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# THE SECURITY DILEMMA AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM IN UKRAINE

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## ABSTRACT

In 1991 nationalism was at its peak in the Soviet space and the sense of independence mobilised the masses and elites alike. In Ukraine, the long sought-after independence did not, however, result in a strong, united state. Subsequent attempts at 'Ukrainisation' weakened Ukraine's socio-political composition to the levels of a potential civic strife. However, it was not until 2014 that this internal disunity resulted in bloodshed. This paper aims to establish how the relationship between Ukraine's internal socio-political weaknesses and Russian intervention impacted the activation of nationalism in Western and Eastern Ukraine and a micro-level 'security dilemma' within Ukraine whereby the policies and actions employed by one group are perceived as threatening to the preservation/ survival of the other. This has resulted in a protracted spiralling perception of insecurity. This paper will outline the logic of the security dilemma and its application to civil conflict, then proceed to explore how domestic and external dynamics impacted the rise of aggressive nationalism in Ukraine and lastly, explore how nationalism responds to a security dilemma by developing a model of its activation.

**Keywords:** Ukraine; security dilemma; nationalism; Ukraine conflict

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“In principle, national identity should be able to exist and persist without nationalism. In reality, when national identity is felt to be threatened – by globalisation, by Americanisation, by Europeanisation – nationalism revives and makes new steps towards internationalism and cosmopolitanism more arduous.” (Hoffmann: 2000: 215)

## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Ukraine is only a tip of the iceberg of Ukraine’s post-Communist developments. During the 1990s Ukraine disregarded internal political and cultural consolidation that would allow it to form a viable nation-state capable of overcoming social and political remnants of the Communist past. Domestically, this enabled internal divisions along cultural and political lines, whether through perceptions of fear of Russian influence, or political opportunism of the elites. Externally, Russia continues to regard Ukraine as geopolitically important and on many levels uses its influence as leverage over Ukraine. These long-term domestic and international realities helped bring about the socio-political ferment that we regard as the Ukraine crisis. Accordingly, this paper will bring forward two main arguments: first, that the Ukraine conflict can be understood by the lens of the security dilemma and its application to a civil conflict, and second, that in the environment of a security dilemma the phenomenon of nationalism manifests itself. In order to explain the dynamics of the activation of nationalism this paper offers a model of conditions and dynamics of civil conflicts, particularly by incorporating the international system into the analysis. The purpose of this research paper is to explain the rise of nationalism as an assessment of culture in action in the context of a security dilemma in order to gain a better understanding of the socio-political characteristics that led to the civil conflict in Ukraine.

The security dilemma theory was developed by the realist school of thought but has been widely used within the field of international relations as a theoretical tool for understanding the conditions that lead to war and peace between states. The logic of the security dilemma posits that due to the inherently anarchical self-help environment of the international system where no governing body guarantees security and survival, states pursue self-help policies of accumulating their absolute and relative power; but by pursuing these power-maximising efforts states often unintentionally disturb the existing balance of power and decrease the security of others. Because states are very responsive to imbalances of power

and the relative and relational character of power itself, they can never be sure just how much power is enough and states end up mirroring each others' power-maximising efforts. Because of the interactive and complementary relationship between increasing power capabilities and the perception of security in the context of anarchy "there is no possibility of drawing a sharp line between the will-to-live and will-to-power" (Neibuhr, 1960: 42). Not only does this result in ambiguity in distinguishing between power-seekers (revisionists) and security-seekers, "it is one of the tragic implications of the security dilemma that mutual fear of what initially may never have existed may subsequently bring about what is feared the most" (Herz, 1966: 241) as this environment of inherent uncertainty can spiral into a war (Tang, 2010).

This is essentially the logic of a 'structural' or inter-state security dilemma. However, this does not disregard its usefulness as an analytical tool for our understanding of intra-state (civil) conflicts. On the contrary: "the security dilemma theory ... is essentially a dynamic model for understanding how interactions between two groups can drive the two groups toward conflict" (Tang, 2011: 532). There is a consensus on the essential factors enabling a security dilemma to ensue: they are the logic of anarchy, initial defensive intentions of the main actors, and the ability of these actors to project military power. These factors that explain inter-state dynamics are replicable to civil group dynamics in an environment of threat and insecurity; because, as emphasised by Horowitz (1985), Kaufman (1996, 2002) or Petersen (2002) the anarchic self-help environment encourages accumulation of predominantly offensive capabilities that both, derive from and result in a perception of insecurity, threat and fear of extinction, which then work as the regulators of the security dilemma. As illustrated below in Figure 1. (Tang, 2011: 515) the process of emerging security dilemma then unfolds as follows: "anarchy generates uncertainty; uncertainty leads to fear; fear leads to power competition; [and] power dilemma leads to war through a spiral" (Ibid).

