

Societal Security Dilemma and Social Identity Theory: Why Structure Matters in Understanding Ukrainian Identity Discourses, 1991–2014

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Abstract

This article reinvigorates the societal security dilemma by utilising the insights from Social Identity Theory (SIT), and it applies this to Ukraine's contested search for a national identity (Ukrainisation) between 1991 and 2014 to reveal the interplay between actor and structural agency. Applying SIT to the societal security dilemma reveals that in understanding how competing interpretations of identity can assume a tit-for-tat dynamic of their own, we need to be not only conscious of political actors' discourse, but also our human disposition to compare our status to others. SIT reveals we do this when in groups and our in-group favouritism can, much like a security dilemma, initiate and sustain a tit-for-tat dynamic that leads to discord. While the focus in the case study is on Ukrainian contestation, this does not exonerate Russia for starting the war, which begins in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. Nations contest their identity; it is a natural part of how identity is understood by the populace and how it evolves. Tragically for Ukraine, Russia aggravates this contestation for its own imperial ambitions placing the culpability for the war at Moscow's door.

Keywords: security dilemma, societal security dilemma, social identity theory, Ukrainisation, Holodomor, Stepan Bandera

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Introduction

This article is both a theoretical examination of the societal security dilemma and an empirical investigation of Ukrainian nation-building prior to Russia's overt intervention in 2014. It seeks to reinvigorate the societal security dilemma by utilising social identity theory and reveals how this enables us to appreciate why Ukrainian national identity discourses contest. It utilises the work of Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina who identify three different Ukrainian discourses (2014). The term discourse is used in this article to distinguish between different understandings that actors (elite and people) have of what constitutes Ukraine's national identity. It is not an analytical tool to evaluate specific phrases. The empirical foundation of this article draws on several recently published authoritative studies on Russian-Ukrainian relations (Arel & Driscoll 2023; D'Anieri 2023; Karatnycky 2024; Popova & Shevel 2024). While these works understandably concentrate on the deterioration of bilateral ties and the onset of war, this article repurposes their insights to examine how Ukrainians contested the formation of a national identity between 1991 and 2014. This was not a purely domestic affair. Russia was actively seeking to influence these contestations, but Moscow's interventions are not the primary focus of analysis. This article therefore concurs with Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll's argument that focusing on Ukrainian contestation does not equate to blaming Ukrainians for the war (Arel & Driscoll 2023: 6–10); Russia's culpability is well-documented (for the latest see Kudelia 2025). The Ukrainian case study is not therefore about why Ukraine became a victim of war in 2014. The timeframe of 1991–2014 is deliberately chosen; it begins with Ukraine's emergence as an independent state following the collapse of the USSR and ends just before Russia's overt intervention in 2014, which significantly reshaped the context in which identity contestation unfolded.

By focusing on identity, the article engages with an invitation issued by Valentina Feklyunina, that to appreciate why certain national identity discourses gained traction in Ukraine we can look for insights from 'the growing literature on status and self-esteem' (2016: 791). This reveals that for many Ukrainians, Russia's extolling of their common bond – prior to its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin asserted that Russians and Ukrainians were 'one people' – rings hollow (Putin 2021). For many Ukrainians, Ukraine's reinvigoration of its national identity entails freeing them from Russian subjugation, thus elevating their status and self-esteem. Significantly though, as Ukrainians contest their national identity regional differences emerge, and increasingly many in the south and east of Ukraine, who retained a cultural affinity to Russia, fear their understanding of being Ukrainian becomes marginalised. To explain this the article utilises the

internal security dilemma, and in so doing revitalises the concept of a societal security dilemma.

The article begins by explaining how the security dilemma has been applied to internal conflicts (also see Abushov 2019). This reveals that the core explanation of why the security dilemma operates is to be found in the context, or structure, that the competing groups operate within. Writing in 2013, Ali Bilgic critiqued this literature by arguing that agency for determining whether an internal security dilemma occurs lies with the actors (2013). Bilgic focuses on the discourse actors adopt in relation to each other. This enables us to understand how they perceive themselves, how they perceive themselves in relation to others, and ultimately, how they experience insecurity in relation to others. While this article acknowledges that actors are important, by utilising the insights from Tobias Theiler's sympathetic critique of societal security, status and self-esteem are shown to be human dispositions that are equally important drivers of group behaviour (Theiler 2003). Since they are human dispositions, they establish the context, or structure, for understanding why groups behave the way they do towards one another. This is therefore the structure within which actors engage. To reveal how this structure has agency, Theiler applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) to societal security. SIT explains what motivates individuals within groups to behave the way they do towards others, and this, I argue, when applied to a societal security dilemma is a critical, and currently missing, component in what creates and sustains a societal security dilemma. The article uses the process of Ukrainisation to reveal how contestation about the Ukrainian language and Ukraine's historical memory can be understood as a societal security dilemma.

While this article uses Ukraine as a case study, the utilisation of SIT to add to our understanding of what initiates and reinforces the dynamics of a societal security dilemma are universal. Therefore, the article provides a framework for applying the societal security dilemma to processes of nation-building, which is itself a continuous project since identities are constantly evolving.

Internal security dilemma

The security dilemma typically describes a situation in which a state, by procuring the capabilities to protect itself in an anarchical environment, unintentionally appears threatening to others. In response, others reciprocate, and consequentially all come to perceive they are threatened by each other. Hence the security dilemma describes a situation in which all feel less secure as they take measures to make themselves secure. It is why the security dilemma is often described as a tragedy: none initially intended harm, but they have come to view

one another as a threat.¹ It is the lack of a governing authority to protect states in the international system – hence it is an anarchy – which compels states to protect themselves. It is the structure of the international system that therefore causes the security dilemma.

The idea that anarchy causes the security dilemma to operate was so engrained in the literature that, during the 1990s, when the security dilemma was utilised to explain internal conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and USSR (Cotter 1999; Kaufmann 1996: 147, 1998: 122; Lake & Rothchild 1996: 52; Posen 1993), writers often did so where state authority was collapsing so that anarchy was approximated. Hence Stuart Kaufman writes, ‘strictly speaking, the security dilemma should not apply to contending ethnic groups within a state, because they rarely find themselves in a situation of complete anarchy’ (1996: 151). However, he reasons that if the government’s authority and territorial control is such that it cannot protect its populace, ‘anarchy can be approximated’ (Kaufman 1996: 151). This approximation is highlighted by Arel and Driscoll in their coverage of Ukraine during the 2013 Euromaidan protests and the militias that formed in response to these protests in 2014. They note that with the perceived breakdown of law-and-order the pro- and anti-Maidan protestors self-identified as ‘self-defence’ (*samooborony*) groups (Arel & Driscoll 2023: 142). Self-defence measures are therefore caused by the emergence of anarchy as law-and-order collapses. These measures are, however, perceived as hostile by others, thereby initiating the spiralling process of insecurity within states analogous to the security dilemma between states. This structural explanation captured the tragedy of the security dilemma: measures taken to increase security paradoxically make matters worse.

