the intersection of Russian-Ukrainian elite politics and elite behavior in the former Soviet Union more generally. Moreover, if the financial-criminal incentive structure explains annexation equivalently to, or more than, ethnonationalism, the theory should hold greater weight more generally in our understanding of elite political behavior.



The article triangulates evidence from various published sources: elite speeches during and after annexation, national security briefings, sociological surveys, and over 300 news reports from Ukraine, Crimea, and Russia, in Russian and Ukrainian languages. I triangulate these various sources to build the elite biographies (Appendix Sections A3-A4) that, in turn, are the empirical scaffolding in an attempt to ‘show the workings’ of the analysis that follows below.<sup>4</sup>

The point of such evidence, and evidence more generally when process tracing, is less to analyze empirically ‘new’ material but to cast the net widely to accumulate, examine, and triangulate evidence in light of competing theories. This article is also motivated by, but does not explicitly draw on, fieldwork immediately prior to Russia’s annexation, including 53 interviews with politicians and ordinary people around questions of Russian identification, citizenship, nationalism, and engagement with Russia (Knott 2022).

Now, fieldwork would be impossible at the micro- and meso-level. Asking questions about ethnonationalism and the financial-criminal incentive structure would put participants, researchers, and gatekeepers at undue risk, particularly given the human rights situation in Crimea since 2014 and 2022 (Knott 2019). The challenge of examining criminality within regimes, and around events like annexation, is also to peer into the ‘blackbox’ both of causality and criminality. For example, court cases illuminating criminal links and activities are only typically used by regimes to repress opponents. For key actors around annexation investigated here, there is sufficient evidence from primary and secondary sources, including journalist interviews with and around key actors, to peer into this ‘blackbox’. It is not only impossible to interview key actors around this ‘blackbox’ (for safety reasons); interviews would also be unlikely to yield more illuminating evidence due to deflection. There are additional data challenges given that government websites in Crimea and Russia have regularly been made unavailable after 2014, and again after February 2022, requiring extensive use of web-archives (where prior web-links of relevant materials are known). Despite these challenges, we can establish the relevant actors in annexation, construct biographies, and examine their interests to test the rival theories of ethnonationalism and the financial-criminal incentive structure (see Appendix).

## **From Failed Secession to Successful Annexation**

The apex of secession in Crimea was the mid-1990s when the secessionist movement appeared like it might be successful. But, by 1994 the Crimean secessionist movement – and support for secession – quickly fell away. In part, this failure was because the secession movement, though led by Yurii Meshkov, was itself divided on its goals (Sasse 2007). So was Crimea’s society divided on how Crimea should be governed and by whom (Marples and Duke 1995). Lacking popular support inhibited the movement from broader mobilization, and there were few incentives in

this environment to overcome their ideological differences. Crimean society was more concerned with economics than ethnonationalism (Dawson 1997, 470). While the secessionist movement appeared motivated by pro-Russia ethnonationalism, it could not consolidate, and contestation remained small and localized.

Russia, too, suffered from a “commitment problem” in supporting Crimean secession and revising Ukraine’s borders, (Laitin 2001, 853). The prevailing view challenged Crimea’s position in Ukraine and vocalized support for the rights of ethnic and linguistic Russians in Crimea and south and eastern Ukraine. But, President Yeltsin was unwilling – militarily or politically – to claim Crimea as part of Russia (Marples and Duke 1995, 278). Instead, a power play ensued between Russia’s upper and lower houses of parliament, on one side, and Yeltsin, on the other.<sup>5</sup> In short, Russia lacked a “clear political opportunity structure” to support elite aspirations in Crimea and favored better relations with Ukraine and the West (Hughes and Sasse 2016, 319). Further, Russia’s simultaneous attack on Chechnya incentivized Russia to leave Ukraine alone to resolve Crimea as a domestic rather than international dispute (Motyl 1998, 27), with Ukraine providing Crimea with some degree of autonomy (Hughes and Sasse 2016).

Ultimately, secession in the mid-1990s remained a domestic political dispute between Crimea and Ukraine rather than a military and international dispute involving Russia. After 1994, Crimea’s reputation as “Ukraine’s next flashpoint” did not entirely dissipate (Kuzio 2010). However, for over 20 years, Crimea seemed a relatively stable, autonomous region of Ukraine where secessionist movements and pro-Russian support were waning (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2013). These changes were reflected in Crimea’s parliamentary elections: *Blok Rossiia* (Russian Block) who had gained 66.8% of the vote in 1994 Crimean elections were wiped out by 1998 (Sasse 2007, 198). Instead, Crimea became a region politically dominated by mainstream Ukrainian- and Donbas-parties, namely PoR, headed by Victor Yanukovich.

Crimea became a “closed issue” for Russia’s political mainstream and confined to the “political margins” (237). But, by 2014, Ukraine-Russia relations deteriorated drastically over Crimea. On 21 February, the Euromaidan protests ended in Kyiv with Ukraine’s militarized riot police (*Berkut*) violently repressing protesters (November 2013–February 2014). By 22 February, President Yanukovich abdicated and disappeared to Russia via Crimea.