Further, as a concept for understanding the conditions leading to the emergence of civil conflict, the security dilemma model leaves space for integrating other relevant factors that help unravel the specific characteristics of the conditions leading to intra-state conflicts. Accordingly, integrating interpretivist cultural or psychological dependent variables such as perception of ontological or societal insecurity, i.e. fear of extinction within the reality of an essentially realist objective of survival under anarchy has the potential to complement the positivism of

realism and move research towards a more inclusive holistic and rigorous analysis of intra-state civil conflict.

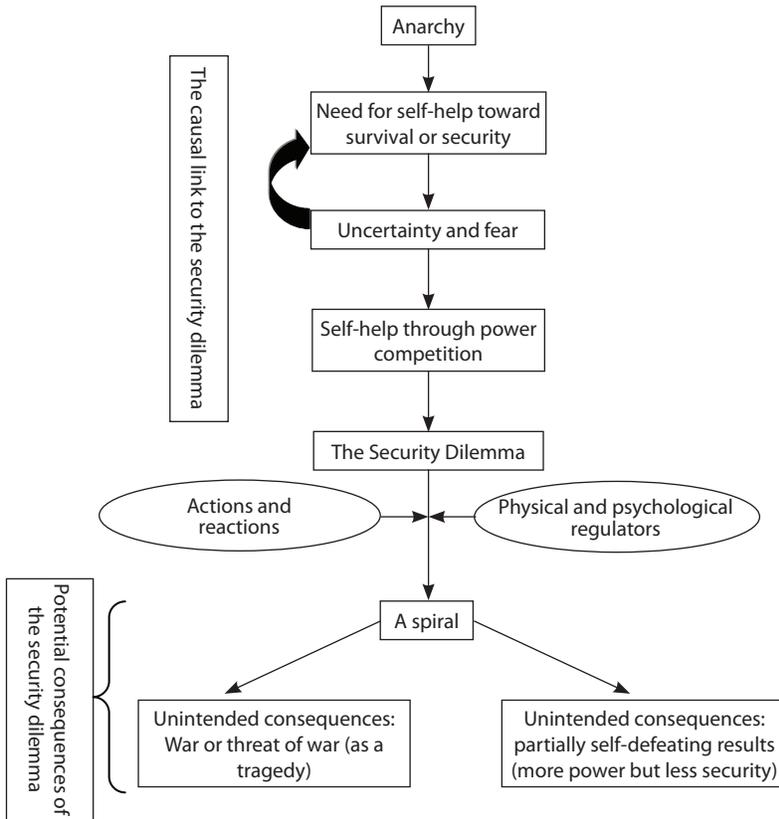


Figure 1. 'The Causal Link from Security Dilemma and War' (Tang, 2011: 515)

In order to understand how an intra-state conflict comes about we need to identify the reference point of an intra-state analysis. Because of the state's role of a guarantor of security and internal unity (including the implementation of policies to this end) which is the emphasis here, the primary actors considered here are the elites and the mass, and their dynamic interaction. Depending on the unity or disunity of the actors' objectives, internal dynamics can then range from a peaceful management or conflict resolution (as in the case of the emergence, management and resolution of Czechoslovak breakup) all the way to an unmitigated, malign civil war (as in the case of the Serbs and Croats) (Tang, 2011: 534). This depends predominantly upon the level of domestic cultural and

political integration, intentions of the actors involved and consequently the interplay of all these factors. When we take Tang's analysis further it should therefore be possible to mitigate or prevent an internal security dilemma from emerging, i.e. to 'manage', or overcome anarchy by employing incorporative domestic policies to consolidate the state to the levels of harmonious co-existence.

Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that mitigating the chances for an internal anarchy to unfold is possible in a politically and culturally inclusive (democratic) nation-state. This is not conditioned upon a state's cultural/ ethnic homogeneity or diversity. The extent to which a nation-state is inclusive is manifested through a number of factors. The first factor is the extent of inclusion or repression of the national groups within the state from which can be observed through the actual and perceived pressure on the groups vis-à-vis one other and vis-à-vis the state. Second, whether the perception of the 'other' is manifested in the state discourses. Third, whether this 'other' is militant with sufficient military capabilities and a strong (consolidated or consolidating) territorial base; and from this deriving fourth point – the groups' sufficient cohesion of identity and a sense of belonging, i.e. to what extent the groups identify themselves with the state. In summary, the argument here is that the ruling elite has the potential to mitigate the 'otherness' factor, therefore to manage and/or prevent a civil strife if the elite is adherent to the groups' perception of political and cultural representation (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Deriving from this model of security dilemma and the internal relationship between national groups and the state presented above and applied to the case study, the argument would be that the failure of Ukraine's national consolidation created the socio-political environment that enabled security dilemma to ensue which manifested itself in the onset of the conflict in Ukraine. In this sense the Ukraine conflict is only the tip of the iceberg; it is part of a longer process of continuing and sharpening internal socio-political disunity. The hypothesis will be applied and the paper will now proceed to give an overview of Ukrainian domestic situation post-1991.

## POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATIONS

Over the course of Ukraine's independence, the elites have failed to transform Ukraine into an independent, politically and socially consolidated and viable nation-state. This derives from wider and replicable structural problems of post-Communist transitions and transformations. Nodia (1996) considers one of the main problems of successful transition the extent of prevailing dependencies on the former Soviet power-centre. This is because the closer the proximity of post-Soviet states to Russia, the deeper the historical, political and economic interdependencies between these states and consequently, the deeper the social division in their civic composition (Stent, 1994). Across the former Soviet space this has manifested itself in the form of cultural and political tensions between the indigenous people and the formerly ruling Russians. This fostered what Kuzio regards as the perception of Russian 'otherness', resulting in denying "the authenticity of the [Russophone] in-group and seeking to subvert its separate existence" (Kuzio, 2001: 343). This, while affecting the nation-building process, leads to greater difficulties in overcoming the remnants of the Communist past and thus weakens the prospect for independence and a transition into a truly inclusive and credible statehood that would allow for liberal governance (Kaldor, 1996), i.e. a regime that would foster a free and fair political and cultural environment.

This reveals the second failure of Ukraine – successful state-building. A state is an end-product of a state-building process that implies the consolidation of territorial and popular governance and execution of power by the elites in a particular country (Kuzio and D'Anieri, 2002; Gellner, 1983). This implies a top-down elite institutionalisation towards the objective of territorial governance and ability to execute power, i.e. "the state exists where specialised order-enforcing agencies, such as police forces and courts, have separated out from the rest of social life" (Gellner, 1983: 4). In the early 1990s politics began to be pervaded by business, and Ukrainian institutional weakness worked to the advantage of a few with political ties who took advantage of it, i.e. in a 'state capture' (Hellmann, et al: 2000).<sup>1</sup>

1 It is beyond the scope of this paper to look more closely at the complex issues of nation/ state-building and institutionalisation processes. However, the point to emphasise and demonstrate here is the *results* of these processes in Ukraine, where the weak statehood and nationhood are closely intertwined and the weaknesses in one sphere reinforce weaknesses in the other.

In Ukraine this became evident in the elites' efforts to marginalise Russian culture. There is a consensus in the scholarly literature on Ukraine that the treatment of Russophones in Ukraine can by no means be classed as minority oppression or discrimination (Arel, 1995; Kuzio, 1998; Solchanyk, 2000; Fournier, 2002). However, neither does this mean that the Ukrainian elites did not attempt to decrease the representation and manifestation of Russian culture, whether it be for political or cultural reasons. Between 1991 and 2005 the use of Russian as a second instructing language at schools decreased by more than a half (from 54 to 24 per cent). Further, after the 2004 Orange revolution until Yanukovych's coming to power in 2010 "the frontal attack on the Russian language commenced in all areas of social life, first of all in education and the media" (Pogrebinskiy, 2015: 89). It was not until 2012 that the status of Russian language was elevated by the implementation of the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko Language Law. It is worth noting that this law was only applied to majority-Russian-speaking regions; and not imposed in prevalently Ukrainophone regions where it would have stirred opposition (Council of Europe, 2010; Council of Europe, 2010a, Bowring: 2012). Despite the law's embracement by the Council of Europe as meeting ethnic and cultural rights parameters, Yanukovych's political opposition in the Verkhovna Rada launched a campaign against this law. While disregarding the negative impact dropping the law would have on Ukrainian Russophones, "all opposition parties in the Verkhovna Rada soon had a common language bill advanced that, in fact, presupposed total Ukrainisation" (Pogrebinskiy, 2015: 89). This has continued to escalate with the Ukraine conflict whereby the new post-Yanukovych government voted to abolish this law.