However, this requirement that anarchy exists in some form is unnecessary. It reflects the realist origins of the security dilemma, but constructivist writings have persuasively argued that it is the interaction between agents that causes the security dilemma to operate, hence Wendt’s refrain that ‘we do not *begin*

1 Although first termed the security dilemma by John Herz (1951: 3), the situation it describes can be traced back to the writings of the Greek historians Thucydides and Xenophon in the 4th Century BC. Thucydides claims, ‘what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta’ (quoted from Jervis 1988: 317). While Xenophon captures the tragedy of a scenario in which two peoples can go to war despite neither wanting such an outcome when claiming: ‘I observe that you are watching our moves as though we were enemies, and we, noticing this, are watching yours, too . . . I know, too, of cases that have occurred in the past when people, sometimes as the result of slanderous information and sometimes merely on the strength of suspicion, have become frightened of each other and then, in their anxiety to strike first before anything is done to them, have done irreparable harm to those who neither intended nor even wanted to do them any harm’ (quoted from Akavia 1991: 29).

our relationship . . . in a security dilemma; security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature' (emphasis in original), but rather 'dilemmas . . . are themselves ongoing effects of, not exogenous to, [actors'] . . . interaction' (1992: 407). Critically, this interaction occurs in the context of unresolvable uncertainty.²

Unresolvable uncertainty is Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler's defining feature of a security dilemma (2008); in paying homage to Herbert Butterfield's observation that we cannot look into the minds of others (1951: 21–22), they write that the security dilemma results 'from the existential condition of *unresolvable uncertainty* in the minds of other humans who can never fully know what they want to know' (emphasis in original) (Booth & Wheeler 2008: 5). Since the uncertainty is unresolvable and all-pervasive in human societies, for Booth and Wheeler the security dilemma is inescapable. Hence, they write, 'We accept that uncertainty is an existential condition of human society, and in that sense can never be *escaped*, short of some post-human future when mechanical implants replace minds with evolved consciousnesses' (emphasis in original) (Booth & Wheeler 2008: 172). Once uncertainty is identified as the necessary condition for a security dilemma to operate, then we can see it operating in human societies within states.

In their reconfiguration of the security dilemma, Booth and Wheeler do not presume that states will take measures that leave all worse off. This can occur in what they classify as fatalist logic, but this is only one possible outcome. They argue that states can construct common norms, shared values and common interests that create a degree of predictability in their relations. They can even come to define their identities and interests in such a way that any pursuit of security is a communal one. By taking such measures, they can mitigate or even transcend the security dilemma, with the latter captured in the notion of a security community (Adler & Barnett 1998). Hence, they identify three possible outcomes, or logics, of the security dilemma: fatalist, mitigator, transcender (Booth & Wheeler 2008: 10). For our purposes, the key point is that whether a spiralling process of insecurity occurs is not caused by unresolvable uncertainty but rather how the actors interpret their interaction.

This focus on actors and applying it to internal security dilemmas is taken up by Bilgic, who was motivated to refocus the attention away from structural tragedies to deliberative political agents engaged in discourses that divided societies. Bilgic's intervention was significant for not only placing causation with actors but also prioritising their discourses as the cause of insecurity. In doing so he draws upon the work of the Copenhagen School, a constructivist approach that introduced societal security and the societal security dilemma to the literature.

2 For the differences between realist and constructivist explanations see Collins (2014).

What is a societal security dilemma?

A societal security dilemma has its origins in the Copenhagen School's idea of societal security. Societal security was originally one of the five sectors of state security – alongside military, political, economic and environmental (Buzan 1991) – but society was elevated by the Copenhagen School to be as significant as the state as a referent object of security (Wæver et al 1993). That is, it was reconceptualised so that rather than being one of five sectors of state security, there now existed a duality of state and societal security with the state encapsulating threats to territorial integrity and political independence, and society capturing threats to the nation. This distinction facilitates analysis of internal state security, highlighting how nation-building policies aimed at homogenisation risk marginalising or erasing alternative ethnic identities, thereby producing societal insecurity within a seemingly secure state. While in the 1990s this duality of state and society reflected changing security considerations in Europe (Herd & Lofgren 2001; Huysmans 1995; Roe 2005), it captured the often-brutal business of nation-building that had been witnessed elsewhere in the world (Collins 2000).

Societal security is thus concerned with the people that constitute the nation, and what can threaten a nation is the dismantling of its identity. Put quite simply, if a nation cannot replicate its identity for the next generation, then it will cease to exist. Identity is thus at the core of societal (in)security, and we are concerned with those things that can threaten it. Threats to identity are multifaceted, they range from physical threats to the people that embody the identity, such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, to repressive measures against an identity's replication, such as prohibiting language rights and closure of places of education and worship (Buzan 1993: 43).

A societal security dilemma can emerge when efforts made to enhance the identity of a group, such as the promotion of language rights for example, can appear threatening to others, and be perceived as a deliberate policy to endanger their identity. This is certainly evident in Ukraine, as Oleh Protsyk writes in 2008, 'debates on the status of the Russian language have been the most politically salient linguistic issue throughout the post-communist period. One indicator of its salience is the frequency with which each issue is raised in the Ukrainian parliament' (quoted from Matveeva 2017: 27–8). We turn to the Ukrainian language issue later; for now, consider that a group, feeling threatened, responds by taking measures to protect their identity, which in turn has the unintended consequence of appearing threatening to another group. An action that initially was designed to promote an identity can leave all feeling less secure as they increasingly perceive others as hostile. It is this tit-for-tat action and reaction that leaves all feeling less secure that captures the dynamics recognisable as a security dilemma, and explains why Barry Buzan writes that 'societal security dilemma

might explain why some processes of social conflict seem to acquire a dynamic of their own' (1993: 46).

To understand how a social conflict acquires a dynamic of its own though requires more examination. While we can identify those actors that are responsible for propagating discourses about identity – such as state elite, regional politicians, bureaucrats, business elites, media and other influential actors – how do we know if these will initiate fear in others? That is, what is it that enables these discourses to establish a tit-for-tat spiralling process of insecurity? For Bilgic, the answer lies in how these actors experience insecurity in relation to each other and what kinds of solutions they envisage (2013: 195). The argument posited here is that while actors' discourses do matter, they are themselves constituted by structural factors that have causal agency. Here Theiler's work becomes instrumental. One of the critiques of societal security is that it reifies societies both as having fixed identities and giving them agency to act. Theiler addresses both, but his most significant contribution is his utilisation of SIT to overcome the shortcomings in the Copenhagen School's explanation of what motivates societies to act. SIT explains what motivates individuals to act the way they do when in group mode and this provides us with an answer to why certain discourses can engender conflict.

Social Identity Theory: Human disposition imbued with fatalist logic?

Theiler utilises SIT to explain what motivates individuals to care about their societal identity. SIT reveals that when individuals are placed within groups, and this allocation can be entirely arbitrary, individuals will exhibit in-group favouritism. This discrimination in favour of members of a group that the individual has no more in connection with than those in another group, is replicated in experiments regardless of the participants' social, cultural, religious or geographical backgrounds. This leads Theiler to assert that this discrimination in favour of their group reflects 'innate human dispositions rather than cultural conditioning' (2003: 259). The explanation for this favouritism is two-fold: categorisation and self-esteem.