However, Russia’s so-called “Operation Polite People” began on 20 February, before Euromaidan ended and Yanukovich’s departure (Lavrov 2014, 159). While claiming these unmarked special Russian forces across Crimea were ‘self-defense’ forces, this deployment became evident only after Crimea’s parliament, airport, and other government and military buildings were seized (26–28 February).<sup>6</sup>

In this militarized climate, an annexation troika consisting of Sergei Aksenov (head of *Russkoe Edinstvo*/Russia Unity, RE), Vladimir Konstantinov (Chairman of Crimea’s Parliament, PoR), and

Rustam Temirgaliev (PoR) seized power from Anatolii Mogilev – Chairman of Crimea’s Council of Ministers and Kyiv’s eyes and ears in Crimea. Aksenov, supported by the troika, scheduled an unchallenged secessionist referendum for Crimea and Sevastopol on 16 March, just over two weeks after they seized power. The referendum officially indicated a high turnout (83%) and high support (97%) for joining Russia (Appendix Table A2). Alternative reporting within Russia suggested lower support.<sup>7</sup> Regardless, the referendum was held in a militarized climate without international observers, a status quo option, and free media, and with the choice framed as “between Russia and a Nazi-style dictatorship” (Grant 2015, 29). The next day, Aksenov – on behalf of Crimea – formally asked Russia to be annexed. Putin formally annexed Crimea as a republic of the Russian Federation on 18 March at a ceremony in Moscow attended by Aksenov and Konstantinov.<sup>8</sup>

The following sections test ethnonationalism versus the financial-criminal incentive structure to explain the success of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, synthesizing the empirical material in the Appendix (see Section A3). Specifically, I interrogate the role of actors within Crimea, focusing on elite breakages and realignments alongside actors in Russia and Ukraine.

## **Support in Crimea for Russia’s Annexation of Crimea in 2014 – Elite Breakages and Realignments**

While reviewing evidence for the ethnonationalism hypothesis in explaining elite support for annexation, this section also reviews links between pro-Russian and PoR politicians. In doing so, I expose the links of both to corrupt and violent politics and demonstrate the stronger evidence for the financial-criminal incentive structure as explaining elite breakage in Crimea and forming of the annexation troika, than ethnonationalism.

### **Nationalism as the Cause?**

Several factors challenge the ethnonationalism explanation, whether from the bottom-up or top-down within Crimea. Ethnic Russians (58%) and Russian speakers (77%) were a demographic majority in Crimea before annexation (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001). But, pro-Russian groups and sentiments in Crimea were weak. First, RE – the party headed by Sergei Aksenov, part of the annexation troika – gained just 4% of the votes in Crimea’s 2010 parliamentary elections (Parties and Elections in Europe, n.d.).<sup>9</sup> Instead, Crimean politics, like Ukrainian, was dominated by PoR.

Second, International Republican Institute (IRI 2014) polls show that an *increasing* majority

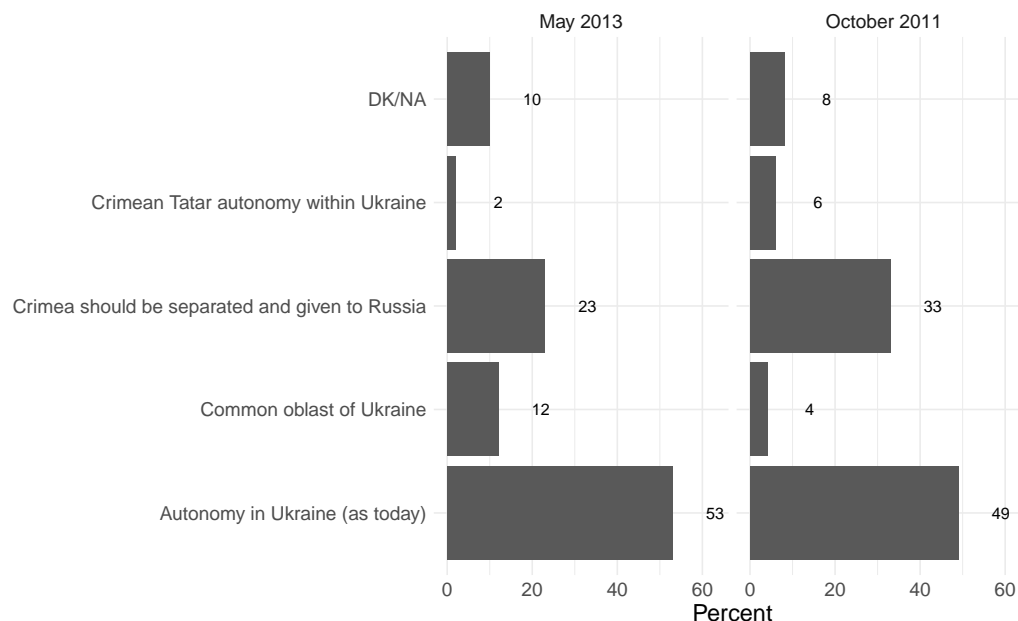


Figure 2: “What should the status of Crimea be?” (n=1,200 from Crimea, Source: International Republican Institute 2014), NB: DK/NA = “Don’t know” / “No answer”

supported Crimean regional autonomy within Ukraine (i.e., status quo, 53% in 2013, 49% in 2011), while a *decreasing* minority supported annexation to Russia (33% in 2011, 23% in 2013, Figure 2). Instead, IRI polling demonstrates that socio-economic concerns, such as unemployment (68%), outweighed concerns over the status of Russian language (4%), with concerns over ethnicity and language (for ethnic Russians) decreasing over time (International Republican Institute 2014, 2009). Rather, within Crimea, Crimean Tatars were the victims of discrimination by local authorities and vigilante members of pro-Russian organizations that destroyed their property (Shynkarenko 2022; OSCE 2013).

