

CANMUN 2025

BACKGROUND GUIDE



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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear delegates,

It is with great pride, excitement and anticipation that we, the Executive Board, welcome you to the United Nations General Assembly at CANMUN 2025. The UNGA is commonly referred to as the “*parliament of the world*”, and rightly so. In this committee, every nation upholds an equal voice, and every delegate is given the power to shape discourse, bridge gaps, and contribute to resolutions that combat global concerns. As your Executive Board, our foremost commitment is to ensure that your two days in this committee are enriching, engaging, fruitful and most importantly, memorable.

This year’s agenda has been curated with utmost thought to ensure that you not only grapple with pressing global issues but also practice and are made aware of the arts of diplomacy, negotiation, and consensus-building. While this background guide provides you with a strong foundation(if you are to go through it with your utmost concentration) , it is not exhaustive. We expect you to dive deeper, explore alternate perspectives, and come armed with research that allows you to present factual arguments. After all, the true essence of the UNGA lies not in agreement alone, but in dialogue and debate that lead towards solutions that are sure to help tackle global curbs.

At the same time, we want you to see this committee as more than a mere formal setting. Yes, we will moderate, judge, and push you to deliver your very best, but we want you to remember that we are also approachable mentors as much as judges. While the gravity of the agenda will demand seriousness and sensitivity, we believe a well-timed smile, a lighthearted remark, or a moment of camaraderie can very well coexist with rigorous and intense debate. Think of us as both facilitators of diplomacy and fellow MUNners who once sat where you are today.

A word of advice as you prepare. First, be thorough with your research, respect the diverse stances you will encounter, and lastly, give voice to your country’s unique perspective. Whether this is your first MUN or your fifteenth, remember that the UNGA derives its strength from the contributions of *all* delegates. We encourage consistent participation, thoughtful interventions, and constructive collaboration not to “win,” but to learn, grow, and create policy proposals with substance.

We, on the Executive Board, are excited to see where your ideas, negotiations, and creativity take this committee. This is your arena to demonstrate not only intellect but diplomacy, patience, and teamwork. Walk in with confidence, be open to dialogue, and above all, enjoy the process.

Vice Chairperson: Archit Shara

Moderator: Ansh Dutta, Vsishnavi Reddy

Committee Overview

The Special Political and Decolonisation Committee (SPECPOL)

The Special Political and Decolonisation Committee, also known as the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, occupies a unique place within the UN's deliberative framework. Unlike other GA committees, which are limited to thematic areas such as budgetary or legal affairs, SPECPOL functions as a hybrid body that manages both the unfinished business of decolonisation and a wide range of special political issues. It is one of the few organs within the General Assembly entrusted with handling matters that straddle questions of sovereignty, self-determination, peacekeeping operations, and the administration of territories that lack full independence.

SPECPOL's competence extends to some of the most politically sensitive debates before the General Assembly, including the granting of observer status to liberation movements, the monitoring of decolonisation processes, and the scrutiny of issues concerning displaced populations. Historically, its mandate has been pivotal in enabling the Assembly to deliberate on cases where political aspirations and territorial sovereignty collide. The Committee's deliberations, while non-binding, often form the basis for General Assembly resolutions that shape international opinion and, in some instances, contribute to the development of customary international law.

SPECPOL's Mandate on Self-Determination and Disputed Territories

Central to SPECPOL's work is the examination of claims to self-determination. This principle, enshrined in the UN Charter and reiterated in numerous General Assembly resolutions, carries both political and legal significance. SPECPOL has historically dealt with questions of colonial independence in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, but its agenda has broadened to cover non-colonial disputes where populations have sought greater autonomy or independence. The Committee operates as a deliberative forum in which states, and by extension international actors, assess whether such claims can be reconciled with the competing principle of territorial integrity.

In situations where self-determination is asserted outside of a colonial context, such as Kosovo, Western Sahara, or, in this case, Crimea, SPECPOL provides a venue for the international community to evaluate the legitimacy of these claims. Although the Committee does not hold enforcement authority, the weight of its discussions lies in shaping the narrative of international legitimacy. Through its reports and draft resolutions, SPECPOL allows the General Assembly to articulate the collective view of the membership on whether a particular self-determination movement deserves recognition, mediation, or further scrutiny.