It is worth noting that the traditionally Russophone Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine "political conflict has arisen whenever the legitimacy of Russian culture in Ukraine has been challenged" (Petro, 2015: 18). This was most clearly visible in the post-1991 repeated calls for either a greater and credible political representation, independence, autonomy, or reunification with Russia in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Wilson, 1997). However, as Wilson explains, "elaborate compromise on language rights ensured the reasonably peaceful coexistence of Ukrainian and Russian speakers before the crisis of 2014" (Wilson, 2015: 97) and prior to the Ukraine conflict public dissent had been mitigated. In other words, the tensions did not escalate into an internal security dilemma, i.e. an action-reaction in-group projection of power. Comparing the failed popular attempt to

rid Ukraine of corruption in 2004, the Euromaidan was an answer to increasing opportunism and power-consolidation of the Yanukovych regime visible first, in the refusal to sign the 2012 EU Association Agreement and second, in giving in to Russian influence which resulted in a much greater and stronger societal push. This was particularly visible in the radicalisation of the Euromaidan movement following the January 2014 passing of repressive anti-protest laws abusing civil liberties (Council of Europe, 2014) (similar reactions were expressed in the East after the decision of post-Maidan Rada to abandon the aforementioned 2012 Russian language law). But two questions remain unanswered: why did the Ukraine conflict unfold the way it did, and when it did?

### **ETHNICITY OR NATIONALISM?**

In the literature on the security dilemma and civil conflict there is a tendency to merge the concept of civil conflict with the civil groups' ethnic characteristics and it is widely assumed that civil conflicts *are* ethnic conflicts.<sup>2</sup> However, an ethnic conflict presupposes sharp divisions between groups whether of historical, cultural, political and/or territorial origins. As the evidence suggests, in Ukraine this is not the case. In 1991, 91 per cent of Ukrainian population (encompassing all ethnicities and both, Russian and Ukrainian speakers) supported Ukraine's decision for independence. Further, a table of popular surveys of Ukrainians' sense of identity summarised by Pogrebinskiy (2015: 86) which spanned between 1994 and 2014 reveals a rising tendency of 'mono-ethnic' Ukrainian identity and a gradual decline of both, 'mono' and 'bi-ethnic'<sup>3</sup> Russians. Indeed, as a comparison between polls held in 2005–2009 and 2014–2015 reveals, whereby formerly there were tendencies among Ukrainians to form "subnational identities at the regional level based on language, cultural, ethnic and religious characteristics" now the majority of Ukrainians associate themselves in terms of Ukrainian citizenship irrespective of their identity, cultural or ethnic affiliations (Razumkov Centre, 2016). Even since the onset of the Ukraine conflict the country's regional differences have not been sufficiently severe as to justify

2 See Butterfield (1951); Posen (1993); Kaufman (1993, 2002); Booth and Wheeler (2008) or Tang (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011).

3 Russophones who identify themselves with both nations – Ukraine and Russia.

federal model of governance. In fact, “only 14 percent of Ukrainians presently support the country’s federalization” (Bugriy, 2016). Further, neither do the Eastern Ukrainian separatists want to break away from Ukraine and join the Russian federation; most of them identify themselves as ‘Ukrainians’ (Razumkov Centre, 2016). Put differently, the argument here is that Ukraine conflict cannot be simplified or generalised as a conflict of clashing ethnicities or clashing civilisations; ethnicity was not a causal factor of increased internal polarisation or the subsequent in-group separatism from the influence of Ukrainian central governance.

