Publication status: This preprint has been published elsewhere.
DOI of the published preprint: https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muaf035

How Wars Impact Public Administration and Street-Level Bureaucracy: Teachers and Education Professionals on the Frontlines of the Russian Occupation in Ukraine

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https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.11171

Submitted on: 2025-01-28
Posted on: 2025-09-04 (version 2)
(YYYY-MM-DD)

Version justification: Updated version following fieldwork conducted in Ukraine in February–March 2025 / Versão atualizada após realização de pesquisa de campo na Ucrânia em fevereiro-março de 2025

How Wars Impact Public Administration and Street-Level Bureaucracy: Teachers and Education Professionals on the Frontlines of the Russian Occupation in Ukraine

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Abstract

The actions of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs)—such as teachers, healthcare workers, and police officers—during crises and emergencies have received growing attention in Public Administration scholarship. Yet a critical and underexplored dimension remains: the role of SLBs in contexts of war and armed conflicts, where threats to personal safety, political coercion, and institutional collapse converge. This article investigates how war—and military occupation in particular—reshapes the everyday work, moral dilemmas, and coping strategies of SLBs operating under extreme conditions. We focus on the war in Ukraine—the most intense armed conflict on European soil since World War II. Within this context, we examine education professionals, as schools and universities have become strategic targets of Russian occupation forces: cultural frontlines central to territorial control and forced assimilation efforts. Our analysis draws on a semi-remote ethnography combining fieldwork in six Ukrainian regions, semi-structured and in-depth interviews (both online and face-to-face) with education professionals that experienced the Russian occupation, as well as qualitative analysis of interviews, media coverage, and human rights reports. Using an abductive approach, we identify four structural features that distinguish war from other crises: forced interaction with enemy state actors, institutional weaponization, loyalty dilemmas, and bureaucratic rupture under contested sovereignties. Building on these findings, we propose a fourfold typology of SLB coping strategies—exit, accommodation, local defiance, and remote adaptation—each grounded in distinct moral dispositions. By bringing SLBs into the analysis of wartime governance, this article contributes to an emerging research agenda on frontline bureaucracy under conditions of armed conflict—contexts that, alarmingly, are no longer exceptional.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucracy; education; ethnography; military occupation; War in Ukraine.

* We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Ukrainian scholars, educators, and interviewees that made this research possible.

Como as guerras impactam a Administração Pública e a Burocracia de Nível de Rua: Professores e profissionais da Educação nos fronts da ocupação russa na Ucrânia

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Resumo

O papel dos burocratas de nível de rua (BNR), como professores, profissionais de saúde e policiais, tem atraído crescente atenção na literatura de Administração Pública. Contudo, uma dimensão crítica permanece pouco explorada: o papel dos BNRs em contextos de guerra e conflitos armados, onde ameaças à segurança pessoal, coerção política e colapso institucional convergem. Este artigo investiga como guerras — e ocupações militares em particular — impactam o cotidiano, os dilemas morais e as estratégias de coping dos BNRs. Como estudo de caso, abordamos a guerra na Ucrânia — o conflito armado mais intenso em solo europeu desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Examinamos a atuação de profissionais da educação, já que escolas e universidades se tornaram alvos estratégicos das forças de ocupação russas: um verdadeiro front cultural, de grande importância para o controle territorial e os esforços de assimilação forçada. Nossa análise baseia-se em uma etnografia semi-remota que combina trabalho de campo em seis regiões ucranianas, entrevistas semiestruturadas e em profundidade (tanto online quanto presenciais) com profissionais da educação que vivenciaram a ocupação russa, além de análise qualitativa de entrevistas, cobertura da mídia e relatórios de direitos humanos. Utilizando uma abordagem abdutiva, identificamos quatro características estruturais que distinguem a guerra de outras crises: interação forçada com atores estatais inimigos, "belicização" da burocracia, dilemas morais de lealdade e ruptura burocrática sob soberanias contestadas. A partir dessas constatações, propomos uma tipologia quádrupla de estratégias de enfrentamento dos BNRs — exit ("saída"), acomodação, resistência local e adaptação remota — cada uma ancorada em distintas disposições morais. Ao incorporar os BNRs à análise da governança em tempos de guerra, este artigo contribui para uma agenda emergente de pesquisa sobre a burocracia de linha de frente em condições de conflito armado — contextos que cada vez mais deixam de ser excepcionais.

Palavras-chave: burocracia de nível de rua; educação; etnografia; ocupação militar; Guerra na Ucrânia.

1. Introduction

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) constitute the human face of the state in everyday life (Smith 2012), as they interact directly with citizens to deliver public services—deciding who gets what, how, and under what conditions (Lipsky 2010 [1980]). SLBs are not passive implementers of top-down policy, but as active agents who mediate between formal rules and the lived needs of the public, effectively functioning as policy-makers (Brodkin 2011). Their front-line position gives them significant discretionary power to interpret and adapt abstract policies in response to local conditions and community expectations (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

Over the years, a growing body of literature has explored how SLBs make decisions, the factors that influence their behavior, and how their interactions shape both policy outcomes and citizen-state relationships (e.g Hupe and Hill 2007; Tummers et al. 2015; Thomann et al. 2018). Even in routine contexts, SLBs operate under conditions marked by ambiguity, lack of resources, workload and different forms of pressure (Lipsky 2010 [1980]). To deal with this context, they develop different forms of coping mechanisms (Tummers et al. 2015) and have to navigate among critical decisions. SLBs can be understood as moral agents (Zacka 2017) who use their judgement about the identity, character, and conduct of people they meet (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

Crisis situations—such as natural disasters, armed conflicts, or pandemics—intensify SLBs' challenges (Gofen and Lotta 2021). In such moments, SLBs move from being the everyday face of public administration to the first line of government response (Brodkin 2021). Their roles shift rapidly, often without sufficient guidance or resources (Henderson 2014; Alcadipani et al. 2020). Crises disrupt the typical logic of service provision, rendering established routines and professional expertise less applicable (Møller 2021). This disorientation affects their coping mechanisms (Cox et al. 2021) and can ultimately undermine their authority and complicate their ability to act decisively (Malandrino and Sager 2021).

Despite recent advances in understanding SLBs in crisis settings, research on their role in contexts of war, armed conflicts, and military occupation remains scarce (Lotta et al. 2022a; Strier et al. 2021). Much of the existing literature on SLBs in crisis was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic or democratic backsliding, focusing on specific institutional settings and challenges. In contrast, wars and territorial conflicts—including those involving military occupations or territorial control by criminal organizations—remain significantly understudied. Yet these scenarios have become increasingly relevant in recent years, as the number and intensity of such conflicts have grown across many regions of the world.

In light of these considerations, we pose two research questions: (1) How do war and territorial conflict structurally affect the work of SLBs? and (2) What strategies do SLBs adopt to navigate and survive within such volatile and dangerous contexts? These questions guide our analysis and aim to

open new avenues for understanding public service delivery in settings marked by profound political instability. To address these questions, this article analyzes an extreme case of war, violence, and territorial confrontation: Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which has unfolded in two phases—a localized invasion in 2014 and a full-scale invasion in 2022 —resulting in the occupation of extensive Ukrainian territories.

Acknowledging the heterogeneity among SLBs, this study focuses on a specific subcategory that has been highly affected by the war and the conditions imposed by the military occupation: education professionals. Russian occupying forces targeted educational institutions, pressuring them to adopt the Russian curriculum and propagating the narrative that local residents were being reunited with their "true" homeland and rescued from Ukrainian "Nazi" elites allegedly subservient to Western powers (see Honchar 2022; Ferraro 2024). Teachers, school principals, and other education professionals became a *de facto* frontline, facing heightened challenges and acute ethical dilemmas in their daily work.