Categorisation captures humanity's need to place order on chaos. To divide the social and physical world into categories enables us to understand the world we inhabit. Hence Theiler writes, 'we perceive the world to contain races, generations, personality types, historical epochs and so forth, all of which reflects attempts to impose structure upon confusion and order upon chaos' (2003: 260). This has implications for how individuals internalise their connection to a group categorisation. They can overestimate the connections between individuals within a group and the differences with those outside the group. It can also lead to the individual associating what it means to be them to the group, so the individual's and group's identities become partially merged. From

a fatalist perspective, this categorisation establishes divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, thus hindering the type of common, shared, values necessary for mitigator/transcender logics.

Self-esteem, and similar notions such as self-worth, captures the recognition that individuals seek a positive self-image, and they do so by comparing their self-image to others. Self-esteem is thus relational: it depends on how we perceive others. For SIT this comparison also exists with groups, so that individuals compare their group to others, and their sense of self-worth and self-esteem is elevated by their group doing well³ – hence in-group favouritism. However, since it is relational, this elevation in self-esteem can also derive from other groups doing badly. This can establish an antagonistic inter-group relationship reminiscent of the fatalist logic where inter-group dynamics can be seen in zero-sum terms. Theiler writes, ‘social identity theory suggests that we can enhance our valuation of the ingroup and thus of the self not only by *perceiving* outgroups in a discriminatory fashion but also by *treating* them in this way’ (emphasis in original) (2003: 261).

With categorisation and self-esteem leading to social comparison we now have innate human dispositions establishing a structure of competition that can explain group behaviour, or more accurately, ‘the behaviour of individuals when acting in “group mode”’ (Theiler 2003: 261). Conceived this way, what makes the structure a competitive arena is that an individual’s ontological security is bound-up in their group’s fortunes and its fortunes are intrinsically bound to the fortune of other groups. This reading of SIT reveals that a fatalist logic is the most likely to emerge, not as a consequence of individuals seeking to harm others, but rather a tragic consequence that what elevates self-esteem comes at others’ expense. This is reminiscent of the security dilemma, where a state’s efforts to increase its security has the unintended effect of decreasing the security of other states, who in turn take actions that decrease the security of the initiating state, leaving all worse-off. It is this tragic outcome that explains Robert Jervis’ comment that ‘unintended and undesired consequences of actions meant to be defensive constitutes the “security dilemma”’ (1976: 66).

The significance of this is that we can utilise Theiler’s insights about SIT and societal security to reveal that causation does lie with the structure. Whereas for the security dilemma it is the anarchical system, and for the initial authors of the internal security dilemma its close approximation, for the societal security

3 It can also explain why members of a group are reluctant to believe that members of their own group could carry out reprehensible acts (see Fearon & Laitin 2000: 854). It can also explain that when acts of violence are perpetrated by in-group members these acts are defended by others in the group as righteous. For connecting SIT with Virtuous Violence Theory see (Schwartz 2024). For a specific SIT explanation for Russian strategies for justifying aggressive actions in Ukraine by emphasising ingroup virtues while dehumanising the outgroup, see (Bliuc & Muntele-Hendres 2025).

dilemma we now have an explanation for why discourses designed to enhance the value of a group identity by elevating a positive image of association can have the unintended and undesired consequence of lessening the worth of other groups and thus in turn the self-esteem of its group's members. However, this is not intended to imply that there is anything deterministic about this process. Actors still retain agency, for they determine what attributes of the group are accentuated. What the application of SIT to the societal security dilemma reveals, and this is currently missing from the literature, is that we can evaluate actors' discourses as instances of social comparison. But in doing so, does a fatalist logic inevitably come to the fore?

Not necessarily. While the structure is predisposed towards this outcome because of its competitive nature, it is important to note that identities are malleable, and individuals have multiple identities. Consequently, discourses will have more or less salience depending upon a variety of contexts. This makes discourses that follow mitigator or transcender logics possible, although it does suggest that they are more challenging than narrating a fatalist logic. Here the work of Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko becomes informative (2010, 2019). They note that social comparison 'may lead to the adoption of an identity management strategy' (Larson & Shevchenko 2019: 1190). Utilising the work of SIT's founders, Henri Tajfel and his associates, they highlight three such strategies (social mobility, social creativity, social competition) – and argue that which is likely to be adopted is determined by two variables. First, are the boundaries between the groups permeable? That is, can members of one group join another? Second, is the status that the groups command recognised by others and thus stable? If so, then it is regarded as legitimate. In those conditions where the status of groups is acknowledged, and a lower-status group believe the boundaries between groups are permeable then they can adopt a mobility strategy to join the higher status group. In essence, members of the inferior group adopt the values, practices and norms of the higher-status group in order to join their group. For example, adopting the traits required for membership of institutions or clubs. This echoes the transcender logic, where members' identities merge to create a common identity.

The second strategy – social creativity – can be adopted where the status hierarchy is acknowledged, and thus is legitimate, but the boundaries are impermeable. That is, membership of the higher status group is not possible. In these circumstances, the lower-status group may seek to lessen their feelings of inferiority by doing the following: '(1) identify a new dimension on which the in-group is superior, (2) reevaluate an existing characteristic as positive, or (3) choose an even lower-status group as the target of comparison' (Larson & Shevchenko 2019: 1190). Excluding the third option, the first two echo mitigator logic, where the groups remain separate, but the membership can extol their own multiple virtues, and the groups recognise the status of these virtues as superior/inferior.

That is, they share a common understanding of what makes each group superior or inferior. Hence Larson and Shevchenko's claim:

For a social creativity strategy to succeed, the lower-status group's proposed criteria for status must be recognized as valid and worthwhile by the dominant group. Status cannot be attained unilaterally. Although status is positional, two social groups may be able to attain positive status at the same time so long as there are multiple criteria. With more than one way to attain status, two groups may be superior but in different areas. (2010: 74)

It is worth reflecting here that a social creativity strategy enables a lower status group to adjust the dominant group's understanding of their positionality, so that it does not remain lower status on all criteria. Status hierarchy is thus contestable via discourse, with multiple criteria establishing variable positionality. We can apply multiple criteria to multiethnic identity, wherein individuals embrace a shared identity while privileging distinct markers they regard as superior. This variation reflects the heterogeneity of the national population and underscores the richness inherent in societies with a multiethnic identity.

The third strategy – social competition – occurs where the status hierarchy is not acknowledged by the lower-status group and thus it challenges the dominant group. This reflects the fatalist logic, and the competition is likely to become more intense where group boundaries are also impermeable since negating crossover in membership can exacerbate their differences. While social competition therefore can be a strategy adopted, and this is entirely plausible given that in-group favoritism is a natural part of the human disposition, it is not inevitable. Strategies of social creativity and social mobility reflect how members' understanding of their self and group identities is subject to change. These changeable understandings are mutually constituted through the interaction between discourses and the permeability of boundaries and status hierarchies; discourses shape, and are shaped by, the structural conditions in which identity is negotiated.