This is because, while study of ‘ethnicity’ enables in-depth understanding of the *tangible* cultural, identity and historical characteristics of a nation, it does not allow for a satisfactory explanation of the *intangible* dynamics and the process of the activation (or a lack of) of intra-state conflicts. On the contrary – it deprives the analysis of its *context*. The conflict in Ukraine needs to be treated as a process of activating nationalist tendencies in the Eastern and Western parts, i.e. as a rise of socio-political *movements*. This is because “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent ... Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind” (Gellner, 1983: 1). In other words, nationalism already encompasses the dependence on shared identity, culture and ethnicity. Depending on the context nationalism can then serve as a powerful unifying force embracing loyalty, identification or solidarity with one’s nation; on the other hand, unmitigated perception of fear, compulsion or coercion sparked by a violation of nationalist principles by the governing state can become a potential catalyst for intrastate group formation, consolidation and nationalistic manifestation (Gellner, 1983: 53).

Taking the example of Eastern Ukraine, the rising dynamic of nationalism appeared when political and material divisions or what is perceived as marginalising the ‘Russianness’ led to *de facto* decreases of security (Petro: 2015). This can be seen in the division over the EU Association Agreement that Yanukovich refused to sign, which was the pretext for the onset of protests from November 2013 onwards and which resulted in Yanukovich’s ouster, the subsequent loss of Crimea to Russia, and the emergence of East-West civil tensions. However, neither does political disunity in itself explain the rise of aggressive nationalism.

The security dilemma model discussed above is helpful in explaining first, the link between internally weak Ukrainian governance and the gradual post-1991 emergence of internal anarchy. This was caused by internal divisions which arguably reached their peak between the dropped EU trade deal of November 2013 and Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014. Second, it also succeeds at explaining the subsequent East-West self-help behaviour that was manifested by militant tendencies and power-projection of the governmental forces over the separated territories in the Donbas region, and the nationalists' armed response. This sharpening of tensions as a consequence caused a spiral and resulted in a protracted conflict. However, it falls short in addressing thoroughly the spiraling process that derived from this and resulted in the manifestation of nationalism at the level of previously unprecedented armed power-projection in Eastern Ukraine. This points to the direction that this dynamic was a by-product of Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which revised the status quo and encouraged the mobilization of 'pro-Russians' in the East. This resulted in the Ukrainian elites' perception of insecurity that manifested itself in what the West perceived as defensive self-help behaviour of marginalizing the Eastern 'pro-Russian' tendencies. However, instead this encouraged a mirroring response from the East (aided by Russia) and ended up as escalating the East-West polarization.

From this derives the second shortcoming of this model – and that is its inability to address the question of timing of Russian annexation and intervention. Prior to the 2014 overthrow of the Yanukovich government (with the exception of some hard-line Russian nationalist discourse and pushes for reunifications of Crimea with the Russian federation), the Kremlin policy-makers had not supported separatism either in the Crimea, or Ukraine. This was the case even during the 1990s when tensions between Kiev and pro-separatist government in Crimea had been spiraling – as seen in the repeated demands of Crimeans and separatists from the Donbas region alike for greater independence, autonomy from Ukraine, reunification with Russia or the secessionists' calls for Russian aid – which Russia ignored (Refworld, 2004).

## **TOWARDS AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR THE RISE OF NATIONALISM**

This leads to the hypothesis that in order to gain a complex understanding of the Ukraine conflict that would trace and explain the link between the timing of Russian intervention and the rise of nationalist territorial secessionism in Eastern Ukraine, a model of its rise ought to be developed. My initial model (Figure 2.) aims to explain the rise of nationalism in Eastern Ukraine and its response to a security dilemma in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

The internal security dilemma that ensued in Ukraine derived from the interplay of a number of different factors. First, since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has not been able to overcome the perception of 'otherness' of Ukrainian Russophones; instead efforts to marginalise the influence of Russian culture which always resulted in increased perceptions of insecurity, subsequently increasing the levels of resistance and thus increasing intrastate tensions; as illustrated in the calls from the East and South-East parts of Ukraine for lessening the state control. The important point here is Ukraine's inability to develop itself into a united socio-political entity. Second, at the same time, this has been reinforced by Ukraine's struggle to sufficiently decrease its politico-economic interdependencies with Russia and in this sense decrease Russia's leverage over Ukraine. This leads to the third overarching factor – Russia's geopolitical regional and global strategy and the extent of Russia's ability to impact Ukraine's political direction to secure its influence (particularly in the sphere of energy and security), as well as the means Russia is able and willing to employ in the pursuit of this. In Ukraine, Russia has manifested this by merging its hard and soft power. The soft power aspect of the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent ongoing destabilisation of Ukraine completes the picture and illuminates the importance to incorporate culture, identity and their manifestation as a socio-political movement, i.e. nationalism, into the analysis of the Ukraine conflict. Thus, the model we develop here (Figure 2.) builds on the previously discussed logic of an external/structural security dilemma and assesses the implications on domestic dynamics that arise as a consequence of these international pulls and pressures.