Based on an abductive approach, we conducted a semi-remote ethnography combining fieldwork in six Ukrainian regions with semi-structured and in-depth interviews—both online and face-to-face—with Ukrainian SLBs who experienced Russian military occupation. In addition, we carried out qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts, media coverage, state normatives, and reports produced by humanitarian organizations.

This paper contributes to the theory in different ways. First, we show that war constitutes a distinct form of crisis—one that not only disrupts daily bureaucratic routines (Gofen and Lotta 2021), but also undermines state legitimacy, escalates violence, fragments territorial control, generates new enemies and conflicts, and exposes SLBs to heightened personal risk and political pressure. Wars entail sustained threats to physical safety, contested sovereignties, deep moral dilemmas, and blurred boundaries—not only between civilian and military roles, but also between the multiple identities SLBs must negotiate. Second, we show that these dynamics can profoundly transform the nature and meaning of street-level work. Third, we develop a fourfold typology of SLBs' coping strategies, aimed at navigating and surviving under such extreme conditions. Finally, we show how these strategic choices are shaped by distinct moral dispositions.

2. Street-level bureaucrats amid crisis, war, and armed conflict

As mentioned before, since Lipsky's seminal work (2010 [1980]), much of the research on SLBs has focused on understanding the key factors that shape their daily routines and their interactions with citizens (Gofen et al. 2024). SLBs have discretion to make decisions, interpreting and adapting guidelines to specific encounters (Brodkin 2011). SLBs judge the situations they

experience (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003) and their decisions are based on different personal, organizational and institutional factors (Cohen 2018; Hupe and Buffat 2014). Still, they work in very critical contexts, characterized by resource scarcity, ambiguity, workload, and different forms of pressure.

To deal with this critical scenario and make decisions systematically, SLBs develop different coping mechanisms (Lipsky 2010 [1980]). Coping is conceptualized as the efforts SLBs employ to master, tolerate or reduce the demands and conflicts they face every day (Tummers et al. 2015). At the same time, SLBs operate in ethically and morally demanding environments (Møller, Pedersen and Pors 2022) that force them to make discretionary decisions that have real consequences for citizens' lives. To deal with that, SLBs develop moral dispositions that enable them to cope with the moral tensions they face (Zacka 2017). Under these dispositions, SLBs may try to meet clients' needs, becoming a caregiver; may be disengaged with clients, becoming indifferent; or may upholds norms and procedures strictly, becoming an enforcer (ibid.).

Over the last few years, part of the literature observed these elements to explain SLBs under crises. Studies show that, during crises, SLBs' discretion tends to increase, as existing regulations and previous experiences may not address the new challenges they face (Hupe and Buffat 2014; Henderson 2014; Gofen and Lotta 2021). Crises heighten demand for services while simultaneously reducing resources, creating intense pressures and uncertainties (Dunlop et al. 2020). These dynamics disrupt governance, destabilize systems, and generate anxiety (Lotta et al. 2024), weakening leadership and triggering unpredictable shifts (Farazmand 2007). In such contexts, routine practices may become ineffective, forcing SLBs to develop additional coping mechanisms, such as to adapt, resist, or innovate (Brodkin 2021; Cox et al. 2021). Crises can further amplify the use of discretion, giving SLBs greater freedom to interpret and shape policies based on their personal values and worldviews (Strier et al. 2021). Moreover, crises amplify the moral dilemmas experienced by SLBs (Gofen and Lotta 2021) and may expose them to more political pressure (Lotta et al. 2022), especially when the crises are also related to institutional and democratic instability (Lotta et al. 2024; Piotrowska 2024).

Crises also tend to heighten conflicts between street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and politicians (Piotrowska, 2024; Lotta et al., 2024). As a result, SLBs may adopt a range of responses, including divergence and dissent (Gofen 2014), sabotage and shirking (Brehm & Gates 1997), or guerrilla strategies (O'Leary 2010). Several scholars have drawn on Hirschman's (2004 [1970]) classic typology to analyze these reactions. In a recent study, for instance, Piotrowska (2024) demonstrates that SLBs use their discretion to respond to political crises and conflicts directly or indirectly, *exiting* the services, using *voice* to protest or raise concerns about contentious situations, or remaining *loyal* to politicians by implementing their agendas.

Despite the usefulness of this literature, most of these insights about SLBs under crises have emerged from studies on the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, on democratic backsliding. While valuable, they may not fully capture the complexities of war and territorial conflicts, which present a distinct set of challenges that are present in many parts of the world. As we show further, a crucial difference is that, under conditions of war and military occupation, SLBs operate amid contested sovereignties and multiple, competing systems of authority and coexisting normative frameworks. This can generate profound dilemmas around identity, representation, and loyalty—raising questions about whom SLBs serve and under what mandates (or which state is s/he the face of).

Moreover, war and territorial conflicts destabilize institutional routines and undermine established regimes of accountability. This disruption increases bureaucratic discretion and forces SLBs to rely more heavily on personal values and judgments, heightening the risk of inconsistency, bias, and conflict in decision-making (Strier et al. 2021; Ramon et al. 2006). At the same time, wars and territorial conflicts increase the stress of making numerous decisions in uncertain, volatile environments may exacerbate SLBs' anxiety, especially when dealing with threats such as bombings, sectarian violence, service disruptions, border crossings, as well as the lack of support from higher authorities (Ramon et al. 2006).

In these contexts, SLBs often encounter morally ambiguous situations in which *de facto* laws may conflict with professional ethics or human rights norms. Amid state institutional erosion, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants may become blurred or even collapse altogether (Kaldor 2007). War zones generate unique moral demands and normative spaces (Eikenaar 2023), which can shape specific moral dispositions (Zacka 2017). Their moral referents—such as the state, their peers, the population, or even the enemy—may shift significantly amid the moral complexities of wartime, compelling them to navigate competing ethical demands and expectations (Eikenaar 2023). SLBs are required to make highly consequential decisions under largely unknown conditions, with a broad scope of discretion they neither anticipated nor were trained for (ibid., p. 76). To cope emotionally with the violent setting and the impossibility to resolve the situation, many SLBs "normalize the abnormal," drawing resilience from their continued efforts to provide services amid ongoing conflict (Ramon et al. 2006). Like soldiers, SLBs in wars may face situations that violate their moral beliefs and expectations—the so-called "moral injuries." To cope, they may justify or rationalize their conduct, for instance by appealing to rules and instructions (see Molendijk 2024).

Given these specificities—and in light of the increasing prevalence of conflict zones globally—we argue that current scholarship on SLBs under crisis conditions has yet to adequately theorize how wars and armed conflict shape street-level work. Wars are not merely another form of disruption: they transform the very foundations of public service delivery, legitimacy, and moral

agency. This paper seeks to fill this gap by focusing on how SLBs navigate the complex ethical, moral, and practical challenges they face in conflict settings.

3. Research design

To investigate how war and territorial conflicts affect the work of SLB and their coping strategies, we adopted an abductive research design that integrates theoretical inquiry and empirical exploration (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). We started by reviewing the literature on street-level bureaucrats, with a focus on two key analytical dimensions: (a) the coping strategies employed by SLBs in both routine and crisis settings; and (b) the development of moral dispositions in street-level work. This initial theoretical engagement helped us identify core constructs and sensitizing concepts that informed the subsequent empirical phase.

Building on this foundation, we then conducted a semi-remote ethnography. Throughout the process, we moved back and forth between the empirical material and theoretical literature, refining our understanding of the coping practices and moral reasoning of SLBs operating in conflict-affected environments. This abductive logic allowed us not only to test and extend existing concepts, but also to remain open to the emergence of new insights grounded in the lived realities of street-level bureaucrats under war.