The Open House Session Format

For this simulation, the Committee is being conducted in an Open House format, a modification that allows participation not only by UN member and observer states but also by non-state actors and international organisations. The rationale behind this approach is to reflect the reality that many disputes over self-determination are not confined to state-to-state interactions. Civil society organisations, indigenous groups, independence movements, and international monitoring bodies often play decisive roles in how such disputes evolve and are perceived by the world.

By admitting these actors into the discussion, the Committee broadens its analytical horizon. This means delegates may engage with perspectives from local communities in Crimea, representatives of Crimean Tatars, international monitoring groups such as the OSCE, or human rights organisations documenting conditions on the ground. In doing so, the Committee mirrors contemporary UN debates, where legitimacy is increasingly shaped not only by diplomatic stances of states but also by the moral and factual authority of non-state stakeholders.

Relevance to the Crimean Question

The situation of Crimea highlights the tension at the heart of SPECPOL's mandate: the struggle to balance the right of peoples to determine their political status with the principle of maintaining the territorial integrity of sovereign states. Since the events of 2014, debates over Crimea have featured prominently in the General Assembly, particularly through resolutions that reaffirm Ukraine's sovereignty and reject the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum. However, beneath the surface of state-level disputes lies the complex reality of independence movements, minority groups, and external involvement.

SPECPOL, operating under the Open House framework, is thus uniquely positioned to explore whether the movement for Crimean independence can be situated within the established legal and political framework of self-determination. It provides an environment where state interests are tested against normative principles, and where non-state voices can shed light on the aspirations and grievances of the affected populations. This sets the stage for a substantive debate on whether the international community should regard the Crimean case as an exercise of self-determination or as a violation of established principles of sovereignty.

Introduction to the Agenda – Self-Determination and Crimea

The Concept of Self-Determination in International Law

The principle of self-determination occupies a foundational place in modern international relations. It is embedded in the United Nations Charter, notably in Articles 1(2) and 55, and reaffirmed through landmark General Assembly resolutions such as 1514 (XV) on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and 2625 (XXV) on Friendly Relations among States. At its core, self-determination recognises that all peoples are entitled to freely determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

Despite its broad recognition, the principle has never carried absolute authority. In practice, it must be interpreted alongside other fundamental norms, most importantly the principle of territorial integrity. This tension produces a persistent legal and political debate: under what circumstances does self-determination justify independence, and when must it yield to the sovereignty of existing states? The answer has varied depending on historical context, ranging from decolonisation in Africa and Asia to more contested claims in places such as Kosovo, Western Sahara, and now Crimea.

Crimea as a Focal Case Study

The Crimean Peninsula, located at the intersection of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, presents one of the most complex and divisive questions of self-determination in the contemporary era. The events of 2014, in which a referendum was organised under the presence of Russian forces and followed by the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, reignited global debate on the scope and legitimacy of self-determination claims.

On the one hand, supporters of the referendum argue that it reflected the genuine will of the Crimean population, many of whom identify historically and linguistically with Russia. On the other hand, critics emphasise that the referendum was conducted under conditions of external military pressure, excluded meaningful participation of minority groups such as the Crimean Tatars, and contravened the Ukrainian Constitution, which does not permit unilateral secession of regions. These competing perspectives make Crimea a unique test case for the international community's approach to self-determination outside of a colonial framework.

Layers of the Crimean Question

Given its complexity, the Crimean case must be understood in multiple dimensions. For clarity, it is useful to distinguish between three interrelated but distinct narratives:

1. Crimea as an Independence Movement

Beneath the headline of annexation lies a long-standing set of political aspirations within Crimea itself. Various groups in the region, particularly those aligned with Russian cultural identity, have historically voiced support for greater autonomy or outright independence from Ukraine. Framing Crimea primarily as an independence movement rather than as a matter of territorial conquest allows delegates to scrutinise whether local aspirations can qualify as an exercise of self-determination under international law.

2. Crimea as a Case of Annexation

The second layer concerns the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. From the standpoint of international law, the use of force to alter territorial boundaries is prohibited under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. The General Assembly, through Resolution 68/262 of 2014, underscored this by declaring the referendum invalid and affirming Ukraine's sovereignty. This perspective highlights the principle that claims to self-determination cannot be legitimised when they arise under foreign military occupation.