Third, in prior work, I expose how understandings of Russian identification and engagement with Russia, immediately prior to annexation, were more complex, contesting the idea of a pro-Russian majority Knott (2022). Only a minority – described as *Politicized Russians* – felt marginalized by post-Soviet Ukrainian policies of “Ukrainization”. Moreover, *Politicized Russians* were also the only participants affiliated to the pro-Russian organizations that would later support annexation (*Ruskaia Obschina Kryma*/Russian Community of Crimea, ROK, and Aksenov’s party, RE).

Indeed, I found more participants who identified as ethnically Russian and supported territorial status quo. Such participants neither felt victimized by Ukraine, nor perceived Russian culture or language as threatened by “Ukrainization”, nor considered themselves represented by pro-Russian organizations (Knott 2019). Rather, this majority maligned pro-Russian organizations as corrupt

“professional Russians” who laundered money from Russia (see also NovoRoss.info 2012).

Maybe something changed in relation to Euromaidan or other events that shifted ideology from the bottom-up within Crimea? The most common explanation highlights the cancellation of the 2012 regional language law (23 February), vetoed later by interim president Oleksandr Turchynov (3 March).

The 2012 regional language law had little impact in Crimea (apart from Sevastopol, Appendix A2). Across 2013, Vladimir Konstantinov (Crimea’s parliamentary speaker, Appendix A3.1.2) argued the 2012 law was “useless” because the Crimean constitution protected Russian “more strongly” (Ukrains’ka Pravda 2013; Komentarii: Krym 2013). Rather, Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar language organizations appealed to the Crimean parliament for greater protection (Abibulla 2012; Pashchenko 2012).

Russian news reported extensively on the repeal of the regional language law and exaggerated the effects of its repeal (A2.2), i.e., they did not contrast it with Konstantinov’s prior sentiments. Ukrainian media described such reporting as “propaganda” (Ukrains’ka Pravda 2018). Still, Ukrainian figures and politicians, including Ukraine’s ombudsman (Valeriya Lutkovska), Vitaliy Klichhko, and Serhiy Kunitsyn, among others, criticized the repeal as unhelpful for sending a potentially threatening signal (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union 2014c, 2014a; Krym Realii 2014). Andrei Malgin (a Crimean political scientist) also described the repeal as a “warning” to Russian speakers that their rights were threatened (Ivzhenko 2014).

Certainly, there were small-scale protests across Crimea, specifically in Sevastopol, around (but not before) 23 February 2014. However, these protests were likely politically organized. For example, the protests in Sevastopol, named the “People’s Will Against Fascism in Ukraine” (Bashlykova 2014), were gathered both to oppose the repeal and to ‘elect’ Aleksei Chalyi as Mayor of Sevastopol (Appendix, A3.2.3). While there is insufficient evidence to evaluate broader understandings of the repeal of the language law, outside of politicized groups, there is some evidence from a Russian journalist (from 2013 and after the language law repeal in 2014) that Crimea’s residents, in particular young people, felt free to speak Russian with language not a threatened, or politicized, issue (Kichanova 2014b, 2014a).

Finally, reports suggest that Russia’s activities began in Crimea around 20 February (Lavrov 2014) and that the annexation troika met by 10 February (see below). Both preceded Yanukovich’s departure from Ukraine (22 February) and the repeal of the regional language law (23 February).

Overall Crimea had not, in the twenty years of Ukrainian independence, become the discriminatory region that Putin claimed in legitimizing annexation, at least in the perception of ordinary citizens. The cancellation of the language law was an unfortunate signal to Crimea’s residents that their rights *might* be at risk. But, by the time the law had been repealed and concerns stoked up, events were already in motion within Crimea: PoR was already splintering, and the

annexation troika was already mobilizing to displace Mogilev. The repeal of the language law is, therefore, at best, a post hoc justification to disguise the elite breakage that was already occurring rather than a causal factor mobilizing support for annexation.

## Pro-Russian Ethnonationalists or Corrupt Elites?

Before Soviet collapse, and even more so with the privatization of state assets, Crimea and especially Simferopol (Crimea's administrative capital) became "free-wheeling havens for smuggling, black marketeering, and a lucrative array of embezzlement schemes centering on the region's health spas and holiday resorts" (Galeotti 2014). Simferopol was home to two rival gangs – *Bashmaki* and *Salem* – that extorted local businesses and brought violence onto Crimea's streets. Crucial was Sergei Aksenov (Section A3.2.1), also known by his criminal name "Goblin" who switched between rival gangs *Greki* and *Salem* (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union 2014b; Tsenzor.net 2014). Aksenov used his money and links to become "(semi)legitimate, in business and politics" (Galeotti 2014), such as becoming RE's leader in 2010, for protection and privileged access to resources.<sup>10</sup>