Our case selection was guided by the logic of extreme case sampling. Such cases, characterized by atypical and significant values on key dependent or independent variables, offer productive entry points for research in underexplored areas (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 301–302). Ukraine—marked by a localized Russian invasion in 2014 and a full-scale invasion in 2022—fits this criterion.

Data collection

To collect and process data, we adopted a semi-remote ethnographic method in three stages. Ethnographic methods are particularly valuable for exploratory studies, as they enable the identification, observation, and analysis of emerging or underexplored phenomena. Recent studies have demonstrated that remote ethnography is especially useful in adverse and high-risk contexts, such as armed conflicts (Fosu 2024) and pandemics (O'Quinn 2024).

In the first stage, initiated in January 2024, we conducted a comprehensive literature review on the impact of war on Ukrainian SLBs operating in territories occupied by Russia. The following sources were examined:

- Reports and interviews from Ukrainian, Russian, and European media outlets;
- Reports produced by international and Ukrainian human rights organizations;

- Normative directives by Ukrainian and Russian state agencies.

The analysis of these documents enabled a preliminary coding of the war's impacts and the coping strategies adopted by SLBs. However, since these materials are based on secondary data sources—deeply embedded in political pressures, power relations, and the intense polarization between rival actors in the context of war—conducting interviews with education professionals (including in-person) became essential. The preliminary coding also informed the design of the interview guides.

In the second stage, we conducted semi-structured online interviews (ranging from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours) and in-depth interviews (ranging from 1.5 to 3 hours) with eight SLBs. These interviews included open-ended questions about the challenges faced by educators and the coping strategies they developed (see interview guides in Appendix 2). The main selection criteria were: (a) having been an active education professional during the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion or the 2014 invasion, and (b) having lived for at least one month in a Russian-occupied territory, but currently residing in a Ukrainian-controlled area. Interviewees were selected through the snowball sampling method, which involved reaching out to Ukrainian scholars and organizations embedded in the local context. These scholars and institutions acted as gatekeepers or intermediaries—a critical role in ethnographic research involving hard-to-reach populations (Dunlap and Johnson 1998). We maintained both remote and in-person contact (e.g., at international conferences) with Ukrainian researchers studying the occupation, as well as with administrative staff from a state university that had been relocated from an occupied territory.

For ethical and security reasons, we did not interview SLBs currently residing in occupied territories—a limitation to the scope of our findings. To mitigate this, we analyzed interviews these professionals gave to Russian media outlets. To partially address this gap, we analyzed public interviews these professionals gave to Russian media outlets. Nonetheless, given the power asymmetries inherent in occupation contexts, even public statements or interactions between SLBs and occupying authorities may have been shaped by coercion. We also asked our interviewees about their peers who remained under occupation, while acknowledging that these second-hand accounts may be biased.

In the third stage, we conducted fieldwork in Ukraine over a three-week period between February and March 2025, visiting six regions with varying degrees of proximity to the frontline: Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kyiv (Bucha), Kyiv City, Mykolaiv (including areas that experienced nine months of occupation in 2022), and Odesa. We had the opportunity to meet in person with a school principal and a university director previously interviewed.

In total, during this new stage, we conducted 15 in-person interviews and 2 remote interviews. We also visited educational institutions located just a few kilometers from the frontline, including some that had been partially or completely destroyed and others that had experienced occupation.

The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee, and all interviewees received informed consent. All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently anonymized.

The category "education professionals" in this study includes school principals, school teachers, university administrators, university teachers, and municipal officials responsible for the education sector. While these are distinct professional roles, the occupying forces—as we will discuss later— employed similar strategies to recruit them into the new administration and to instrumentalize both their roles and their social (street-level) embeddedness in efforts to legitimize the occupation and forcibly assimilate the local population. As a result, the wartime impacts and coping strategies of these SLBs displayed notable similarities. Given their high level of expertise, we also interviewed three representatives of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations specializing in education.

The graphs (Figures 1 and 2) below show the distribution of the 25 interviewees[1] by profession and region. The regions of Kherson and Mykolaiv accounted for the largest share of respondents—both include localities that experienced approximately nine months of occupation before being liberated. Sixteen percent of interviewees lived under occupation in 2014, and 76% in 2022.

Figure 1. Interviewees by professional area

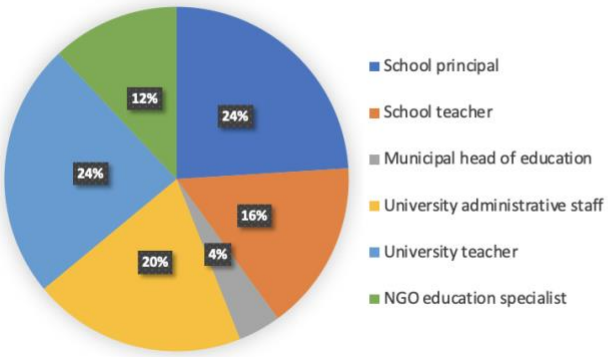
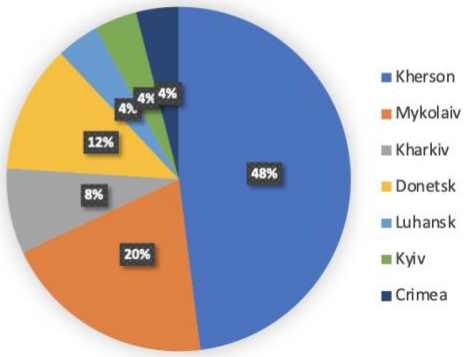


Figure 2. Interviewees by region



Source: authors.

Several important caveats must be noted regarding the scope of this data collection. Due to our limited access to the perspectives of education professionals currently living under occupation, our study does not fully capture the range of coping strategies. To a large extent, our findings reflect the early months of occupation—primarily in 2022, and to a lesser extent in 2014—a context that

[1] While a total of 55 Ukrainians were interviewed during the course of the research, this article focuses exclusively on education professionals.

may differ significantly from later phases in which the occupation became more consolidated. Additionally, the use of the snowball sampling method, which tends to involve individuals with similar characteristics, may have led to findings that are relatively homogeneous. To address this, we aimed to achieve greater saturation by reaching a sufficiently large number of respondents and by interviewing educators from different regions, contacted diverse actors and organizations, and working across various sectors of the educational system. We conducted interviews until no new themes or insights emerged from the data, indicating thematic saturation.

To validate and process the data, we employed various triangulation strategies. Through methodological triangulation, we compared the results of the document analysis with the findings from interviews and fieldwork. Reports of coercion against educators found in documents from humanitarian organizations were consistent with accounts provided during interviews – in presenting the results, we prioritized our primary data sources. In source triangulation, we presented accounts from individuals across different professional categories within the education sector on the same topics. Finally, through investigator triangulation during the data analysis phase, we sought to reduce potential bias. Given that the authors have varying forms of involvement with the research topic, we included a positionality statement in Appendix 1.

Data Analysis

After analyzing the literature, we coded all the collected data based on the two research questions, and, therefore, aimed to observe four elements: 1) the occupying state strategy; 2) the impacts of war on SLBs; 3) the coping mechanisms they adopt and 4) the moral dispositions that support the coping mechanisms.

Following the abductive process and drawing on Schreier (2012) and the preliminary codes developed in the second stage, we created coding frames with categories and subcategories to organize the data collected through document analysis and interviews. Using the summative content analysis technique (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), codes and keywords were established both prior to and during the data analysis process. As displayed in Table 1, through our integrative analysis, we identified 15 first-order codes, which we organized into four second-order categories. We then returned to the literature to examine the similarities and differences between our findings and existing theories of street-level bureaucracy, identifying key contributions to understanding how war affects SLBs and shapes their coping strategies.