In summary, traditionally, the explanation for why states, and ethnic groups within states, are susceptible to the security dilemma is the context, or structure, in which they interact. Hence, the security dilemma is a *tragedy*, as states/ethnic groups fall *victim* to a spiralling process of insecurity caused by the actions they are *compelled* to take. The Booth and Wheeler reconfiguration of the security dilemma challenges this in two ways. First, the context of unresolvable uncertainty does not just replace anarchy, it also removes any causality. Unresolvable uncertainty is a condition that arises from humanity's inability to read the minds of others, but it has no causal explanation for why this should lead to a spiralling process of insecurity. Essentially, it is no more than a description. Second, whether a spiral-

ling process of insecurity emerges, or whether actors cooperate, is determined by their interactions. Causality therefore lies with how actors interpret one another from their interactions. For Booth and Wheeler therefore the security dilemma is neither caused by the structure nor does it equate to a spiralling process of insecurity. The security dilemma is caused by actors, and it can assume three different logics (fatalist, mitigator, transcendor). It is this understanding of the security dilemma that Bilgic adopts to refute the importance of tragedy as an explanation for the internal security dilemma, and why he places importance on how actors interpret their sense of security, and the security of others, via their interactions. It is why he calls it the 'new' societal security dilemma.

While this focus on actors is not wrong, the relegation of the importance of structure is wrong. The context, or structure, is more than a description. Indeed, it is as important as the actors themselves. The structural explanation for the security dilemma is two-fold, and the answer lies with SIT. This reveals two structural drivers for how secure actors feel in the presence of others. First is our human disposition, when placed in groups, to exhibit in-group favouritism by overestimating the connections between individuals within the group and conflating our self-esteem to the success of the group. This social comparison can lead to social competition as prestige is relational, establishing a zero-sum relationship. We can therefore interpret the discourses actors adopt as instance of categorisation and self-esteem to reveal whether social competition happens and with it a societal security dilemma. Second, the likelihood of this outcome is determined by the structural conditions of (a) status hierarchy and (b) permeability of boundaries. Where the status hierarchy is not recognised by the groups, it is thus regarded as illegitimate, social competition is likely and this will be more so if the boundaries between the groups are impermeable. However, this is only one outcome, and like Booth and Wheeler's logics, SIT has alternative identity management strategies. Through their discourses, actors can change perceptions of status hierarchy and the permeability of boundaries. The argument is not that actors do not have agency, but rather that societal security dilemma causation is mutually constituted by the interaction between these structural conditions and the discourses adopted by the actors. This I claim is a more accurate understanding of the Constructivist approach in which actors and structures are mutually constituted (Hopf 1998). We can therefore discern the likelihood of a Ukrainian societal security dilemma by interpreting Ukrainian nation building discourses as instances of categorisation and self-esteem. Does it lead to social competition? In this article, this is done by focusing on language and historical memory.

Us and them: Contesting identities and cultures

Before turning to Ukraine, it is necessary to reflect on the relationship between societal security, boundaries and identity makers, such as language, historical

memory, symbols, etc. When Theiler writes that ‘societal security is not cultural security’, he is distinguishing between the cultural attributes of a community (language, customs, etc), what he refers to as ‘content’, and the differences between groups, which are their boundaries (2003: 266). SIT is concerned with explaining humanity’s need to favour their group, and what distinguishes it from other groups is what it is not. What is important for groups is therefore what they are not – Ukrainians are not Russians – rather than ‘the cultural stuff they enclose’ (Theiler 2003: 267). However, the content is not irrelevant; it establishes the group norms, which, while changeable, have meaning to the members of the group. It is not therefore that identity markers are irrelevant, rather, as Theiler notes, ‘people value their culture because it helps sustain their groups, with “groupness” serving basic cognitive and emotional needs’ (2003: 267); which is their ontological security.

We know from SIT that once in groups we exhibit in-group favouritism because of categorisation and self-esteem, and therefore the discourses that are likely to gain traction will reinforce these attributes. In effect, ‘we’ are distinct from ‘them’, and ‘we’ surpass ‘them’ in various ways. Walker Connor identifies this ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy and captures Theiler’s distinction between cultural and societal security when writing:

Ethnic strife is too often superficially discerned as principally predicated upon language, religion, customs, economic inequity, or some other tangible element. But what is fundamentally involved in such a conflict is that divergence of basic identity which manifests itself in the “us-them” syndrome. And the ultimate answer to the question of whether a person is one of us, or one of them, seldom hinges on adherence to overt aspects of culture. (Connor 1972: 341)

Connor specifically relates this to the case of Ukraine:

This propensity to perceive an ethnic division in terms of the more tangible differences between the groups is often supported by the statements and actions of those most involved. In their desire to assert their uniqueness, members of a group are apt to make rallying points of their more tangible and distinguishing institutions. Thus, the Ukrainians, as a method of asserting their non-Russian identity, wage their campaign for national survival largely in terms of their right to employ the Ukrainian, rather than the Russian, tongue in all oral and written matters. But would not the Ukrainian nation (that is, a popular consciousness of being Ukrainian) be likely to persist even if the language were totally replaced by Russian, just as the Irish nation has persisted after the virtual disappearance of Gaelic, despite pre-1920 slogans that described Gaelic and Irish identity as

inseparable? Is the language the essential element of the Ukrainian nation, or is it merely a minor element which has been elevated to the symbol of the nation in its struggle for continued viability? (1972: 338)

Here, however, Connor reveals discourses that promote these lines of distinction do so with reference to cultural symbols – Theiler’s ‘content’. It is these identity markers which therefore become the tangible manifestations of discourses that actors narrate – Connor’s group members engaged in ‘rallying points’ about ‘tangible and distinguishing institutions’ – that tell stories of distinctiveness and superiority. This is the structure within which actors operate; their discourse constructs and is constructed by categorisation and self-esteem.

Ukrainian discourses and (im)permeable boundaries

We now turn to Ukraine prior to 2014 to trace discourses that emerged about Ukrainian identity and the permeability of the boundaries that separated these discourses. The argument posited is that Ukraine’s search for a national identity was contested, and a societal security dilemma between the south/east and centre/west of Ukraine emerges that is specifically manifest in contention over the issue of the Ukrainian language, where competing discourses echo SIT’s self-esteem and historical memory, which echoes SIT’s categorisation. While our focus will be on how these human dispositions reinforce actors’ discourses, recall that dispositions and discourses are mutually constitutive. That is, while dispositions shape the discourses actors engage with – often reinforcing mutually exclusive frameworks – those same discourses, in turn, reinforce and reshape the dispositions themselves as they promote social comparison. Hence, we are not fatally doomed to social competition, as social mobility and social creativity remain possible.

When turning to Ukraine, it is worth noting the presence of both domestic actors – such as Ukrainian officials, regional bureaucracies and the public – and Russian actors, whose discursive engagement intensified after the 2004–05 Orange Revolution, and how these became intertwined. The behaviour of Russian actors, and the presence of Russian culture, establish Russian manipulation of Ukraine’s societal security dilemma. Adrian Karatnycky captures this when lamenting the failure of Ukrainisation, specifically in the Donbas, because successive national governments failed to ‘inure Donbas citizens to Russian influence’ (2024: 175). Karatnycky, while noting the presence of Russian agents stirring up violence, notes the role of Ukrainian politicians by deploring how Ukrainian governments failed to counter Russian influence achieved through its saturation of the media, books, social media and websites, leaving the people of eastern Ukraine susceptible to Russian propaganda, and how, ‘successive Ukrainian politicians and political parties traded on competing historical narratives and culture wars that stood in the way of shaping a cohesive Ukrainian polis’ (2024: 176). While Karatnycky is right

to note domestic drivers of the societal security dilemma, Russia's involvement is tangible and specifically manifest by the contestation surrounding the role of the Russian language and differing historical memories. These become symbolic battlegrounds between competing pro-European and pro-Russian discourses vying to shape Ukraine's future identity. Their significance for Russia is captured by Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel when they write:

In a 2006 meeting with the speaker of the Ukrainian parliament, Russian foreign minister Lavrov singled out the status of Russian language as "one of two grave problems" in relations between the two states, the other one being Ukraine's interpretation of the 1932-1933 famine. . . . It is telling that for Russia identity issues, not strained economic relations or the Euro-Atlantic foreign-policy aspirations of the Yushchenko government, constituted the top two concerns. (2024: 110-11)

When Russia today refers to resolving the 'root causes of the conflict', a deliberately broad formulation, two of these are Russia's perceived grievances about the marginalisation of the Russian language and its interpretation of Ukrainian history being systematically suppressed. To understand why these become symbolic battlegrounds manifesting social competition, we need to identify the discourses that contest Ukraine's search for a national identity, and here the work of White and Feklyunina is instructive (2014). White and Feklyunina identify three Ukrainian identity discourses – 'Ukraine as Europe', 'Alternative Europe' and 'Ukraine as part of Greater Europe' – examined across the elite as well as the general populace. These discourses diverge in their interpretations of history, culture and national values. Our interest lies in how Ukrainians identifying with these discourses perceive status hierarchies as legitimate and boundaries between them as (im)permeable.

The most oppositional are 'Ukraine as Europe' and 'Alternative Europe', which differ sharply in their historical narratives. The former portrays Ukraine's history as one of independence from Russia, such as being the true heirs of the Kievan Rus', the Cossack era, the 'European legacy' when Western Ukraine was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Ukraine's early 20th-century autonomy (White & Feklyunina 2014: 138). Russia is framed as an oppressor – through imperial rule, Soviet domination and post-Soviet energy coercion – with the Holodomor (devastating famine in 1932-33) presented as genocide. In contrast, 'Alternative Europe' situates Ukraine within an East Slavic or Orthodox civilization alongside Russia and Belarus that form an 'in-group', emphasising shared development during the Soviet era. Ukraine and Russia's history is thus an embedded one, with Ukrainians playing an equally vital role as Russians. The difference between these two positions is captured by the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's

response to a question about Ukraine and Russia's common history: 'there is no common history. Each nation has its own heroes' (quoted from White & Feklyunina 2014: 139).

These historical distinctions inform cultural interpretations. 'Ukraine as Europe' emphasises cultural distinctiveness, especially through the Ukrainian language as a marker of national identity. 'Alternative Europe' views Ukrainian culture as inseparable from the broader East Slavic tradition, deeply intertwined with Russian culture. Finally, the discourses diverge on political values. 'Ukraine as Europe' frames Ukraine at a civilisational crossroads, advocating European norms – democracy, market economics, civil rights – against Eurasian authoritarianism and corruption. It envisions a normative transformation through de-communisation and European integration. 'Alternative Europe', by contrast, treats Europe as a geographic label and promotes socialist ideals rooted in East Slavic values of social justice and equitable resource distribution, positioning these as morally superior to Western individualism.

What is evident is that they are not only mutually exclusive, they also regard themselves as superior. In SIT terminology, the status hierarchy is not stable. What also becomes evident is that their traction is different in different parts of Ukraine. The physical territory of Ukraine in 1991 was, like many territorial entities, a construct that brought together communities that could trace their ancestry to previously separate lands governed by different political centres. For Ukraine, the western part – loosely designated as west of the Dnipro River – was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whereas the central and eastern regions came under the rule of the Russian tsars.⁴ The effect of the state being divided between the East and the West results in different cultures reflecting different histories. Popova and Shevel note that 'in the PLC, Ukrainian territories had exposure to influences from the West that the Muscovy did not experience; most consequentially Renaissance and Reformation' (2024: 22). The regional traction of these discourses is not therefore surprising. White and Feklyunina write of 'Ukraine as Europe':

The appeal of this narrative was limited to the western part of Ukraine, which had indeed experienced this "European belonging", whereas in the eastern regions that had been part of Russia's imperial project for a much longer period this narrative was largely rejected.

4 In 1649, what is now central Ukraine was granted self-governing status by the PLC and was called Hetmanate led by the Cossack leader, Bohdan Khmelnytsky. In the 1780s, under Catherine II, Russia abolished the Hetmanate and established direct rule (see Popova & Shevel 2024: 23–4).

They therefore conclude:

In Ukraine the polar discourses – “Ukraine as Europe” and “Ukraine as Alternative Europe” – were largely confined to the western and eastern regions of the country, respectively. This division was equally pronounced at the level of political elites and the mass public. (White & Feklyunina 2014: 233)

Russian intervention and manipulation in favour of ‘Alternative Europe’ was therefore falling on fertile ground in the south and east of Ukraine.

Before revealing the significance of self-esteem and categorisation in establishing a fatalist logic, it is important to note that this distinction between pro-European and pro-Russian sentiment establishing impermeable boundaries is not true for Ukraine as a whole. Popova and Shevel write:

The widespread perception of Ukraine as a country regionally divided between a more ethnically Russian and predominantly Russian-speaking south and east, feeling loyalty to Russia, and an ethnically Ukrainian and predominantly Ukrainian-speaking west, oriented toward Europe and the West and away from Russia, is a much-used shortcut to understanding popular preferences. (2024: 52-3)

Popova and Shevel do not claim that this ‘shortcut’ is wrong, rather what constitutes East and West spatially and ideationally evolves from 1991, and increasingly those in the centre become drawn to the West. For Popova and Shevel, the ‘centre’ is both geographical and political, occupying the middle position between the Left (pro-Russian) and the Right (pro-Western). The Centre consisted of a variety of parties and interest groups ranging from former party apparatchiks to new business and regional elites. With such a broad composition it is not surprising that it had no clear ideological position and it was neither aligned with the national identity pursued by the Left or Right. What they did have in common was a desire to lessen Ukraine’s subordination to Moscow and seize the opportunities – both political and economic – that arose from running an independent state. It thus had more in common with the Right and it was a Centre-Right coalition that came to dominate politically. This evolving position indicates that identity boundaries were permeable, and here we find White and Feklyunina’s third discourse: ‘Ukraine as part of greater Europe’. This differs from the others by being pragmatic rather than normative. For White and Feklyunina this is the one that increases in popularity and is dominant prior to the protests in late 2013 (2014: 243-44). It was pragmatic rather than normative as it did not embody a Ukrainian future as part of either a Europe or Russia ‘in-group’, but rather one that was

politically independent and culturally close to Russia. The emergence of 'Ukraine as part of Greater Europe' indicates that for many Ukrainians it was possible to adopt a national identity that fused elements of pro-European and pro-Russian values. While it is tempting to think that given time all of Ukraine would have coalesced around this third discourse, the argument posited here is that the regional traction of 'Ukraine as Europe' and 'Alternative Europe' was so engrained that boundaries between the centre/west and south/east were impermeable. These mutually exclusive identities are manifest in the importance attached to the Russian language and contestation over Ukraine's historical memory. The former reveals self-esteem and the latter categorisation as 'Ukraine as Europe' and 'Alternative Europe' contested their status hierarchy. We now turn to these points of contention to reveal how discourses reinforced the structural driver of social comparison, thus making social competition the identity strategy prevalent and a societal security dilemma inevitable.