This transformation was deliberate – from "sportsuit-wearing, pistol-wielding 'bandits' who gave Crimea a reputation as the 'Ukrainian Sicily' and ended up in jail, shot, or going to ground" in the 1990s to "mainly above-board businesses, as well as local government" in the 2000s/2010s (US State Department Cable 2006). With "real power" in Crimea in the hands of "criminal bosses", Leonid Kuchma (Ukraine's president, 1994–2005) used Ukraine's Ministry of Interior and security services (SBU) to curb gangster power (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union 2014b). Meanwhile, Yanukovich continued to curb local gangster power in Crimea (while not curbing Donetsk-based gangsters) by installing PoR cadres from Donetsk (so-called 'Macedonians') in key power positions in Crimea.<sup>11</sup> He also bulldozed PoR opposition, including pro-Russian opposition ((Lashchenko 2021; Fumagalli and Rymarenko 2022)). While Crimean (even PoR) MPs were angered by their subordination to 'Macedonians', only the smaller number of Yulia Tymoshenko Blok Crimean MPs resisted "the invasion of non-Crimean cadres" (Prytula 2010).

Vladimir Kostantinov was PoR's exception, as a 'local' and speaker of Crimea's parliament (Section A3.1.2). Kostantinov became among the wealthiest in Crimea through the renowned corrupt business of construction (Sergienko 2012),<sup>12</sup> and was politically rewarded following his assistance to (and funding of) Yanukovich's presidential campaign. Prytula (2012) described Kostantinov as a perfect mix of inexperience, incompetence, and obedience that was easily subordinated and hard to replace because PoR 'locals' feared that he would only be replaced by a 'Macedonian'. Indeed, even Mogilev (A3.1.1) – a 'Macedonian' and former ally of Yanukovich who was overthrown by the annexation troika – blamed the erosion of Crimean autonomy as

Table 1: Prominent Actors in Crimea

Actor	Prior to Annexation		After Annexation	Under Sanctions	Evidence	
	Political Party	Status			Nationalist	Financial-criminal
Anatolii Mogilev, A3.1.1	PoR	Macedonian	Loyal to Ukraine	No	n/a	n/a
Vladimir Konstantinov, A3.1.2	PoR	Local	Defector (troika)	US/EU/Canada	Somewhat	Yes
Rustam Temirgaliev, A3.1.3	PoR	Local	Defector (troika)	US/EU/Canada	Somewhat	Yes
Vitalii Nakhlyupin, A3.1.3	PoR	Macedonian	Defector (annexation supporter)	No	Unclear	Yes
Olga Kovitidi	PoR	Local	Defector (annexation supporter)	EU/Canada	Unclear	Unclear
Aleksei Cherniak	PoR	Local	Defector (annexation supporter)	No	Unclear	Unclear
Konstantin Bakharev	PoR	Local	Defector (annexation supporter)	US/EU/Canada	Somewhat	Unclear
Sergei Aksenov, A3.2.1	RE	Professional Russian/local	Troika	US/EU/Canada	Yes	Yes
Sergei Tsekov, A3.2.2	RE	Professional Russian/local	Annexation supporter	US/EU/Canada	Yes	Yes
Ruslan Balbek, A3.2.1	Unclear	Crimean Tatar/anti-Mejlis	Annexation supporter	US/EU/Canada	Unclear	Yes
Mikhail Sheremet, A3.2.1	RE	Professional Russian/local	Annexation supporter	US/EU/Canada	Yes	Yes
Leonid Grach, A3.3	KPU	Communist/local	Sidelined	No	n/a	n/a

NB: The Appendix contains each key actor's biography, as per the indicated section.

fomenting annexation, or at least the elite breakages that made it possible (Nikulenko 2016).

### Elite Breakages: The 'Macedonian' Split and the Annexation Troika

The existing 'local' versus 'Macedonian' cleavage within PoR transformed into an elite breakage in February 2014 (Table 1). Local PoR functionaries, namely Konstantinov and Temirgaliev (Sections A3.1.2-A3.1.3), among others, defected from PoR and joined forces with Sergei Aksenov (Section A3.2.1), and others from the political pro-Russian fringe in Crimea. Evidence suggests they were already meeting by 10 February 2014 to plan removing 'Macedonians' from Crimea (Matsuzato 2016). 'Macedonians', largely, remained loyal to Kyiv but were deposed and replaced by the annexation troika (Aksenov, Konstantinov, and Temirgaliev). In turn, Aksenov was anointed as the leader of annexation by Konstantinov and Temirgaliev; Temirgaliev had wanted the position himself but was convinced by Konstantinov to rescind it to Aksenov (DeBenedictis 2021).

Kuzio (2019) claims that PoR's pro-Russian credentials were crucial for Crimea's annexation (i.e., ethnonationalism). But this split, and its alignment along 'local'/'Macedonian' lines, points to pre-existing grievances (loss of local power to 'Macedonians') and material interests rather than solely ideological ethnonationalist reasons. Euromaidan, then Yanukovich's departure, unified the aims of previously more ideologically disparate politicians and reduced the costs of defection from PoR: they shared material corrupt interests and ties to Russia that were more centered on corruption and criminality than ideological. Perhaps, they felt a sense of potential threat to their political and economic capital in a post-Yanukovich Ukraine, with Aksenov's links to clandestine organized criminal networks well documented in "Ukraine's Sicily" (Wyka 2007, see also A3.2.1).