In line with ethnographic standards and our commitment to faithfully represent the voices and experiences of those who lived through the war, we included a broad range of extended interview quotes, where SLBs reflect on their decisions in their own terms. While we do not attempt to quantify the relative weight of personal characteristics, roles, or resources, our analysis points to their

significance in shaping coping strategies. This richer narrative foundation provides a more nuanced and human-centered basis for the subsequent analysis of wars' impacts, SLB coping strategies, and moral dispositions.

Table 1. First and Second-Order Codes

Second-Order Codes	First-Order Codes	Description	Codification Process
Occupying State Strategies	Coercion	The use or threat of force to pressure SLBs into complying with the occupying regime's directives.	Pre-Analysis
	Co-optation	The strategic incorporation of SLBs into the occupiers' administrative apparatus through material and career incentives.	Post-Analysis
War Impacts on SLBs	Forced Interaction with Enemy Actors	The obligation of SLBs to engage with military or civilian representatives of the occupying power as part of their professional duties.	Pre-Analysis
	Institutional *Bellicization* and Political Weaponization	The transformation of routine public service roles into tools of wartime control, identity politics, and territorial consolidation.	Post-Analysis
	Loyalty Dilemma and Double Victimization	The moral and political dilemma of choosing between loyalty to the *de jure* state and coerced alignment with the occupier, often resulting in exposure to retaliation from both sides.	Pre-Analysis
	Bureaucratic Rupture and Improvised Restructuration	The abrupt disruption of institutional routines and hierarchies, followed by competing states' improvised efforts to restore basic administrative functioning.	Pre-Analysis
SLB Coping Strategies	Exit	The decision of SLBs to leave occupied territories and their duties.	Pre-Analysis
	Accommodation	The adoption of survival strategies that involve compliance with the occupying power.	Pre-Analysis
	Local Defiance	Subtle or covert acts of resistance by SLBs aimed at undermining the occupiers' agenda.	Pre-Analysis
	Remote Adaptation	Adjustments in work practices and service delivery from outside the occupied zone, enabled by online tools.	Post-Analysis
SLB Moral Dispositions	Self-Preservation / Well-Being	A moral disposition in which decisions are guided primarily by concerns for personal safety, psychological health, and physical integrity.	Pre-Analysis
	Commitment to Service Provision and Community Well-Being	The ethical drive to continue delivering public services despite war-related risks, institutional breakdown, and occupation.	Post-Analysis
	Loyalty to the *de jure* State	An enduring identification with and allegiance to the internationally recognized Ukrainian state and its institutions.	Pre-Analysis
	Affiliation with the *de facto* State	A pragmatic or ideological alignment with the occupying authority as the immediate source of power and control.	Pre-Analysis
	Search for Institutional Stability	Efforts by SLBs to re-establish predictable structures and routines in the midst of administrative collapse and wartime uncertainty.	Post-Analysis

Source: authors.

4. Findings

In this section, we present our findings, divided into two parts: a macro-level analysis of the structural impacts of war on street-level bureaucracy, and a micro-level analysis of the coping strategies adopted by SLBs to mitigate these impacts, as well as the moral dispositions they draw upon to justify their decisions.

4.1 The Impacts of War on Teachers and Education Professionals: Macro-Level Analysis of Structural Factors

Drawing on the abductive process – coming from the theory to the data and back to the theory – we identified four structural factors that differentiate the work of SLBs in wartime from their roles in other types of crises and under normal times. These factors help illuminate not only the distinctiveness of the environment under war but also the exceptional dynamics that shape public service delivery under extreme conditions.

Forced Interaction with Enemy State Actors

In military occupations, SLBs must engage directly with enemy military personnel and administrative agents operating under the authority of the occupying power. These interactions are highly asymmetrical and often underpinned by the implicit or explicit use of force. Due to their prior affiliation with the legitimate state, SLBs are perceived as potential sources of resistance or disloyalty, which heightens their vulnerability and increases threats to their physical safety. They are caught between the suspicion of the occupiers and the expectations of the local population, who may see them either as "intermediaries" or as potential "traitors" to the legitimate state. This dual exposure renders their position both precarious and politically charged.

In the case of Ukraine, Russian occupying forces employed simultaneous strategies of coercion and co-optation to recruit SLBs. Education professionals—particularly school principals—were primary targets, viewed as potential brokers for persuading teachers to comply with the new regime. One school principal recalled—with a tense voice and an expression marked by bitterness—that meetings with the occupation administration were held in the presence of heavily armed officers, reinforcing an atmosphere of intimidation:

> At that time, it was a moment when you had to think for yourself: should I go or not? But I'm the kind of person who needs to know how my enemy breathes, in order to understand what steps I should take next. So, I had to listen and draw some conclusions. I went to that meeting. There weren't many school principals — just over half showed up. The rest had either already left for Ukrainian-controlled territory or gone abroad. [...] So the principals came, and *** started talking about how it was necessary to organize education in [our community]. He said children have nothing to do with political wars — children must

> study. [...] He said that all schools, kindergartens, extracurricular institutions must open. The war should not affect children's education in [our community]. 'You're receiving salaries from Ukraine, but you'll get enormous salaries from Russia.' [...] But I know what teachers in Russia actually earn [...]. How can teachers in Russia earn one salary, and we're supposed to receive five times more? He said: 'Don't give your answer now. You'll get a call, and then you'll say which schools will open and which won't. But I hope all of them will open.' [...] Then this other man *** came to my school — with armed soldiers [...]. They came to me with rifles in hand. Talking about 'good deeds', saying I must open the school, because mine was a leading school, and if I did, all the other principals would follow.

The prospect of direct contact with the occupying forces created a pervasive atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Another school principal, speaking with sorrow, recounted her experience under occupation:

> At that time I lived in fear. I woke up in fear, I went to bed in fear, I couldn't sleep. […] The worst part was the fear that they would break down your door and that there would be lawlessness. There were many cases of rape and murder. And a lot of people disappeared—just vanished without a trace. […] The second fear I had was that the occupation might last forever.

As these accounts illustrate, SLBs operating in wartime are compelled to transcend the boundaries of routine bureaucratic functions and interactions. Their role extends beyond policy implementation to encompass high-stakes political decision-making under physical threat, the navigation of shifting loyalties, and strategic engagement with representatives of occupying or enemy forces.

Institutional Bellicization and Political Weaponization

SLBs are essential actors in ensuring state legitimacy, territorial control, and the interaction between the population and the higher levels of the state bureaucracy (Sager and Gofen 2022). Previous studies showed how they can be politically instrumentalized by different actors in order to increase their legitimacy and control, especially when democratic institutions are under risks (Lotta, Piotrowska and Raaphorst 2024; Piotrowska 2024). This process of politicization also occurs under war, though it assumes distinctive characteristics. SLBs undergo a process of *bellicization*—they are incorporated into the logics of warfare, not through direct combat, but by being framed, targeted, or coerced as strategic actors within the occupying power's apparatus of control. Simultaneously, SLBs are politically *weaponized*: transformed into instruments of coercion, indoctrination, and symbolic domination. In this process, their very national affiliation and loyalties are targeted by the occupiers' identity politics. Amid contested sovereignties and blurred identity boundaries, they may become both victims and instruments of the occupying state's agenda.

In occupied Ukraine, the *bellicization* of SLBs radically redefined the role of education professionals, turning them from public service providers into ideological agents and objects of forced assimilation. After the end of the Ukrainian academic year in April–May 2022, pressure on education professionals escalated as the Russian authorities prepared for a September referendum to annex the occupied territories (Honchar 2022; United Nations 2024). One school principal who resisted Russian directives described this escalation with a visibly tense demeanor:

> [...] they didn't touch us until June. [...] That evening, the [other] principal gave passionate toasts in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and for victory. In July, all the Telegram channels started reporting that s/he was opening a Russian school. After that, everything changed. [...] At the beginning of August, a man arrived with armed soldiers, other men, and a woman [...]. He ordered us to urgently hand over all the keys, all the classrooms, and the personal records of the students. Those men, carrying bags, walked toward the wall, guarded by armed soldiers. They pushed aside our deputy principals and took all the student files into those bags. And the woman said in a certain tone: "Sorry, ***, but it's not me — I'm not to blame. I was told to take your offices." [...] The teachers were, of course, shocked. [...] They [the occupying authorities] took all our documents and prohibited us from approaching the building. Two locksmiths changed all the door locks and keys.