3. Crimea as a Minority Rights Question

A third dimension, often underemphasized, concerns the status of minority communities, particularly the Crimean Tatars. Historically subjected to persecution and displacement, the Tatars overwhelmingly opposed the 2014 referendum and have consistently advocated for their political and cultural rights within Ukraine. Their experience underscores a critical question: can a process claiming to embody self-determination be legitimate if it marginalises or excludes a significant minority population?

The Open House Lens

The Open House format adopted in this session brings new depth to the debate by expanding the scope of voices represented. Non-state actors such as Crimean civil society organisations, Tatar representative bodies, and international monitoring groups will have the space to present evidence and arguments that state delegations may otherwise overlook. This is particularly relevant in the Crimean case, where narratives advanced by major powers often overshadow the lived realities of local communities.

By including these perspectives, the Committee can explore whether the Crimean independence movement should be considered a genuine expression of self-determination or whether it is inseparably tainted by the presence of external military influence. In doing so, delegates will grapple with the same challenges that confront the real United Nations: defining the line between legitimate political aspirations and actions that undermine the international order.

Historical Context of Crimea and the Independence Movement

Crimea in the Pre-Soviet and Imperial Periods

The history of Crimea is marked by successive waves of conquest, settlement, and cultural exchange, each of which left enduring imprints on the region's identity. For centuries, the peninsula was home to the Crimean Khanate, a state dominated by the Crimean Tatars and closely tied to the Ottoman Empire. Its position on the Black Sea made it a valuable prize for regional powers, and by the late eighteenth century, the Russian Empire moved decisively to establish control. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 1783 not only displaced many Tatars but also initiated a process of demographic transformation through the settlement of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

This imperial annexation laid the groundwork for Russia's enduring claim that Crimea forms part of its historic territory. Yet it also introduced a theme that recurs throughout Crimean history: the tension between indigenous populations and incoming settlers, and the competing political claims that arise from demographic change. These tensions would resurface repeatedly in the centuries that followed.

Crimea under Soviet Administration

The Soviet era profoundly altered Crimea's legal and political status. Following the Russian Revolution, Crimea was reorganised as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). However, autonomy under the Soviet system was largely nominal, with Moscow exercising tight control over political life.

1. Deportation of the Crimean Tatars

Perhaps the most significant episode of this period was the forced deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944. Accused by Stalin's government of collaborating with Nazi occupiers, the entire Tatar population was uprooted and relocated to Central Asia. The deportation resulted in widespread loss of life and dismantled centuries of cultural presence on the peninsula. Although Tatars were permitted to return only in the late Soviet period, their displacement fundamentally changed the region's demographic balance, entrenching a Russian majority population.

2. The 1954 Transfer to Ukraine

Another decisive moment occurred in 1954, when the Soviet leadership transferred Crimea from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The transfer, framed at the time as a symbolic gesture to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of Ukrainian-Russian unity, was of little practical significance while both republics were integral parts of the Soviet Union. However, this administrative decision would later become the basis of competing sovereignty claims following the dissolution of the USSR.

Crimea in the Post-Soviet Period

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine emerged as an independent state, and Crimea became an Autonomous Republic within its borders. The new political landscape created space for competing nationalist, separatist, and minority voices to reassert themselves.

1. Autonomy and Rising Tensions

In the early years of Ukrainian independence, Crimea was granted a special autonomous status, with its own parliament and constitution, though still subject to Ukrainian law. This arrangement was intended to balance the peninsula's distinctive demographic composition, where ethnic Russians formed the majority, with the need to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty. Despite this compromise, pro-independence and pro-Russian movements steadily gained ground, reflecting dissatisfaction with Kyiv's central authority and growing alignment with Moscow.

2. The Crimean Tatar Return

Concurrently, the Crimean Tatars began to return in significant numbers, rebuilding communities that had been shattered during Soviet deportations. Their reintegration was fraught with social and economic challenges, as many struggled to reclaim property or secure political representation. Nevertheless, the revival of Tatar activism added another layer to Crimea's internal dynamics: while some ethnic Russians supported closer ties to Russia, Tatars largely aligned with Ukrainian sovereignty, seeing it as a safeguard against renewed repression.