i. *Language and self-esteem*

Ukraine's first language law, passed in 1989, designated Ukrainian as the sole state language, although it gave Russian the status of the 'language of inter-ethnic communication' within the then existing Soviet Union. While giving Russian this status makes sense for communication within the USSR, it had the consequence of elevating its importance as *the* language for social mobility and relegating the importance of Ukrainian. After all, if Russian can also be used for communicating within Ukraine, then why should Ukrainians invest in learning and using Ukrainian when they were already fluent in Russian? It was this concern, which also happened in Belarus where Russian and Belarussian were adopted as the state's two languages thus perpetuating and accelerating Russification, that led to Ukraine pursuing a one-state-language policy. As Popova and Shevel write:

Support for the one-state-language policy was informed by a two-fold concern: implications of state language policy for the future of the Ukrainian language, including its very survival, and implications of state language policy for the prospects of a fully independent state. . . . As a symbol of statehood, a one-state-language policy underscored the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian nation, which in turn legitimized distinct Ukrainian statehood. By contrast, two state languages served to blur the difference between Ukrainian and Russian nations and states, correspondingly weakening the symbolic foundation for a separate Ukrainian state. (2024: 105-6)

The one-state-language policy therefore became a symbolic marker of Ukraine's distinctiveness, with an increasing number of Ukrainians using their language as

a matter of pride. However, there was distinct regional divide. Although the 1996 Ukrainian Constitution enshrined Ukrainian as the state's official language, it also guaranteed the protection of Russian alongside 'other languages of national minorities' in Ukraine. This designation became a point of contention as it conflated the usage of Russian by Ukrainians with a minority's language. The effect of the one-state-language policy was disproportionately felt in Ukraine, with the east particularly impacted. At the time of independence, Russian was spoken by most of the people of the Donbas (67% in Donetsk and 63% in Luhansk oblasts), with only a few claiming proficiency in Ukrainian. The language policies of 'Ukrainisation' conducted under the presidencies of Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) saw the rapid change in the language of instruction used in Ukrainian schools, which was continued under Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010).⁵

Regarding the Donbas, Anna Matveeva writes: 'It was Yushchenko's presidency that dealt a decisive blow to Russian language in the region. Shift in language policy and a threat of losing access to education in the mother tongue were of concern to the local society' (2017: 28). In the Donetsk region in 2004, 26.6% of schoolchildren studied through the medium of Ukrainian, and by 2012 it had almost doubled to 48.4%. The number of Russian-language schools declined in the decade from 2001 to 2011 from 518 to 176. The result was that families had little choice but to send their children to Ukrainian-language schools, which they resented (Matveeva 2017: 30). The situation was similar in Luhansk. In 2005, 29.5% of schoolchildren studied through the medium of Ukrainian and this had risen to 48.5% by 2009 'although two-thirds of the population considered Russian as their native language' (Matveeva 2017: 30).

The constitution's designation of Ukrainian as the sole state language, coupled to the language policies of the first three Ukrainian presidencies, indicate that state elite are key political actors. Russian elite are also key actors. Russian politicians routinely complained that Russian speakers were persecuted and called for Russian to be accorded the status of Ukraine's second state language (Popova and Shevel 2024: 105–112). The persistence at the elite level of contesting Ukraine's language is also manifest within the general populace, thus indicating that actors include the common people. This is evidenced in Anna Fournier's work, which, examining letters of protest written to the government and newspaper articles written by Ukrainians living in the south and east, identifies five resistances to the Ukrainisation of Ukraine's language.⁶ These resistances include the accusation that it was creating

5 In 1991 in Ukraine, 51.4% of schools were teaching through the medium of Ukrainian and 47.8% through the medium of Russian, by 2013–14 this had changed to 85.8% teaching through the medium of Ukrainian and 6.8% through the medium of Russian (see Matveeva 2017: 29).

6 Fournier uses the identifier 'Russian' when looking at the resistance to Ukrainisation, but this is not an ethnic marker but rather a linguistic/cultural reference to people

an artificial divide between Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine, and the claim that what matters is not an ethnic division between Russians and Ukrainians but a linguistic division between Russian-speakers, whether they were Russians living in Ukraine or Ukrainians, and Ukrainian-speakers. We can connect these resistances to self-esteem, where the sense of inferiority and superiority and the impermeability of boundaries is captured in Fournier's second, third and fourth resistance.

The second resistance relates specifically to the sense of self-worth in SIT. Here the resistance is to the elevation of Ukrainian as a state language because it is inferior to Russian. Citing from newspaper articles protesting against Ukrainisation, Fournier identifies the criticism of Ukrainian being 'backward', 'a medieval folk colloquial language' ill-suited to modern 'city life', and that to switch from Russian to Ukrainian 'is like switching from colour TV back to a black and white TV' (Fournier 2002: 425). Hence Fournier writes, 'I would argue that implicit in this discourse was the perception of Russian as the "high variety" (to be used for high culture and official state business) and Ukrainian as the "low variety" (to be used in informal contexts such as the home)' (2002: 426). It is likely that this disparagement of Ukrainian comes from the prestige afforded to Russian during the Soviet period when Russian was the language of social mobility. It indicates that for Ukrainian speakers of Russian there was no incentive to cross the language boundary.

This boundary marker is prominent in the third resistance in which it is the Russian speakers that perceive Ukrainisation as undermining their status as Ukrainians. The third resistance is to the labelling of Russian as a foreign language. This occurs because the language law designates Russian as equivalent to a minority ethnic language, thus implying it is a language only for Russians and therefore relegating its significance for Ukraine, when for many Ukrainians it was their language of choice for everyday use and regarded as part of their identity as Ukrainians. This explains the 'joke': 'Name a country where two-thirds of the citizens communicate in a foreign language', and then explains why, for those Ukrainians whose language of choice was Russian, Ukrainisation excludes them and treats them as second-class citizens (Fournier 2002: 427). The riposte was to claim Russian as a native language and thus by implication the absurdity of claiming it as a foreign language.⁷ Hence the claim here is that it is absurd to teach Russian as a foreign language in Ukrainian

that live in Ukraine. Russian, for Fournier, is thus a hybrid identity consisting of Russian-speakers and this includes Ukrainians for whom Russian is the language of convenience. Fournier's use of 'Russian' for Russians that have lived in Ukraine for generations, and Ukrainians that use the Russian language daily and are inculcated into Russian culture, represent the 'Ukraine as Alternative Europe' discourse (Fournier 2002).

7 Fournier clarifies that while Russian is not a native language of Ukraine, it was a language of convenience for many Ukrainians, hence the use of the term 'native' by ordinary people.

schools when it was the language of choice for many school children in the south and east. This leads to the claim that oppressing the Russian language oppresses ‘*the Ukrainian people*’ (italics in original) (quoted from Fournier 2002: 428). This notion that segments of the Ukrainian people are being oppressed by their state is also evident in the fourth resistance.

The fourth resistance interprets the language law as symptomatic of a wider ‘liquidation’ of Russian culture in Ukraine (Fournier 2002: 428). Here the phasing out of Russian is a ‘merciless fight’ to ‘uproot’ Russian culture in Ukraine. These terms capture the existential nature of the threat felt by those Ukrainians that see their identity deeply intertwined with Russian culture.