Reopening schools under the Russian curriculum became a key political objective. This involved mandatory instruction in Russian, the use of state-approved textbooks aligned with Russian official war narratives, and the removal of Ukrainian educational content. The strategy behind this process was multifaceted: the reopening of educational institutions serves as a signal of stability and control; the delivery of public goods may further legitimize the occupying regime (Hechter and Vidal-Aparicio 2010); teachers, especially in rural areas, are influential community figures capable of shaping public attitudes; and schools are perceived as long-term tools for cultivating loyal subjects and shaping collective identity (Weber 1976; Anderson 1983). As one education policy expert, who also experienced the 2014 occupation, explained:

> [...] the textbooks used to teach children from the first grade already instill in children the belief that they are Russians [...]. The idea is to turn the population into a loyal one, and that's why they work with children [...]. Even in kindergartens, Russian military personnel are invited, the *Yunarmiya* (Youth Army) is present. [...] Children wear military uniforms, take part in drills, competitions, and sing war songs.

International human rights organizations have extensively documented the *bellicization* of SLBs and the *weaponization* of education in occupied Ukraine, citing practices such as political indoctrination, forced cultural assimilation (Russification), re-education, militarization, and the erasure of Ukrainian language and identity, and the coercion against teachers (United Nations 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024; Amnesty International 2024; Ombudsman of Ukraine 2024). These claims are supported by our online observations of school activities in occupied areas over a year:

social media posts reveal children in military uniforms, praising Russian military figures, drawing parallels between the Ukrainian government and Nazism, waving Russian flags, and singing the Russian national anthem. Ukrainian authorities and interviewees also reported the removal and destruction of Ukrainian textbooks and literature books—some listed as "extremist" in official Russian registries (Shynkarenko 2023). Thus, while in Ukraine the imposition of a Russian educational system in occupied territories is perceived as an attempt to erase Ukrainian identity, Russian mass media portray it as a liberation from "Nazi" and "Russophobic" educational ideologies—simultaneously denying that these territories and their inhabitants are Ukrainian (see Yemelyanov 2022; Krym Inform 2022).[2]

The political weaponization of education is not exclusive to the Ukrainian context. Raphael Lemkin (2008 [1944]: 84–85), the jurist who coined the term "genocide", described how the Nazi regime systematically instrumentalized schools and teachers to carry out "cultural genocide" in occupied territories—through political indoctrination and the repression of languages, identities, and local artistic expressions.

In sum, the *bellicization* of SLBs reconfigures them as strategic instruments of war, collapsing the normative distinction between everyday street-level bureaucratic routines and the high politics of conflict. In the context of institutional disintegration and shifting sovereignties, it also blurs the conventional boundary between civilian and military roles (see Kaldor 2007; Eikenaar 2023), positioning SLBs within the broader architecture of wartime governance.

Loyalty Dilemma and Double Victimization

In contexts of military occupation—characterized by contested sovereignties and competing normative frameworks—SLBs are compelled to navigate high-stakes trade-offs and complex moral dilemmas. Although previous SLB studies highlight the moral dilemmas as part of their daily routine (Zacka 2017), we found that in military occupations these dilemmas are different both in terms of degree and of content. This is because SLBs in these contexts must either remain loyal to the *de jure* state—refusing to cooperate with the occupying regime, at great personal risk—or agree to serve under the *de facto* authorities/ state, thereby exposing themselves to potential stigmatization and legal consequences for "treason" or "collaboration". War, in this sense, compels SLBs to take sides, pushing their identities, national affiliations, and discretionary authority into a deeply politicized terrain. We conceptualize this

[2] Political pressures for self-censorship and compliance with official state narratives are also observable in Ukrainian-controlled territories.

compelled choice—under extreme conditions—between allegiance to two competing states as *loyalty dilemma*.

Under this dilemma, SLBs are subject to sanctions from both states. This condition constitutes a form of *double victimization*, in which bureaucrats are penalized no matter their course of action—whether through loyalty to the *de jure* state or cooperating with the occupying regime.

The *bellicization* and political weaponization of the education sector places SLBs in particularly vulnerable positions. According to interviewees, many resisted initially by boycotting occupation-led meetings. In response, Russian officials and co-opted local personnel intensified coercive tactics. These included threats, intimidatory meetings in the presence of heavily armed soldiers, home and workplace searches, and abductions followed by extrajudicial detention, interrogation, beatings, and torture in so-called *pidvaly* (basements)—improvised facilities unfit for human habitation (see United Nations 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024; Amnesty International 2024). A report by the Zmina Human Rights Center (Okhotnikova et al. 2023) documented the abduction of at least 30 education professionals under such circumstances.

Some were detained for days and later forced either to pledge loyalty to the occupiers or to resign and leave the occupied territory—if permitted. Two school principals recounted being arrested by masked and heavily armed officers. Held in a *pidval* for refusing to implement Russian directives, they were accused of promoting a “foreign” curriculum on "Russian territory" and were threatened with long-term imprisonment. One university teacher who had participated in public protests against the occupiers gave the following testimony, showing visible signs of unease while recalling the events and noting that it was the first time he had shared this story in an interview:

> They took me directly to the *pidval* [basement]. [...] The cell was smaller than this couch. There were three of us inside. It was summer, and the temperature inside reached around 67°C. There was one ventilation pipe with an incandescent bulb inside—that was the only source of air. The light was on all the time. They didn’t give us water. [...] No food. For the bathroom—some were taken, others weren’t. And you just stayed there, with no idea if it was day or night. [...] They further said: ‘Now we’re going to execute you.’ They put plastic bags over my heads, took us somewhere, and said: ‘You're about to be shot.’ [...] Everything was designed to break you psychologically.

Across the front line, Ukrainian authorities issued stern legal warnings. Enacting Russian directives was deemed “collaboration” under Articles 111-1 (“On Collaborative Activity”) and 111-2 (“On Assistance to the Aggressor State”) of the Ukrainian Criminal Code (Verkhovna Rada 2022). These provisions stipulated penalties of six to twelve years of imprisonment for middle-rank employees, such as school principals, deputy principals, and administrators.

To summarize, as our data showed, loyalty dilemma is one of the most acute challenges faced by SLBs in wartime governance. Every choice entails risks—legal, physical, and reputational. SLBs

confront a profound disjunction between "formal delegated authority" from the *de jure* state and "practiced discretion" required by the *de facto* regime (see Hupe 2013), heightening the tension between institutional duty and personal survival.

Bureaucratic Rupture and Improvised Restructuration amid Competing Normative Frameworks

As in other crises, military occupation produces a marked rupture in bureaucratic stability (Gofen and Lotta 2021). However, in this case, the lack of stability has other sources and consequences, as the absence of effective territorial control by the legitimate state disrupts the ordinary functioning of administrative structures and procedures, generating institutional discontinuity and operational uncertainty.

In Ukraine, technologies have allowed for partial deterritorialization of communication flows between SLBs and higher bureaucratic levels. However, without physical access to territory, such flows were obstructed and yield limited outcomes in terms of effective public service delivery. This disconnection gave rise to recurring uncertainties related to the payment of salaries, distribution of resources, procedures, and discretion.