The 2014 Referendum and Its Aftermath

The political earthquake of 2014, triggered by the ousting of Ukraine's President Yanukovych during the Euromaidan protests, provided the backdrop for Crimea's most dramatic turn in modern history. In March of that year, a referendum was organised in the presence of Russian military forces. Official results claimed overwhelming support for secession from Ukraine and accession to the Russian Federation. Moscow recognised the outcome immediately, incorporating Crimea as a federal subject.

International reaction was sharply divided. The United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 68/262, declaring the referendum invalid and reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity. Western states denounced the move as a violation of international law, while Russia framed it as an exercise of self-determination. Beyond this clash of state positions, the referendum had profound consequences for local communities: Tatars boycotted the process, while many ethnic Russians embraced it. This divergence reinforced the contested nature of Crimea's independence movement and highlighted the question of whether genuine self-determination can occur in the shadow of foreign military presence.

Crimean Independence as a Movement

While the annexation narrative often dominates, it is important to recognise that movements for greater autonomy or independence within Crimea predate 2014. Local political organisations, some advocating outright separation from Ukraine, had operated since the early post-Soviet period. However, their credibility is difficult to assess independently of Russian influence, which both supported and amplified separatist agendas.

The Open House framework encourages a closer look at these independence movements in their own right. Were they genuine expressions of local will, or were they politically orchestrated extensions of Russian policy? How did minority voices, particularly Tatars, fit within or outside these narratives? Understanding this dimension is crucial, as it shifts the conversation from annexation alone to the broader issue of whether Crimea's claim to independence, however contested, aligns with the established legal contours of self-determination.

International Legal Framework

Foundations of Self-Determination in International Law

The principle of self-determination is deeply embedded in the post-1945 legal order. The United Nations Charter, adopted in 1945, identifies the promotion of self-determination as one of the Organisation's core purposes. Article 1(2) explicitly calls for the development of "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples," while Article 55 reiterates the obligation to promote conditions conducive to this goal.

Subsequent legal instruments further clarified its scope. Both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which entered into force in 1976, contain identical provisions in their first article affirming that "all peoples have the right of self-determination." These provisions establish self-determination as not only a political principle but also a legal right with universal applicability. Yet, the open-ended wording left unresolved the crucial question of when this right entitles a people to secede from an existing state.

The Decolonisation Framework

The clearest application of self-determination emerged in the context of decolonisation. The General Assembly's landmark Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960, the "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," proclaimed the right of all colonised peoples to independence. This resolution, often considered the "Magna Carta" of decolonisation, reflected the consensus that foreign rule in colonies was incompatible with the Charter.

Resolution 2625 (XXV), adopted in 1970, went further by articulating the “Friendly Relations” Declaration. It emphasised that the principle of self-determination should not be used to dismember or impair the territorial integrity of sovereign states that represent “the whole people belonging to the territory without distinction.” This established a delicate balance: while decolonisation was a legitimate expression of self-determination, unilateral secession in other contexts required more careful scrutiny.

The Principle of Territorial Integrity

While self-determination grants people a recognised entitlement, it exists alongside the equally fundamental principle of territorial integrity. The United Nations Charter, under Article 2(4), prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. International law thus places clear limits on the exercise of self-determination when it threatens to undermine the unity of a sovereign state.

This creates the legal dilemma central to the Crimean question: how to reconcile the aspirations of a population claiming independence with the international obligation to respect Ukraine’s territorial boundaries. The Friendly Relations Declaration underscores this point by indicating that self-determination cannot serve as a pretext for secession when a state already represents the whole of its population on a basis of equality and without discrimination.

Jurisprudential Precedents

The body of international jurisprudence has added important, though not always consistent, guidance on the legality of secessionist claims.

1. The Western Sahara Advisory Opinion (1975)

In its opinion on Western Sahara, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) emphasised the right of colonial peoples to self-determination, concluding that decolonisation could not be bypassed even if external states claimed historic ties to the territory. This opinion reaffirmed the primacy of local populations in determining political status, a principle relevant to debates about external claims on Crimea.