As defectors might have expected, annexation brought nationalization and reallocation of assets and the ability to racketeer (coercing assets and businesses to change hands) on a new

scale. Being within, or aligned to, the annexation troika – by filling government positions with their friends, relatives, and affiliates from business, politics, and organized crime – enabled control over who would hold such assets, control of the budget (for Konstantinov), and reallocation of land and contracts, enabling self-enrichment. For example, Evgeniia Dobrynia, Aksenov's sister-in-law, was positioned high in elections to Crimea's post-annexation parliament on United Russia's list (Putin's party). She has been the chair of land relations committee (Oparyshev 2019) – a key position for reallocating land and benefiting from its reallocation.

Installing their “proteges” (and Konstantinov's mistresses, Kazarin 2016) has not ‘solved a single important problem for Crimea’ (water, energy, transport, etc.); but figures like Aksenov's wife, Elena, have become wealthy entrepreneurs (Stel'makh 2018). Even peripherally, figures like Konstantin Malofeev – Russian individuals straddling the line between extreme Russian ethnonationalism and corrupt business interests – have personally benefited from the business schemes and collaborations with Temirgaliev opened up by annexation. Malofeev, for example, met with Temirgaliev at Konstantinov's ice-rink over a month before Yanukovich's departure to discuss increasing Crimea's autonomy in case of further chaos (Kozlov 2015).

Further, the scale of corruption and organized crime around the webs and power verticals within the annexation troika, primarily Aksenov and Konstantinov (since Temirgaliev was offloaded early and later arrested, A3.1.3), has exploded since annexation. Such corruption goes deep into various avenues of Crimea's political-economic landscape (tourism, construction, energy, among others, see Zhabarov 2018; Glavk 2018).

Elite breakages and realignments might at first suggest ethnonationalist politics. Digging deeper lends weight to the financial-criminal incentive structure. First, pro-Russian ethnonationalism was always a fringe movement and sentiment in Crimea before 2014. Moreover, it is unlikely that ethnonationalist sentiments could have exploded due to Euromaidan or the canceling of the 2012 language law – not least because the language law was canceled after the troika was already assembling and support from Russia was coming. Second, elite breakages align less with ethnonationalist ideology and more with material interests (i.e., links to corruption and organized crime), accompanied by pre-existing grievances over the watering down of Crimea's autonomy via the installation of PoR ‘Macedonians’. Ethnonationalism would likely only have motivated only pro-Russians to defect, a smaller and different cleavage than the ‘local’ vs. ‘Macedonian’ split (evidence for Figure 1a).

Annexation offered the material potential for protection and enrichment (A3, Appendix), allowing Aksenov to transition from a “violent entrepreneur” to a “regional baron” (Volkov 1999; Blyakher 2019). The installing of Aksenov and Konstantinov's cadres to key positions of power, their personal, business, corrupt, and criminal endeavors, and their success at personal enrichment after annexation – as well as the bountiful corruption scandals that leave Aksenov and



Konstantinov untouched (for now) – lends further weight to a financial-criminal incentive structure. The remaining irony is that while local Crimean politicians, prominently the annexation troika, resented their subordination to ‘Macedonians’, they have switched this to subordination for Moscow, albeit while accumulating larger sums of wealth.

## Ethnonationalism and the Financial-Criminal Incentive Structure in Russia

In 2014, Russia showed no ‘commitment problem’ in annexing Crimea. While Russia’s willingness was critical, I scrutinize local relationships between Moscow and Simferopol (following Fumagalli and Rymarenko 2022, 2) and expose the ties of corruption and criminality previously overlooked.

Putin had long rebuked Yeltsin’s unwillingness to contest Ukrainian sovereignty. Such contestations became magnified by Putin’s claim that Ukraine – after Euromaidan – was an illegitimate and “totalitarian state” (President of Russia 2014a). Russia justified annexation using ethnonationalism as if Russian citizens and Russia’s so-called ‘Compatriots’ in Crimea were at risk following Euromaidan,<sup>13</sup> without any evidence of such threats (Hofmann 2020, 40–41).

However, just like Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 on the pretext of protecting Russian citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia,<sup>14</sup> alleging that Compatriots were discriminated against,<sup>15</sup> creating a narrative of a “‘deniable’ intervention” to legitimize Russia’s actions (Allison 2014, 1255; see also Wanner 2014). For example, Putin referenced the legacy of the “Kosovo precedent” and argued it was duplicitous for this “precedent” not to apply equally and “double standards” to allow intervention only after a humanitarian disaster (President of Russia 2014b). Similarly, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, claimed that if Kosovo was “a special case”, then Crimea was “no less special” (Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2014). Again, no evidence suggests such a disaster would have occurred in Crimea.