Unable to exercise authority directly, the *de jure* state has to improvise new channels of communication with local administrative levels. This restructuring is contingent on the dynamics of armed conflict, territorial fluidity, and the destruction of institutional infrastructure. Although SLBs are accustomed to operating with some functional autonomy, the centralization of control inherent to wartime governance restricts the "delegated authority" (Hupe and Hill 2007) and reinforces vertical command structures.

At the same time, the occupying power—despite having *de facto* control—must also build its own administrative architecture, often in unfamiliar territory, facing local resistance and operating outside its sociocultural frame of reference. Institutional adaptation under these conditions is highly improvised and vulnerable to uncertainty (Hechter and Vidal-Aparicio 2010). Strategies of coercion and cooptation are aimed at severing the SLBs' remaining ties to the legitimate state and placing them under the authority of the occupier.

Regardless of the moral or legal order SLBs choose to follow, their actions take place in a setting marked by normative ambiguity and administrative vacuums. Relations with the legitimate state become unstable; institutional support fragments; and state authority, once taken for granted, is eroded. A further layer of uncertainty stems from strategic indeterminacy: the unclear trajectory of the war and the possibility of the legitimate state's return. If ambiguity characterizes many times frontline work (Matland 1995), in this case, this type of ambiguity renders loyalty dilemma even more complex.

In Ukraine, education professionals used to operate within a coherent political-legal framework, requiring knowledge of national, regional, and local bureaucratic systems. Following the invasion, they were abruptly forced to engage with the newly installed *de facto* authorities. Resource allocation soon became a critical concern. Russian occupying forces shut down Ukrainian banks, gradually introduced the Russian currency, and disrupted communications, cutting partially off access to Ukrainian digital platforms and financial transactions. Interviewees emphasized that some partially functional systems operating online were vital to receive resources and survive without working for the occupying regime. When teaching became impossible, educators were placed on *prostii*, a furlough system guaranteeing two-thirds of their salary. A former school teacher (now school principal) observed that the availability of resources depended both on the local infrastructure and the coordination between the school's administrative staff and the higher levels of the educational bureaucracy.

> [At the very beginning of the occupation] all basic human necessities were absent: there was no electricity, no communication, and we had to hide our mobile phones. [...] At that time, we still had our bank cards, and somehow — either through the people who delivered food — we asked them, gave them the cards, and they were still able to withdraw money in [the city] for a certain period. [...] I, having left [after a couple months in occupation], reached out to our [educational] department. Thanks to them, we were able to organize the *prostii* payments for people, because it was practically impossible to survive without anything. These payments were organized — even if they were small, because *prostii* is not a full salary, but people were receiving something. [...] For those [initial] five months, people were practically left with nothing, without salaries. [...] Because, unfortunately, the previous principal remained under occupation, and for certain reasons was unable to leave; he couldn't arrange it. And I, at that time, was not yet in charge.

In wartime, territorial control emerges as a critical variable reshaping the everyday work of street-level bureaucrats. Institutional routines are disrupted and professionals must navigate heightened operational uncertainties, physical risks, and acute moral dilemmas in contexts where state authority is fluid and contingent on the trajectory of the conflict.

Table 2 summarizes the key structural impacts identified above. It is worth noting that across all of these impacts, typical challenges that affect SLBs with greater intensity during crises and dysfunctional contexts—such as physical risks, acute moral dilemmas, bureaucratic politicization, uncertainty, and ambiguous discretionary space—were also present. The following section provides additional examples that illustrate these structural impacts in practice.

Table 2. War's Structural Impacts on Street Level Bureaucrats

War's Structural Impacts on SLB	Key Features	Ukrainian Case
Forced Interaction with Enemy State Actors	SLBs interact with enemy actors under asymmetrical conditions, facing strategies of both coercion and co-optation.	School principals summoned by armed occupiers; pressure to open schools under Russian curriculum.
Institutional *Bellicization* and Political Weaponization	SLBs are reframed as political agents; used as a tool of indoctrination and regime control.	Use of education to promote pro-Russian narratives; students enrolled in militarized activities.
Loyalty Dilemma and Double Victimization	SLBs must choose between loyalty to the *de jure* state or cooperation with the occupier (*de facto* state)—each with severe personal consequences.	Education professionals pressured by both Russian and Ukrainian authorities.
Bureaucratic Rupture and Improvised Restructuration amid Competing Normative Frameworks	SLBs operate amid the collapse of institutional routines, unstable and improvised governance, blurred legal authority, and competing systems of authority.	Unclear legal frameworks, salary disruptions, and institutional fragmentation.

Source: authors.

4.2 Teachers and Education Professionals Reactions to War Impacts: Micro-Level Analysis of Coping Strategies and Moral Dispositions

As demonstrated above, war reshapes the strategic, institutional, and moral landscape in which SLBs operate, necessitating a revised coping typology that accounts for the unique pressures of militarized and contested governance. To understand how SLBs respond to these pressures, we developed a typology based on two core decisions: (a) whether to remain in or leave the occupied territory, and (b) whether to engage or not politically against the occupying forces. These two decisions capture the core dilemmas SLBs face under occupation, as they directly reflect both territorial and political alignment in a context of contested authority. From this matrix, we identify four primary coping strategies (see Figure 3): exit, accommodation, remote adaptation, and local defiance.

Figure 3. Typology of Street Level Bureaucrats' Coping Strategies in Wars and Military Occupations

		POLITICAL RESISTANCE AGAINST THE OCCUPATION	
		NO	YES
PERMANENCE IN THE TERRITORY	NO	EXIT	REMOTE ADAPTATION
	YES	ACCOMMODATION	LOCAL DEFIANCE

Source: authors.

Each strategy will be detailed later. This typology partially echoes Hirschman's (2004 [1970]) classic framework on organizational decline, which centers on the categories of *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty*. In our adaptation, the "exit" strategy aligns closely with Hirschman's original formulation, while "remote adaptation" and "local defiance" may be interpreted as divergent forms of loyalty, albeit under radically different conditions of coercion and occupation. A key innovation of our model, however, is the explicit incorporation of territoriality—linking political positioning to the relationship with territory.

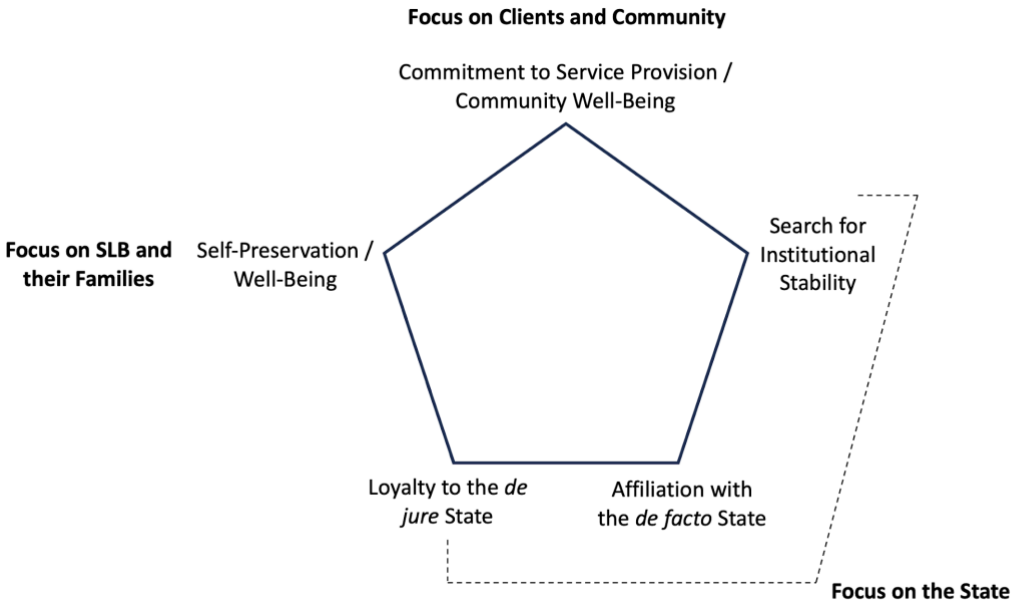
Analyzing the reasoning behind each type of coping strategy, our findings revealed five recurring moral dispositions that SLBs drew upon to make sense of their coping decisions. These dispositions function as interpretive schemas through which bureaucrats assign ethical meaning to their actions (Zacka 2017):

a) Commitment to service provision and community well-being: decisions grounded in concern for the welfare of policy beneficiaries.
b) Self-preservation / well-being: decisions oriented toward preserving personal safety and securing welfare conditions for the SLB and their families.
c) Loyalty to the *de jure* state: actions justified by legality, patriotism, and national-identity affiliation.
d) Affiliation with the *de facto* state: actions mobilized by political, ideological, or cultural identification with the occupying state.
e) Search for institutional stability: an expressed indifference toward sovereignty, as long as day-to-day routines remain predictable and functional.