2. The Quebec Secession Case (1998)

The Supreme Court of Canada’s advisory opinion on Quebec clarified that international law does not recognise a general right of unilateral secession outside colonial contexts or situations of oppression. The Court did, however, note that “remedial secession” could arise if a people is systematically denied meaningful internal self-determination. This conditional recognition of secession introduces a framework that some actors invoke in non-colonial disputes, including those concerning Crimea.

3.The Kosovo Advisory Opinion (2010)

The ICJ's advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence remains the most frequently cited precedent in discussions of Crimea. The Court concluded that international law contained no prohibition against declarations of independence per se. However, it stopped short of recognising a positive right to secession, leaving unresolved whether Kosovo was a unique case or a broader precedent. Russia invoked this opinion in defence of Crimea's referendum, though critics argue that the presence of foreign military intervention fundamentally distinguishes the two cases.

Emerging Doctrines and Constraints

The evolution of international law has given rise to a series of doctrines that aim to clarify the boundaries of self-determination.

1. Remedial Secession

This doctrine suggests that a people may secede if they are subject to sustained denial of fundamental rights and have no other recourse. While invoked in cases like Kosovo, it remains highly controversial and lacks clear codification. Its application to Crimea is debated, as supporters of secession argue that Kyiv marginalised Russian speakers, while opponents highlight the absence of systemic persecution comparable to that seen in other remedial cases.

2. The Prohibition on Acquisition of Territory by Force

Customary international law, reinforced by the UN Charter, maintains that territory cannot be acquired through the threat or use of force. This principle directly affects Crimea, where the presence of Russian armed forces during the referendum undermines the independence claim. Even if elements of local self-determination existed, the association with military occupation complicates its legitimacy.

Application to Crimea

Taken together, these legal sources and precedents reveal why Crimea occupies such a contested space in international law. On one side, proponents of independence argue that the referendum expressed a form of self-determination analogous to Kosovo. On the other hand, critics emphasise the illegality of unilateral secession under Ukraine's constitutional framework, the lack of genuine participation by minority groups, and the external coercion of Russian forces. The clash of these principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and non-recognition of forceful acquisition creates the legal ambiguity that SPECPOL delegates must navigate.

Crimea – Between Independence and Annexation

The Crimean Referendum of 2014

In March 2014, a referendum was organised in Crimea under circumstances that remain highly contested. Official results claimed overwhelming support for integration with the Russian Federation, yet the legality of the process has been widely disputed. Ukraine and a majority of UN member states rejected the referendum on the grounds that it was conducted under military presence and in contravention of Ukraine's constitutional framework. By contrast, Russia emphasised the expression of popular will, presenting it as a legitimate exercise of self-determination.

This divide reflects a central tension in international law: whether a local population can unilaterally decide its status without the consent of the parent state. While some point to Kosovo's independence as a precedent, others argue that Crimea's situation is distinguishable due to the immediate involvement of external armed forces. SPECPOL delegates must therefore examine whether the referendum represented a genuine aspiration for independence or a coerced political manoeuvre engineered in favour of annexation.

Competing Narratives of Legitimacy

The Crimean crisis illustrates how legitimacy in self-determination disputes is rarely a matter of legal text alone. Competing narratives, one emphasising historical ties to Russia and the other highlighting Ukraine's sovereignty, continue to shape international positions. The portrayal of Crimea as a "return" to Russia resonates with segments of the local population and the Russian public, while Ukraine and its supporters underscore the violation of international norms concerning territorial integrity.

1. *Historical Justifications*

Russian officials and certain groups in Crimea have frequently invoked history to justify the peninsula's realignment. They cite Catherine the Great's annexation in the eighteenth century, the Soviet transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, and the enduring presence of ethnic Russians as evidence of natural affiliation. For proponents of this view, the referendum merely restored a historic reality that had been disrupted during the Soviet era.

2. *Sovereignty and International Law*

On the other side, Ukraine and a large portion of the international community contend that history cannot override established principles of sovereignty. Under the UN Charter, territorial boundaries are not easily altered, and unilateral secession is considered exceptional at best. From this perspective, the 2014 referendum was invalid because it bypassed Ukraine's constitutional mechanisms and was conducted under external military occupation. The General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 68/262, which affirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity, highlights the weight of this argument in the international arena.