But Putin’s powerful discourses of subterfuge and securitization, and annexation, rewarded him via unprecedented surges in his popular support (Greene and Robertson 2022; see also Levada Centre 2014a, 2014b). Ethnonationalism as justification for annexation created a diversionary war to disguise the authoritarian trends of the Putin administration towards media, opposition figures such as Aleksei Navalny, and civil society (see for example Shevtsova 2014; Greene and Robertson 2022; in Crimea, see Gorbunova 2014). Is there evidence that ethnonationalism was not only Russia’s *justification* but also *explains* annexation?

## Nationalism versus the Financial-Criminal Incentive Structure

The extent to which Russia had a ‘plan’ to occupy and annex Crimea for several years, or months, is debated, given that annexation was militarily smooth but politically chaotic (Treisman 2018).<sup>16</sup> A crucial detail is *who* Russia approached within Crimea to lead efforts (November 2013–February 2014), as well as *who* did such approaching.

First, political aides with longer-term (geo)political, ideological (or even economic) agendas vis-à-vis Ukraine, such as Vladislav Surkov, did not lead Russia’s annexation efforts. Rather, Putin tasked Sergei Shoigu, Russia’s Minister of Defense (Zygar’ 2016). In turn, Shoigu (A4.1) installed his close aide, Oleg Belaventsev (A4.2), to lead operations within Crimea. Belaventsev has been Shoigu’s subordinate at multiple points in their careers, most recently at *Slavianka* (one of the largest military contractors controlled by Russia’s Ministry of Defense) – a career that has afforded Belaventsev several financial kickbacks via contract awards.

Second, while the annexation troika internally anointed Aksenov, Aksenov was not Russia’s initial choice. Instead, Belaventsev first approached Leonid Grach (A3.3), Crimea’s ‘last Communist’ as leader of the Communist Party within Crimea (Zhegulev 2017; corroborated by Grach, see Stoianov 2015; Semena 2021).<sup>17</sup> Grach later told FSB agents that while he might support pro-Russian forces annexing Crimea, he could not support “bandits” like Aksenov and Konstantinov (Zhegulev 2017). As Grach feared, Konstantinov raised concerns about Grach; Shoigu and Belaventsev also backtracked, realizing that while “famous”, Grach was Crimea’s (elderly) “madman” and wielded little power (Zygar’ 2016, 729).

It might not matter who Russia chose to lead annexation within Crimea, especially if they assumed that all politicians would be pro-Russian. But, this meandering escapade to choose a local leader signals Russia’s ignorance of power dynamics within Crimea before annexation (Matsuzato 2016), assuming Grach would be a popular or possible choice. Moreover, this escapade signals that Aksenov, alongside the troika that anointed him, was an important force of power in annexation within Crimean elites and a far cry from the “puppet” moniker used by Kuzio (2016). Finally, who led annexation within Crimea mattered to those who sought to wield and exert power and profit from annexation (the annexation troika), and Russia sought to support the troika and install them as leaders.

As much as ethnonationalist, the Russian regime aligned with criminal and corrupt elites in Crimea who have benefited immensely from annexation (the annexation troika). In turn, Russian citizens’ business interests in Crimea have skyrocketed since annexation, suggesting a broader manifestation of the financial-criminal incentive structure.

First, Putin’s inner circle have been awarded contracts worth billions of dollars. Arkady Rotenberg, with whom Putin trained in judo, owns *Stroigazmontazh*. This company was awarded

contracts for the Crimean bridge (the largest state contract in post-Soviet Russia, 228 billion rubles, Barsukova 2019), several cultural opportunities in Sevastopol (PASMI 2019),<sup>18</sup> and the Kuban-Crimea gas pipeline, allegedly “curated by Aksenov” (20 billion rubles, Ezhov 2019). Second, are the business interests of those within Russia who were directly involved with annexation, chiefly Oleg Belaventsev, who both denied knowing Aksenov before annexation *and* described him “like a son” (Basharova, n.d.). As of 2022, Belaventsev no longer holds a formal position within Crimea (as Honorary Consul of Nicaragua in Crimea) but remains Crimea’s “most influential person” and holds billions of rubles of assets in Crimea (Basharova, n.d.; Putilov 2016). Here, Aksenov’s family members, such as his sister-in-law (Dobrynia), have proved useful in chairing the land rights committee and liquidating and redistributing Ukrainian oligarchs’ assets, such as Ihor Kolomoyskyi, to individuals like Belaventsev (Basharova, n.d.).

Overall, we can continue to view ethnonationalism as a convenient justification for Russia’s annexation of Crimea. But we have to scrutinize the role of ethnonationalism alone and examine other factors: the financial-criminal incentive structure that ties Crimean individuals supporting annexation together and to Russia. Here, ethnonationalism functions both as a convenient justification and a veil for business – and corrupt and criminal – interests.

## **Ethnonationalism and Ukraine – Crimea as Pro-Russian**

Finally, in examining Ukraine’s role, we see the role of ethnonationalism, or fear of pro-Russian ethnonationalism in Crimea.