As illustrated in Figure 4, these moral dispositions tend to cluster around three primary referents: the public service clientele, the SLBs themselves (and their families), and the state—whether *de jure* or *de facto*. These orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive; many individuals invoke more than one disposition when justifying their actions, underscoring the ethical

complexity of bureaucratic work under occupation. Moreover, in wartime, the moral referents of SLBs may undergo significant shifts (see Eikenaar 2023). While in peacetime their ethical orientation tends to center on the relationship with clients, conflict settings elevate other referents—such as personal and familial survival—to greater prominence. As SLBs navigate the structural pressures of war, these overlapping considerations may give rise to competing moral claims and difficult trade-offs within the scope of their discretionary autonomy.

Figure 4. Street Level Bureaucrats' Moral Dispositions in Wars and Military Occupations



Source: authors.

Two of the moral dispositions identified in this study echo the categories proposed by Zacka (2017): "commitment to service provision" aligns with a "caregiving" orientation, while "loyalty to the *de jure* state" is akin to "enforcement". Three dispositions are new and, most of all, findings show that all of them were developed with the specific challenges of wartime in mind.

In the sections below, we analyze each of the four coping strategies emphasizing the dominant moral dispositions mobilized by education professionals in wars.

Exit

The exit strategy—leaving the occupied territory and refraining from political resistance against occupying forces—is primarily associated with a disposition toward *self-preservation / well-being*, but also reflects continued *loyalty to the de jure state*. Relocating to another region or country offers a safer alternative in light of life-threatening risks and challenges posed by forced interaction

with enemy state actors, the *bellicization* and political weaponization of bureaucracy, loyalty dilemma, bureaucratic rupture, and a wide range of uncertainties. However, opting for exit is rarely simple. It requires careful consideration of both personal safety and the feasibility of reinsertion in a new location. Access to housing, employment, income, and social support networks are all critical conditions.

In Ukraine, many education professionals chose to leave once pressures and threats intensified. One school teacher explained her decision to leave in a deeply emotional tone:

> They passed down the streets in military vehicles, armed, entering houses while armed. They searched everything... It was a horrible situation. You see a dirty soldier in boots walking around your home, throwing your things to the floor, scattering them, going through your personal belongings, demanding your phone, searching everything. They looked at your photos... I don't know what they were trying to find. It was terrifying. And the last thing—what made me leave [the occupation]—was when they looked at my mother and said: 'Take care of her.' Maybe it was a threat, like next time they would do something worse.

A university teacher who experienced the occupation of Crimea shared a similar story, also in an emotionally charged tone. She chose to leave after learning that she was under surveillance by Russian security agencies:

> I had an elderly mother. I had to make a very difficult decision, but when real threats began to appear, I realized I could be arrested [...]. Then I really did notice I was being followed. Then I was fired. Then came the pressure. [...] So, in October 2014, the decision was made — we left with almost no money. I had just enough to rent an apartment for two months. I didn't know where I would work, or what would happen to me after those two months. [...] I understood that I had two months—and after that, I would be living at the train station. [...]. And I'm very thankful to those friends who started sending me job opportunities. Thanks to that, I was at least able to pay for housing. I still have dreams where I'm sleeping in a cardboard box at the Kyiv train station because I can't survive. And that's why, when people ask me for advice—whether to leave or not—I say: don't go. You need tremendous strength and a deep will to survive.

As these testimonies show, the decision to leave is often shaped by emotional and practical concerns. It is more feasible when individuals can count on relatives or friends in safer areas, access to social networks, and sufficient resources to support resettlement.

The Ukrainian government encouraged the evacuation of occupied and frontline areas. Early in the war, temporary humanitarian corridors were established. In March 2022, the Ministry of Education issued a decree instructing municipalities to prioritize hiring displaced teachers and to support displaced students (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2022). As discussed earlier, in some cases displaced educators could also apply for the *prostii* leave. Since 2014, modest monthly cash transfers for internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been in place.

Exit amid wars involves also significant logistical risks. Humanitarian corridors were often unsafe, with documented cases of violence and even killings. People had to organize their own

evacuations, crossing dozens of checkpoints where Russian soldiers conducted inspections and filtration procedures.

As evidenced by these examples, the exit strategy is predominantly driven by a moral disposition toward self-preservation and well-being. It involves assessments concerning personal safety, perceived risks, and the prospects of integration in the new environment.

Accommodation

The accommodation strategy—remaining in the occupied territory without engaging in political resistance against the occupying forces—is arguably the most morally complex coping strategy. It involves four of the five moral dispositions identified earlier and amplifies the tensions arising from key wartime impacts, such as the *bellicization* and political weaponization of bureaucracy, loyalty dilemma, double victimization, and bureaucratic rupture. Due to the specific nature of SLBs' interactions with occupation authorities, accommodation is also a highly controversial strategy—closely linked to what much of the conflict studies and historical literature refer to as *collaborationism.*

The concept of *collaborationism* is often laden with normative judgments that obscure the lived complexities of occupied communities (Tönsmeyer 2015; Buschmeier 2024). To move beyond normative simplifications, we examine the various moral dispositions that inform SLBs' decisions to adopt accommodation. This analytical lens allows us to distinguish between two subtypes: engaged accommodation and passive accommodation.

Engaged Accommodation

Engaged accommodation refers to cases in which SLBs actively participate in the occupying state's direct efforts to establish an administrative structure and to legitimize the new order. This choice is typically associated with the moral disposition of "affiliation with the *de facto* state", whereby SLBs perceive the new status of the territory positively—either due to prior ideological or identity-based affinities with the occupying state, or as a response to dissatisfaction with the pre-occupation political context.