The Role of Minority Populations

The question of independence or annexation cannot be divorced from the experience of minority communities, most notably the Crimean Tatars. This community, which has deep historical roots in the peninsula, opposed the 2014 referendum and expressed concerns over repression, land rights, and cultural survival under Russian control. Their position complicates claims that the referendum reflected universal consent within Crimea.

The Tatars' appeals to international bodies emphasise not only self-determination but also the need to safeguard minority rights under international conventions. In this sense, the Crimean case intersects with broader UN debates about whether self-determination can be considered valid when a significant minority rejects the proposed change. It also illustrates how independence movements are not monolithic and how internal divisions within a territory may influence international assessments of legitimacy.

Independence Versus Annexation – A Legal Distinction

A critical issue in this debate is whether Crimea's shift should be viewed as a case of secession or as an annexation. These terms carry different legal and political implications.

1. Secession

Secession involves the withdrawal of a part of a state's territory, often through a claim of self-determination. For secession to be recognised, it typically requires demonstration of widespread popular support and, in many cases, either the consent of the parent state or extraordinary circumstances such as systemic oppression. Those who frame Crimea's actions as secession argue that the population's vote expressed a collective will to determine their political future.

2. Annexation

Annexation, by contrast, refers to the incorporation of territory by another state, usually without the free and fair consent of the population. It is widely considered illegal under international law, particularly when carried out by force or under military occupation. Critics of Russia's actions view Crimea not as an independent state choosing affiliation, but as territory absorbed by a powerful neighbour under coercive conditions.

This distinction matters greatly, as international law tolerates secession under limited circumstances but rejects annexation outright. How delegates interpret Crimea's status, whether as a failed attempt at independence or as a straightforward annexation, will determine the trajectory of the committee's debate.

The Strategic Dimension

Beyond questions of legality and identity, the geopolitical significance of Crimea weighs heavily on the independence versus annexation debate. The peninsula holds the port of Sevastopol, home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and serves as a strategic naval hub. Control over Crimea thus carries not only symbolic but also material importance for regional security.

Many states argue that the referendum cannot be disentangled from this geopolitical calculus. They contend that the outcome was shaped as much by military imperatives as by civilian preferences. Others suggest that the strategic dimension merely amplified pre-existing sentiments among the population, providing momentum to a movement that might have emerged even without external intervention.

Implications for Self-Determination

The Crimean case forces the international community to confront a difficult question: can a movement for independence remain credible if its outcome is immediately aligned with annexation by another state? This blurring of independence and annexation undermines the clarity of self-determination as a principle. If self-determination becomes a vehicle for expansionist aims, its legitimacy risks being diminished in other contexts.

For SPECPOL, the task lies in dissecting these contradictions. Delegates must weigh the genuine aspirations of some Crimean residents against the concerns of minorities, the sovereignty of Ukraine, and the possibility that external intervention compromised the authenticity of the process. In doing so, the Committee is not only addressing the fate of Crimea but also setting precedents for how similar disputes may be understood in the future.

Role of Non-State Actors and International Stakeholders

Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

While international debates on Crimea often centre on states and their positions, the lived reality of the peninsula is also shaped by grassroots actors. Civil society organisations, both within Crimea and in exile, have sought to document events, mobilise international opinion, and preserve cultural identity. For example, Crimean Tatar organisations have consistently emphasised their opposition to annexation and pressed for guarantees of minority rights. They have used platforms such as the UN Human Rights Council and the European Parliament to highlight cases of intimidation, suppression of media, and religious restrictions.

Local non-governmental groups in Ukraine have also played a vital role by gathering testimonies from displaced persons and lobbying international bodies to maintain focus on the issue. These initiatives reveal how civil society actors often function as the moral conscience of international disputes, ensuring that the experiences of individuals are not subsumed entirely under geopolitical narratives.

International Monitoring and Human Rights Organisations

Independent international organisations have been central in shaping perceptions of Crimea after 2014. Bodies such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Federation for Human Rights have compiled reports detailing alleged violations ranging from arbitrary detention to suppression of free assembly. Their findings frequently challenge the official narratives put forward by state actors and serve as resources for UN discussions.