Apparent in Mogilev’s testimonies (Appendix, A3.1.1) and the minutes from Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council (RNBO) meeting on 28 February was Ukraine’s unwillingness to resist Russia’s incursion into Crimea. Ukraine’s interim post-Yanukovch leadership saw Crimea already as “lost” – before Russia’s military incursion (“Why Didn’t Ukraine Fight for Crimea?” 2022; RNBO 2014). They viewed Crimea’s residents as already ethnonationalist, pro-Russian, and supportive of Putin. For example, Arsen Avakov (Ukraine’s Interior Minister, 2014–2020) described the “risk” that the “the majority of the population of Crimea takes a pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian position (RNBO 2014). Thus, RNBO officials saw Crimea as itself wanting to join Russia and, in this calculation, not worth saving (“Why Didn’t Ukraine Fight for Crimea?” 2022). In this climate, most RNBO attendees (excluding Oleksandr Turchynov, interim President) were unwilling to risk escalation with Russia without NATO or EU support. Against Mogilev’s calls (Ukrains’ka Pravda 2018), RNBO participants denounced declaring martial law in Crimea, fearing escalation beyond Crimea (RNBO 2014).

Such fears were reasonably founded. Crimea had 12% of Ukraine’s armed forces, which

outnumbered Russia in Crimea (Lavrov 2014, 166). Yet, Ukraine's troops mainly were navy with unoperational equipment, while military in Crimea from Ukraine's Interior Ministry were "never meant to defend against an external aggression" (Ibid 157, 159). Still, Ukrainian forces were overcome because they lacked orders from Kyiv to actively resist (Lavrov 2014), with Ukraine's interim leadership allowing Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty to be breached to protect mainland Ukraine.

Within Ukrainian officials' decision-making, we observe the leverage of ethnonationalist explanations. Even if identity was more complex in Crimea, identifying as ethnically Russian was different from supporting Russia (Knott 2022), far fewer held Russian citizenship than suggested, (Wrighton 2018), and the supposed threats to those "passportized" by Russia was just a convenient post hoc justifying narrative for annexation (Grigas 2016), this complexity did not translate to Ukraine's understanding of Crimea during annexation. Instead, the interim Ukrainian regime acted as if the pro-Russian ethnonationalism explanation was true and, in turn, judged that active resistance against Russia was too risky ("Why Didn't Ukraine Fight for Crimea?" 2022), preferring to shield territories that were not 'lost'.

## Conclusion

Overall, the article finds that the financial-criminal incentive structure offers better leverage than ethnonationalism in explaining how and why elite breakage and realignments occurred in Crimea, specifically the formation of the annexation troika who were pivotal in supporting and participating in annexation. Euromaidan lowered the costs of defection and Russia's annexation of Crimea. With PoR in disarray, actors could mobilize within Crimea to usurp power (annexation troika), with Russia offering military support to shore up this grab of political power and territory.

It is crucial *who* defected. Not only did pro-Russian nationalists defect to support Russia. PoR within Crimea also defected. These were not isolated individuals or the entirety of PoR within Crimea – they split on a 'local' vs. 'Macedonian' axis. Euromaidan cemented the growing cleavage and animosity between Crimea and Kyiv/Donbas-elites ('Macedonians') over how Crimea was run; 'local' politicians within PoR defected to support Russia, while most 'Macedonians' remained loyal to Kyiv. Binding together the interests of 'local' defectors and pro-Russian defectors were less their interests in pro-Russian ethnonationalist politics, and more their material interests: the financial-criminal incentive structure. These interests seemed augmented by annexation compared to the old 'Macedonian' system, which itself appeared threatened by what might emerge out of the embers of Euromaidan. Those who benefited from the emerging financial-criminal incentive structure remained in power, with Aksenov and Konstantinov transitioning from "violent entrepreneurs" to "regional barons" (Volkov 1999; Blyakher 2019); those who did not benefit fled

('Macedonians').

The annexation troika was neither necessary nor sufficient for annexation to be successful; Russia could have engineered it without them. But, Russia chose to support the annexation troika and take its leadership from it. Moreover, the financial-criminal incentive structure is necessary for explaining elite breakage and the formation of the annexation troika, and in explaining elite support for annexation. Nominally pro-Russian, Aksenov provided the muscle through local militia, fortified by Russia's 'little green men'. However, pro-Russian politics in Crimea, since the 1990s, has never been more than a smokescreen to allow the transition of organized criminals and corrupt businessmen into office seeking profit and protection. Nor did Aksenov act alone, buttressed by 'local' PoR politicians.

For Russia, ethnonationalism was a convenient justification – and had peripheral benefits by shoring up support for Putin's regime – but itself was not causally sufficient. Instead, Russia was also motivated by a financial-criminal incentive structure, willing to provide military support given the personal, regime, and financial benefits, buttressing and utilizing local actors to ensure a swift Russian lockdown of Crimea.

We see more evidence for the role of ethnonationalism in how Ukraine handled the early stages: considering Crimea already 'lost' to Russia, and believing in the strength of Russian ethnonationalism, Kyiv preferred to protect mainland Ukraine rather than risk escalation. But even for Ukraine, perceived ethnonationalism in Crimea is insufficient to explain lacking willingness to intervene. Had Western actors provided more support, crucially military support, ethnonationalism could have been overcome in encouraging more radical intervention in Crimea and less acceptance of a Russian fait accompli.

It is intrinsically important to interrogate explanations of Russia's annexation of Crimea for creating unstable and unrecognized borders for Ukraine, diminished regional security, and laying the way for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This article also holds broader empirical and theoretical implications.