The perception of threat is what drives the societal security dilemma. Popova and Shevel write that:

Actual Ukrainization was rather lackluster . . . Russian retained its dominant position in media and business and even in the government sector, where documentation was switched to Ukrainian, but interactions among state officials and between officials and the public often remained in Russian. (2024: 108–9)

Yet, despite a tacit understanding that Ukrainian was formally the state language while Russian remained the language of choice for many, including the political elite, the sensitivity of the topic remained. This was manifest in the 2012 ‘Law on the Principles of the State Language Policy’ under the Viktor Yanukovich presidency (2010–2014). It allowed for the use of Russian in courts, schools and other government institutions in areas of Ukraine where Russians exceeded 10% of the population. The controversial nature of the language law was manifest in its passing when opposition deputies surrounded the chair of parliament to prevent further legislative progress, and a fistfight broke out. The effect of the 2012 language law was to make Russian an official language in nearly half of Ukraine’s regions, and it led to street protests that become known as the ‘Language Maidan’ (Popova & Shevel 2024: 187). Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovich’s presidential challenger in 2010 who was imprisoned after his victory, called it ‘a crime against Ukraine, the nation, its history and the people’ (quoted from D’Anieri 2023: 181). The significance of the 2012 law is captured in parliament voting to overturn it the day after Yanukovich’s removal. However, the language law remained in place as it was not signed. This though was not widely reported, and, in the south and southeast of Ukraine, it was interpreted as undermining their understanding of what a Ukrainian identity meant. As Arel and Driscoll note, ‘it was widely interpreted as a symbolic attempt to “ban Russian.” The political effect of the repeal – even if it was vetoed by Interim President Turchynov – was to encourage sedition in the East’ (2023: 96). Capturing the spiralling process of the security dilemma’s tragedy, Paul D’Anieri writes

that the 'issue is a vivid example of how competing versions of the status quo can lead both sides to see the other as being aggressive' (D'Anieri 2023: 181). This demonstrates that language became a site of social competition, with linguistic choice reflecting individual self-esteem – either through Ukrainian as a symbol of resistance to Russian domination, or Russian as an affirmation of cultural affinity with Russia. With social competition manifest, a fatalist logic was inevitable.

ii. *Historical memory: Categorisation of heroes or villains*

Two differing interpretations of Ukraine's historical memory form status contention and impermeable boundaries between the pro-European and pro-Russian identities. These relate to the WWII-era Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) that fought alongside the Nazi forces against the USSR and were led by Stepan Bandera, and the Holodomor.

The telling of the Soviet victory in WWII from the Russian perspective paints the OUN and UPA as treasonous collaborators fighting with Nazi Germany against the USSR. For nationalist Ukrainians, they were fighting for Ukrainian independence and in Leonid Kuchma's presidency a commission was established to re-evaluate the historical interpretation of the OUN and UPA. It published its findings in 2005, and while its findings were ambiguous, it had established that a different interpretation of the OUN and UPA as treasonous was possible. Our actors in this instance are the political elite, specifically Yushchenko as it was during his presidency that attempts to redefine the OUN and UPA as fighters for national liberation began in earnest, and Russian President Medvedev and his presidential commission who began to counter 'falsification' of a common history. The commission specifically targeted neighbouring states to counter narratives that would cast Russian and Soviet rule in their histories as oppressive. Ukraine was a particular target (Popova & Shevel 2024: 97-8).

During Yushchenko's tenure, 15 draft bills were tabled in parliament to recognise the OUN and UPA as participants in a national liberation struggle and grant them status as war veterans. The contentiousness of this is revealed by none of the bills securing enough support in parliament to be passed. Indeed, it is only after Euromaidan that it becomes the majority view, and while from 2006 to 2007 the share of those that opposed OUN and UPA recognition fell from 52% to 46% nationwide, in the southeast only 22% were in favour, and in the Donbas the number was even lower. The explanation lies in categorisation: was Stepan Bandera, the OUN leader, a hero or villain?

The divisiveness of the OUN and UPA relates to not just their collaboration with Nazi forces against the USSR but also their role in the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing of Poles. For many Ukrainians, Bandera was a fascist and murderer. In his final weeks in office, Yushchenko posthumously conferred the award of Hero of Ukraine, the state's highest honour, on Bandera. He had previously done the

same for Roman Shukhevych, the UPA commander-in-chief. Both of these would be repealed by Yanukovych. D'Anieri writes of these awards:

To many, it was inconceivable that [Bandera] could be praised, let alone made a "Hero of Ukraine". The historiography of Bandera and the Ukrainian Independence Army is among the most bitterly contested issues in Ukraine, and feeds the notion in Russia and the West that those most committed to Ukraine's independence are fascists or are tolerant of fascists. Yushchenko's decision was a godsend for those, like Yanukovych and the Russian government, who wanted to paint pro-western politicians as extremists. (2023: 167)

Such a divisive figure was therefore going to reaffirm boundary markers in Ukraine, as Matveeva writes:

The problem developed when Bandera was presented as a national hero that could be imposed upon parts of society which had a profound discomfort with the version of Ukrainian project that Bandera was associated with. Construction of a new national identity based on Bandera's legacy meant a significant redefinition of the existing one and no wonder caused a considerable strain, given that memories of the past were strong and the traumatic events of the War fairly recent. (2017: 27)

The adoption by mainstream demonstrators during the 2013–14 protests of the slogan 'Glory to the Heroes', which is associated with the OUN and UPA, instead of 'Glory to Ukraine' (D'Anieri 2023: 207) reaffirmed the fear that this telling of Ukraine's historical memory would be imposed again. A contested status hierarchy is thus evident between the 'Ukraine as Europe' discourse, with its focus on exposing Russian oppression of Ukraine's interpretation of its history, and the 'Alternative Europe' discourse that portrayed a more benign relationship. These mutually exclusive interpretations reaffirmed impermeable boundaries, thus making social competition likely. This is also manifest in how the Holodomor was interpreted.

iii. *Historical memory: Categorisation of tragedy or crime*

The Great Famine of 1932–33 is known in Ukraine as the Holodomor (death by starvation) and was responsible for the deaths of more than 3.5 million Ukrainians. Until Glasnost, it was a period of Soviet history taboo to discuss, but it became a topic of much controversy once it was open to discussion. There is contention over whether the famine was a deliberate act by Stalin and whether it constitutes a genocide. For our purposes, the contention is that it became an historical memory to unite the Ukrainian people.

In 1993, on the 60th anniversary of the tragedy, Kravchuk created a programme of official events to commemorate the famine and introduced the term 'the Holodomor'. During the 1990s, the split between the nationalist Right, for whom the Holodomor became a symbol of Ukrainian national history that symbolised Ukraine's victimisation by Moscow, and the Left, which sought a future aligned with Moscow, was reflected in the division between the western and eastern parts of Ukraine. While there would be a shift in public attitudes towards seeing the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, this geographical distinction remained: by 2007 there was 63% nationwide support for calling the Holodomor a genocide, but with significant regional differences (85% in western regions, 35% in eastern regions) (Popova & Shevel 2024: 94).