1. The Role of the OSCE

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has attempted to monitor developments in Crimea, though its access has often been restricted. Even so, its broader regional missions in Ukraine have provided crucial documentation of displacement, electoral processes, and the security environment. These reports feed into General Assembly and SPECPOL debates, giving delegates material evidence that goes beyond political claims.

2. Human Rights Advocacy Networks

Transnational advocacy networks, linking diaspora groups, NGOs, and policy institutes, have added further layers of scrutiny. By lobbying governments, organising campaigns, and producing shadow reports to UN bodies, they seek to ensure that the voices of Crimean communities are neither ignored nor overshadowed by great-power competition. In the Open House session format, these networks may directly address the Committee, offering perspectives grounded in human rights rather than state interests.

The Crimean Independence Movement

Although frequently overshadowed by the debate between Ukraine's sovereignty and Russia's annexation, a strand of Crimean activism has sought to articulate independence as a third option. These movements argue that Crimea's unique history, multiethnic composition, and distinct cultural trajectory justify a status separate from both Kyiv and Moscow. While these claims have not gained broad international recognition, they highlight the complexity of self-determination in practice.

The independence argument is often framed not only in terms of ethnic Russian identity but also as an assertion of local agency. Its proponents claim that true self-determination cannot be equated either with forced integration into Ukraine or with externally supported annexation by Russia. For SPECPOL delegates, engaging with these perspectives opens space to examine whether the principle of self-determination can be applied in ways that are not confined to binary state-centric outcomes.

Regional and Religious Communities

Beyond organised political movements, religious and cultural communities in Crimea have been active in shaping discourse. The Orthodox Church has, in some cases, aligned itself with pro-Russian narratives, reinforcing claims of shared spiritual heritage. By contrast, Islamic institutions tied to the Crimean Tatar community have functioned as spaces of resistance, preserving cultural identity and providing support to displaced persons. These dynamics demonstrate how non-state actors, often overlooked, can exert powerful influence by sustaining morale, framing identity, and legitimising political claims.

International Judicial and Advocacy Platforms

Non-state stakeholders have also turned to international judicial and quasi-judicial platforms to advance their positions. Submissions have been made to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), often supported by NGOs or advocacy lawyers. While rulings on Crimea remain limited, these filings keep the legal dimension of the dispute alive and ensure that future judgments may provide some measure of accountability.

Parallel to these judicial efforts, advocacy coalitions have pursued recognition through symbolic channels, such as cultural diplomacy or appeals to UNESCO regarding heritage protection. These strategies highlight the creative ways in which non-state actors seek to internationalise the Crimean question and resist the narrative that the issue is settled.

Implications for the Open House Format

The involvement of non-state actors is particularly significant in the Open House format of this committee session. Their participation ensures that discussions extend beyond the familiar state-centric exchanges and incorporate perspectives grounded in lived experiences and normative commitments. For delegates, this requires a shift in diplomatic engagement: recognising that legitimacy is no longer defined solely by votes in the General Assembly but also by the credibility of evidence and advocacy presented by civil society, monitoring bodies, and minority representatives.

In the Crimean context, non-state actors and international stakeholders provide crucial insights into whether the movement for independence represents a genuine political aspiration, a manipulated referendum under occupation, or a suppressed alternative to binary choices of annexation and territorial integrity. Their voices thus complicate the debate, but also enrich it, by making the principle of self-determination tangible rather than abstract.

Previous International and UN Action

The United Nations General Assembly

The General Assembly has been the primary forum within the UN system for addressing the Crimean question. In March 2014, shortly after the referendum, the Assembly adopted Resolution 68/262 affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity and declaring the referendum invalid. Although the resolution was not binding, it carried significant symbolic weight by making clear that a majority of the international community rejected the legitimacy of Crimea's integration into Russia.

Subsequent sessions of the Assembly have returned to the issue, often within the framework of human rights reports on the situation in Crimea. These resolutions have expressed concern over restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and religion, particularly in relation to the Crimean Tatars. They have also called for unimpeded access for international monitoring bodies. While the voting patterns reveal some divisions among member states, the consistent passage of these resolutions demonstrates an ongoing refusal to accept annexation as a fait accompli.