Figure 2. The causal link of the rise of nationalism

Thus, the first stage of the model represents the dynamics, rules and the logic of the security dilemma as discussed throughout this paper. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine this represents the situation between November 2013 and March 2014 and the rise of nationalist tendencies in the West over the future socio-political direction of Ukraine. This resulted in Yanukovych being ousted from power, and was followed by Russia's intervention. Russia's use of hard power in Ukraine transformed the status quo and produced new threats and insecurities within Ukraine's administration, thus deepening the security concerns over Russian influence in Ukraine (particularly over its tendencies to enhance and aid separatist tendencies, the potential of Russia's further territorial expansion and its implications for Ukraine's sovereignty). This led to the second stage termed as

'Emerging/de facto anarchy'<sup>4</sup> which represents deteriorating internal dynamics, i.e. the administration's failing efforts to de-escalate intrastate tensions and thereby leading to an internal 'de facto anarchy'. Kaufman explained this as a situation when "the state is either unwilling or unable to protect all major groups, forcing them to resort to self-help" (1996: 113). This is a useful term for explaining the dynamics of a dysfunctional central government that either breaks down, or is dominated by/favouring one group at the expense of other group(s). This was arguably the case in Ukraine's decision to marginalise the 'pro-Russian' nationalist movement in the East following the annexation of Crimea, i.e. an employment of what the administration perceived as a defensive measure. Instead it increased the perception of 'otherness' and reinforced the rise of nationalism in the East, as demonstrated in the armed pursuit of territorial control as a means of defensive self-help power-maximisation.

There is a fine line between security dilemma and spiralling; when a security dilemma emerges, i.e. the central government employs repressive (militant, exclusionary, aggressive, and/or zero-sum policies) it can quickly turn into a spiral which has an immediately detrimental and escalatory effect. In this context we refer to the security dilemma as a potential end-result of what begins as a failure of the central authority to protect and/ or fairly govern the whole population. This can arise either from exclusive domestic policies (which are perceived as a defensive measure) or can be triggered by external factors that revise the status quo, cause imbalances of power and exacerbate the environment of threat and fear. If the government escalates the emerging conflict further (particularly by projecting power by military means) this can lead to the rise of nationalism as a way of political mobilisation and a means of self-help, whereby the 'endangered' nationalist group responds to what it perceives as imbalances of threat by accumulating predominantly military power. This, then, in effect sprawls a sense of insecurity and can lead to spiralling whereby the adversaries resort to malign actions aimed directly at one another in the pursuit of survival. It is the argument here that these are the dynamics that encouraged the rise of nationalism in the Eastern Ukraine and the subsequent spiralling between the polarised West and East.

4 The 'emerging anarchy' term is borrowed from Posen (1993) who applied it to the rise of anarchy following the collapse of the governing body of the Soviet Union.

## CONCLUSION

As Smith put it “there have been many studies of the relationship between nationalism and politics, but little systematic theory” (1996: 445); but not only on the micro-level of nationalist elite politics or nationalist group formation and their interaction, as he emphasised. The Ukraine conflict reveals that there were domestic socio-political factors at play that defined and sharpened the divisions in the political elites-group objectives, but this was exacerbated by the interplay of external factors, mainly deriving from Ukraine’s regional position and Russia’s regional aspirations. Therefore, the argument this paper has brought forward is that the interaction of these factors provides the context for understanding the dynamics leading to activation of nationalism which our model outlined here aimed to illuminate. The Ukraine conflict reveals the need for an integrative theory of activation of nationalism that would accommodate for both, cultural and material characteristics of nationalism within a wider security context into the analysis of the dynamics of civil conflict because a satisfactory answer to questions why, how, when a civil conflict emerges and to what end, reaches beyond the scope of either, the domestic-level analysis and external pulls and pressures, when treated in separation. The situation in Ukraine reveals that ethnicity, culture, identity and historical differences bare limited explanatory weight when treated in a vacuum; civil conflict is better understood as a rise of nationalism/ nationalist tendencies that emerge as a consequence of and a reaction to security concerns.

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