The contention over reimagining Ukraine's historical memory occurs after the Orange Revolution and the ascension of Yushchenko. Yushchenko spoke about the Holodomor in his inauguration speech and in November 2006 submitted a draft law to the parliament defining the Holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian people. The fact that it only narrowly passed reflected the contentiousness of the law. Hence Lina Klymenko writes:

Given the fierce political debates preceding the adoption of the law, it became clear that various segments of the Ukrainian political elites disagreed with the conceptualization of the famine as the genocide of Ukrainians and thus proposed their own vision of the Ukrainian national community. (2016: 343)

Russia too objected to this interpretation. They were 'outraged by the law' (Popova and Shevel 2024: 93), Yushchenko was accused of pursuing 'provocative actions' as Russia, the successor state to the USSR, was implicated in the genocide, and, defending its own self-image, Russia blocked Ukraine from gaining international recognition for the Holodomor as an act of genocide.

Given that eastern Ukraine suffered heavier losses from the famine, why was it more reluctant to perceive it as a genocide? The answer lies in presenting the Holodomor as a tragedy inflicted by Moscow, and while this matched the 'Ukraine as Europe' sentiment of interpreting Russian-Ukrainian relations as one of oppression, it directly challenged the historical memory of those Ukrainians that saw their Ukrainian identity inextricable tied to Russia. For the latter, reflecting Moscow's position, the famine was a common catastrophe for Soviet citizens. In effect, as John Paul Himka asserts, 'the great difference between the Centre-West and the East-South of Ukraine is that the former conceives of the famine as a crime and the latter conceives it as a tragedy' (quoted from Zhurzhenko 2011: 604). Accordingly, Himka observes:

Two different identities competing in Ukraine, an exclusivist one dominant in the West and growing stronger in the capital, especially among the youth, and a post-Soviet Ukrainian identity shared by many in the East and South, an identity that is neither anti-Russian, nor embedded in a sense of victimization. (quoted from Zhurzhenko 2011: 604)

The resistance to the Yushchenko interpretation can be witnessed in the 75th Holodomor anniversary commemoration campaign of 2008, a campaign that specifically targeted the south and east with Yushchenko making repeated visits. Tatiana Zhurzhenko writes:

It was supposed to strengthen the national identity and revive the collective memory of Stalin's terror. Not only national suffering, but also national resistance to Sovietization, was included in the unifying myth: the new narrative of eastern Ukrainian peasants resisting the Soviet regime was presented as an analogy to the armed struggle of the UPA in the West. (2011: 604)

However, local authorities in the east tasked with implementing the campaign, which included erecting historical monuments, initiating the renaming of streets, and the removal of memorials to Communist leaders, amongst other things, were at best half-hearted in their implementation. Zhurzhenko, using Kharkiv as an illustration of resistance in the east, writes 'the Party of the Regions, the most influential political force in Kharkiv, opposed the interpretation of the Holodomor as genocide and criticized the "excesses" of the official commemoration campaign' (2011: 616), and noted that:

The example of Kharkiv demonstrates at first glance the tensions between the center imposing changes in a national memory regime and a region resisting them. A more detailed analysis shows that the new memory regime is contested, renegotiated, and modified on the local level, resulting in a decentralization and fragmentation of the official narrative of the Holodomor as genocide. (Zhurzhenko 2011: 619)

Ultimately, Zhurzhenko concludes:

Under President Yushchenko, the Holodomor became the core of a new identity politics conceptualizing the Ukrainian nation as a "postgenocide" community, a collective victim of the Communist regime. But the interpretation of the Famine as a genocide enforced by law and imposed from the top-down met ambivalent responses in the regions, particularly in the East and South. Far from consolidating the nation, the new discourse on

the Holodomor was instrumentalized on both sides of the political front-line, thus deepening divisions between different commemorative cultures in Ukraine. (2011: 633)

Here we can see that the contention between Yushchenko's national government and the local, regional, authorities. The contention is not about the Holodomor itself, but what it represented. Was it indicative of Russian oppression and thus a marker for Ukrainian distinction, or was it a common Soviet tragedy and its commemoration a reinforcement of Ukraine and Russia's shared sense of self (brotherly) peoples? As with Bandera's status of hero or villain, these categorisations of Ukraine's Holodomor historical memory (crime or tragedy) become impermeable boundary markers because they represented, in SIT terminology, mutually exclusive discourses that challenged one another's status as having the right to interpret Ukraine's historical memory. Our actors, both domestic and foreign, are therefore reinforcing a pre-existing structure characterised by a disputed status hierarchy and impermeable boundaries between 'Ukraine as Europe' and 'Alternative Europe' discourses, thereby ensuring that social competition and a societal security dilemma become inevitable.

Conclusion

By revisiting the societal security dilemma, the article provides both conceptual innovation and, through an empirical application to Ukraine's nation building between 1991 and 2014, addresses Feklyunina's invitation to look for insights from the literature on status and self-esteem. Bilgic's introspection of the internal security dilemma was significant because it challenged the dominant structuralist assumption that the catalyst for the security dilemma is the uncertainty caused by the collapse of law-and-order and the approximation of anarchy. Bilgic rejected this as it prioritised a focus on the tragedy of actors falling victim to a structure with a fatalist logic. Instead, Bilgic argues that we can identify deliberative political actors that are taking measures that make a fatalist logic more likely to emerge than either a mitigator or transcender logic. This placing of agency with actors is in keeping with a constructivist understanding of the security dilemma, but constructivism also understands the relationship between actors and structure as mutually constituted. Theiler's work on SIT and societal security gives us insight into human disposition and thus the propensity for the structure to favour fatalism. SIT reveals that individuals acting in group-mode are predisposed to show in-group favouritism, and this favouritism arises because of our human disposition to categorise and seek self-esteem. SIT therefore provides a contextual understanding of why individuals behave the way they do towards others in a group setting. It reveals that self-esteem and categorisation give agency to societal interaction as groups compare themselves to others; social comparison

is therefore what determines the value of belonging to a group. While the structure is predisposed towards a fatalist logic this is not preordained, mitigator and transcender logics are possible because actors also have agency. By examining their narratives, we can discern if they are pursuing social mobility or social creativity identity management strategies, which will be manifest in how they are interpreting the permeability of boundaries between groups and their status hierarchy.

In the case of Ukraine, by late 2013 the primacy of White and Feklyunina's 'Ukraine as part of Greater Europe' discourse indicates that for many Ukrainians identity boundaries were permeable. Hence, reflecting on Yushchenko's presidency, Karatnycky writes: 'Ever larger portions of the public were beginning gradually to shed their Soviet identity' (2024: 129). However, where pro-Russian sentiment was most keenly felt in the south and east, and this was exacerbated by Russian intervention supporting the Alternative Europe discourse, the boundaries were impermeable and the status hierarchy between the pro-European and pro-Russian identities were unstable. This was manifest in the contestation over language rights and Ukraine's historical memory. Our actors – Ukrainian and Russian elites and ordinary Ukrainians – were engaged in discourses that helped constitute, and were in turn constituted by, a fatalist structure. The binary distinctions between language status, hero or villain, crime or tragedy, created a zero-sum social competition where discourses promoting one were interpreted as denigrating the other. A societal security dilemma is at play. Tragically for Ukraine, Russia uses this societal security dilemma as a pretence to annex territory and establish the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, but there is no evidence that Ukrainians living in the Donbas wanted to secede and abandon Ukraine. The contention in the south and east was what constitutes a Ukrainian identity, not whether to be Ukrainian.



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