The Security Council

The Security Council attempted to respond to the crisis in 2014 but was unable to take substantive action due to the use of the veto. Draft resolutions reaffirming Ukraine's sovereignty and condemning the referendum were introduced but blocked by the Russian Federation, a permanent member of the Council. This stalemate underscored the structural limitations of the Security Council when disputes directly involve one of its permanent members.

The paralysis in the Council shifted attention back to the General Assembly and to regional organisations. For many states, the lack of binding Security Council action reinforced the importance of using other UN mechanisms, such as SPECPOL, to maintain political attention and to articulate collective positions even in the absence of enforceable measures.

The Human Rights System

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has maintained a presence in Ukraine since 2014, issuing regular reports on the human rights situation in Crimea. These reports, based on interviews and monitoring, highlight patterns of intimidation, forced conscription, and restrictions on minority groups. The reports are regularly presented to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly, thereby keeping the issue on the broader UN agenda.

Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council have also engaged with Crimea, though access has often been denied. Rapporteurs on minority issues, freedom of religion, and internally displaced persons have all issued communications or statements regarding the peninsula. Their work has reinforced the perception that annexation has brought about systemic rights violations, adding another layer of international scrutiny.

Regional Organisations and Courts

The European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have each played distinct roles in addressing Crimea.

1. The European Union

The EU has repeatedly condemned the annexation and introduced a series of sanctions targeting individuals, entities, and sectors linked to Crimea. These measures include restrictions on trade, investment, and travel. While the sanctions were introduced as political measures rather than legal judgments, they carry economic consequences and signal a refusal to normalise the situation.

2. The Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights

The Council of Europe has kept the issue on its agenda through monitoring mechanisms and by allowing Ukraine to bring interstate cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The Court has accepted jurisdiction over several applications alleging rights violations in Crimea since 2014. Although final judgments are still pending, interim decisions affirm the Court's competence and signal that the annexation will continue to face legal scrutiny in the European human rights system.

3. The OSCE

The OSCE deployed a Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine in 2014, tasked with observing developments throughout the country, though it was denied access to Crimea itself. Even with this limitation, the OSCE reports provided important documentation of the displacement of Crimeans and the regional security consequences of annexation. The organisation also facilitated dialogue on minority rights and broader de-escalation, though its ability to alter facts on the ground was limited.

International Judicial Forums

Beyond regional courts, Crimea has been raised before other international judicial bodies. Ukraine filed a case against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2017, alleging violations of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, in part connected to events in Crimea. While the ICJ has not directly ruled on the legality of the annexation, it did indicate provisional measures ordering Russia to refrain from restricting Crimean Tatar institutions and to ensure access to education in the Ukrainian language.

Similarly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has conducted preliminary examinations concerning the situation in Ukraine, including events in Crimea. In 2020, the Office of the Prosecutor concluded that crimes within the Court's jurisdiction may have been committed, including the transfer of parts of the Russian population into Crimea. Although the ICC's proceedings remain slow, the very inclusion of Crimea within its assessments indicates that annexation is being treated not merely as a political dispute but as a matter of international criminal law.

Significance for SPECPOL

The record of previous action demonstrates that while binding enforcement has been elusive, Crimea remains firmly embedded in the international system's agenda. The General Assembly continues to articulate the majority view, human rights bodies keep attention on daily realities, and judicial forums are slowly constructing legal assessments that may carry weight in the future.

For SPECPOL, this history is instructive. It reveals the limits of existing UN mechanisms when great-power politics obstruct decisive outcomes, but it also illustrates the capacity of international institutions to maintain normative pressure over time. In the Open House setting, where both state and non-state stakeholders are invited, this accumulated record of resolutions, reports, and legal proceedings will provide a crucial backdrop for delegates as they debate whether the Crimean case can be understood as a valid exercise of self-determination or as an unlawful annexation.

QARMAs (Questions A Resolution Must Answer)

Does the Crimean independence movement have legitimacy under international self-determination law?

How can the UN distinguish between genuine self-determination and secession backed by external military force?

What protections should be guaranteed to minority groups, particularly Crimean Tatars, in any self-determination process?

Should the UN develop criteria for independence referendums to ensure transparency and legality?

How should SPECPOL balance sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-determination in Crimea's case?

What role should non-state actors and NGOs play in shaping international recognition of self-determination claims?