First, with Crimea a most likely case of ethnonationalism explaining annexation, this article finds that the financial-criminal incentive structure was necessary for how elite breakage unfolded. Thus, the financial-criminal incentive structure can help explain why annexation and conflict goals might succeed and why they might fail. After all, outside of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics,<sup>19</sup> since 2014 and since 2022 Russia's goals have failed, not least in territories that Russia has sought to annex illegally (e.g., Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts).

Relatedly, politicians can rarely mobilize support around how dirty politics is (because they are implicated). But, they can stoke, and even fabricate, ethnonationalist divisions to marshal support. Often such divisions appeal to too few people to be meaningful (Crimea in 1994). While moments like Euromaidan and conflict might catalyze ethnonationalist sentiments in ways

that might not exist at other moments, they can also mask the personal criminal and corrupt motivations of elite political actors at these moments, just as they do in quiet times. Overlooking the financial-criminal incentive structure is to follow, rather than critique, Crimean and Russian politics. As scholars, we have to look beyond ethnonationalist justifications that might be no more than a convenient smokescreen masking the less obvious organized criminal networks and clandestine business interests.

Second, this article brought together various aspects of existing theory – from patronalism (Hale 2014), crony capitalism (Sharafutdinova 2010), to violent entrepreneurs (Volkov 1999) – to develop the notion of a financial-criminal incentive structure. It also introduced existing theories of defection. This article offers a new way to understand how defection, via elite breakage, can be linked to financial-criminal incentive structures. Moreover, this article has demonstrated how defection from Kyiv to Moscow was neither individual nor en masse in Crimea, as defection has more typically been analyzed. Rather, the defection that resulted in elite breakage and realignment in Crimea was cleaved on a specific ‘local’ vs. ‘Macedonian’ axis (Figure 1a). With elite realignment joining ‘locals’ with pro-Russian politicians in forming the annexation troika, the incentives from such an alignment were material, financial, and criminal, more than ideological and ethnonationalist.

## Notes

1. O’Loughlin and Toal (2019) avoid gathering data on support for annexation presumably for political and ethical reasons.

2. ‘Macedonian’ refers to Makeevksa in Donetsk oblast, from which many of the Yanukovych cadres hail.

3. 2014 was a turning point with sanctions on Russia following their actions in Crimea and Donbas. Federal funding for regional programs has dried up, with regional barons facing centralized repression (Barsukova 2019). Crimea both demonstrates this system and is an exception to this turning point, as I explore below (Support in Crimea for Russia’s Annexation of Crimea in 2014 – Elite Breakages and Realignments), with the largest ever state contract in post-Soviet Russia for constructing the linking bridge to Russia in 2015; a contract awarded to Putin ally and “confidant”, Arkady Rotenberg (Blyakher 2019).

4. The Appendix is neither separate from nor independent of the main article but fleshes out key empirical details that are synthesized in the main article (both in terms of details and references).

5. For example, in 1993 Russia’s upper house declared that Sevastopol was a “Russian (*rossiiskiy*) city” – according to Hosking (2006, 395) “one of the main reasons” that Yeltsin dissolved it and then ordered an armed uprising to suppress. Yeltsin also resisted Russia’s lower house 1996 resolution that

Khrushchev's 1954 transfer of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was "arbitrary" (Solchanyk 2001, 177).

6. For a fuller timeline, see Appendix Table A1.

7. Results posted on the The Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights (2014) website suggested far lower turnout (30-50%) and support for unification with Russia (50-60%).

8. On behalf of Sevastopol, Aleksei Chalysi also attended (on Chalysi, see Section A3.2.3).

9. RE also failed to win any seats in the Ukrainian parliament.

10. There are also corruption scandals around Tsekov, leader of ROK, and Aksenov's broker into RE; see Section A3.2.2.

11. Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Interior, head of SBU in Crimea, prosecutor, and chief of police

12. See Szakonyi (2020) for how construction, and procurement in particular, are one of the most favorable domains for corruption in Russia.

13. Kuzio (2023) questions whether ethnonationalism is a suitable concept for Putin's actions in annexing Crimea and launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, preferring "imperial nationalism". Equally, Laruelle (2017, 2) describes the distinction between ethnic and imperial forms of nationalism as "artificial" because Putin, as well as ideologists, reproduce discursive claims that align with both ethnonationalism and imperial nationalism.

14. Though Dmitrii Medvedev, as Russia's president, later admitted they intervened to prevent Georgia from joining NATO (Whitmore 2011).

15. For discussion on the "fuzziness" and ambiguity of the concept of Compatriots within Russia see Shevel (2011).

16. Rudenko (2021) argues there was a long-term plan to annex Crimea whereas Matsuzato (2016) argues there was no such plan.

17. Grach told Belavtsev he was not a good choice, unliked by those who mattered in securing annexation within Crimea (e.g., Konstantinov), see Section A3.3.

18. E.g., a cultural center in Sevastopol, a large opera and ballet theater, a choreographic boarding school, a cinema and concert complex, and residential and hotel buildings for employees, artists, and students, see PASMI 2019.

19. Aliyev (2019) and Laryš and Souleimanov (2022) demonstrated the incentives of "personal enrichment" via conflict, rather than solely ethnonationalism, as factors explaining lacking support for separatism in Donbas.

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