In Ukraine, and particularly in Kherson region, few education professionals openly embraced engaged accommodation. Due to the historical experience of Russian occupation since 2014, educational SLBs were generally aware of the political weaponization of education as a tool for legitimizing occupation and promoting the forced assimilation of children. Most interviewees emphasized that instances of engaged accommodation were rare. While this perception might reflect

the underreporting of collaboration typical in national historiographies, direct statements from individuals who adopted this strategy also corroborate its low prevalence. One teacher who did engage with the occupying administration was tasked with reorganizing the local education system. Prior to the full-scale invasion of 2022, she had publicly supported Moscow's ideological and identity-based projects and was under criminal investigation by Ukrainian authorities. In her interviews with Russian media, both her "affiliation with the *de facto* state" moral disposition and the limited support she received from her peers are evident:

> Some didn't understand what happened, and some were afraid. Fear was the main reason for "non-participation." Half of those who believe that "Ukraine is Europe" sincerely believe it. It is possible to persuade some, but others not. [...] Half of my colleagues, with whom I worked for 15-20 years, were even friends, did not understand my choice. They called me a traitor to my face. [...] Some people from my former close circle went away. Some hid and are still awaiting the "return" of the former [Ukrainian] authorities. [...] Many good specialists, teachers, and school principals fell victim to [Ukrainian] propaganda. This is a loss for us. We miss them very much. [...] We tried to persuade them. [...] But they hid; they were afraid. Only a few are working now. (Yemelyanov 2022)

As noted in the methodological section, for ethical reasons we did not interview SLBs currently living under occupation, which limits our direct access to the moral dispositions behind engaged accommodation. However, when we asked our interviewees to talk about their peers' motivations, most did not emphasize ideological or identity alignment, but rather pointed to "self-well-being" as a disposition—including aspirations for career advancement and material benefits. Beyond coercive tactics, the Russian occupation forces also employed co-optation strategies, offering significantly higher salaries than those paid by Ukraine, financial bonuses, and administrative positions. The first citizens and SLB to support the occupying regime were indeed appointed to high-ranking posts in the local administration. One teacher expressed her frustration:

> The state supported us. They paid less than before the full-scale war, but they paid […] That's why the behavior of the traitors is so infuriating. If there had been no money at all, I might have understood—someone collaborating with the enemy to survive, to support themselves and their family. But the state was paying money, so it was simply greed. (Pavlenko 2023)

Such testimonies reveal a deep sense of resentment toward those who engaged with the occupying administration. However, due to the risk of stereotyping and war's political polarization, it is difficult to determine whether "well-being" (co-optation) was indeed the dominant moral disposition, whether it coexisted with other dispositions such as "affiliation with the *de facto* state," or whether the decision was primarily driven by coercion ("the self-preservation" disposition). Moreover, social desirability bias would likely prevent individuals from openly admitting material motives. Much of the resentment stems from the fact that some of these individuals acted as

intermediaries of the occupation regime, exerting pressure on fellow educators to comply—whether through co-optation or coercive means.

Passive Accommodation

Passive accommodation refers to the involvement of SLBs in the functioning of the occupying administration not out of ideological or identity-based affiliation with the *de facto* regime, but rather due to moral dispositions such as *self-preservation*, *search for institutional stability*, and *commitment to service provision*. While we use the term passive, this should not be understood as implying that SLBs are merely inert or unreflective actors. On the contrary, even in this mode of coping, SLBs engage in active moral reasoning and make consequential decisions in the face of constrained and risky circumstances. In such cases, SLBs typically do not participate directly in the political-ideological legitimation efforts of the new regime, nor do they occupy high administrative positions. Nonetheless, they contribute indirectly to the consolidation of the occupation by ensuring the continued functioning of frontline services and the provision of public goods (Hechter and Vidal-Aparicio 2010).

As discussed in the previous section, coercion strategies included arbitrary detentions, intimidation, and even torture. In this context, the disposition of *self-preservation* appears to have guided some education professionals in their decisions to accommodate. One teacher, speaking in a notably serious tone, described being pressured to cooperate and serve as an informant:

> They told me that if I didn't cooperate by the third time [of inquiry], I'd have problems. [...] They knew I was a teacher—they knew everything. They said: 'You're useful to us. You understand this is now the Russian Federation. We need to establish order. All you have to do is perform your duties—just help us. If we need information about certain people, you provide it, that's it.' My friend was taken to a basement. [...] They showed that he was already on the wanted list. These lists were updated weekly—if someone said something wrong, even a small thing, they were marked as someone 'who did not support the occupiers.' [...] They went through very severe torture. [...] Maybe, over time, people give in. Because, you know, occupation is constant pressure—psychological pressure. [...] Maybe people break and start to collaborate.

Although methodological constraints limited the ability to document the full range of SLBs experiences under occupation, some testimonies hinted at the *search for institutional stability* as a disposition for passive accommodation. One university teacher asserted that local SLBs and managers were indifferent to who held territorial control, as long as their work and personal lives remained unchanged. Expressing clear disappointment, she reflected on the power dynamics within her community:

> All the local power-holders stayed — our [local] "officials". [...] Their job titles may be different now, but the people are the same. Everyone who held power under Ukraine just changed the flags in their offices

> [...]. So, honestly, I don't think much has really changed. [...]. Unfortunately, [my former] school now provides educational services under what we might call "[local] legislation" — that is, under those [occupying] authorities.

Finally, the notion of *passive accommodation* driven by a disposition of *commitment to service provision*, that is, an ethical orientation centered on the recipients of public services. In such cases, SLBs make suboptimal decisions not out of ideological alignment, but to prevent greater harm to their clients.

As an illustrative example, one school principal reported that the occupying forces exerted various forms of pressure and intimidation on educators, demanding that all subjects be taught in Russian, using Russian textbooks and materials distributed to schools. The principal recalled:

> [The occupiers] said that if we didn't work, they would bring teachers from Russia. […] It was difficult for all of us to make that decision. But we decided we would cause less harm to the children than the teachers who would come from Russia. These are our children, and we must teach them. […] It was scary to tell the children: I used to teach Ukrainian, and now I will also teach Russian. Scary and shameful. But the children didn't ask anything. Probably, their parents explained everything to them. (Sokolova-Stekh 2022)

The principal also reported receiving disapproving phone calls from former colleagues who criticized her for "collaborating" and accepting a salary from the occupation authorities.

As this section illustrates, accommodation strategies are shaped by multiple moral dispositions and marked by high levels of risk and uncertainty. War impacts—such as forced interaction with enemy actors, institutional *bellicization* and political weaponization, loyalty dilemma, and double victimization—become particularly salient. Accommodation has also the potential to reshape SLBs' identity: the shift in state allegiance (and national affiliation) may automatically position them on the opposite side of the "friend–enemy" dichotomy.

Local Defiance

Local defiance—a strategy in which the SLB decides to remain in the territory while actively engaging in some form of resistance to the occupying forces is similar to what previous studies named as sabotage (Brehm and Gates 1997) or divergence (Gofen 2014). However, in this case, this strategy is much riskier and is undoubtedly the riskiest of the four strategies in our typology. Similar to other previous studies that analyzed why SLBs accept to take risks for clients (see Cohen and Gollan-Nadir 2020; Cohen et al 2024), our findings reveal that the local defiance strategy is driven by the moral disposition of *loyalty to the de jure state* and *commitment to service provision and community well-being*. This strategy involves a broad range of actions opposed to the interests of the occupiers and

may help mitigate some impacts of war—such as *bellicization*, political weaponization, loyalty dilemma, and related moral dilemmas—but in return, it significantly heightens the personal security risks for the SLB in their forced interactions with enemy state actors.

In the case of education professionals, we identified six main sub-strategies of defiance: (1) improvised service provision, (2) concealment of working materials, (3) humanitarian functional innovation, (4) self-concealment, (5) civic engagement, and (6) military engagement.

(1) Improvised service provision—specifically, the continuation of educational activities—was initially enabled through remote learning. Drawing on their extensive experience from the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and students quickly adapted this strategy at the onset of the invasion. However, in many rural areas, long-term electricity shortages and internet outages made online teaching unfeasible. Educators developed alternative methods to maintain instruction, such as delivering materials to students' homes or teaching small groups in their own residences. Despite the high risks, these actions reflected a strong *commitment to service provision and community well-being*, aiming to minimize war-related harm to students. As one school principal explained, with a resolute and proud demeanor:

> The [Ukrainian regional] Department of Education issued an order for us to shift to family-based learning. We discussed it with parents and teachers and agreed — just to make sure the children weren't left without education. [...]. I couldn't allow them to go uneducated. We set things up so that teachers would visit students, or sometimes the students would come to us. We were risking our lives. I carried a laptop in my bag. We agreed with parents: in homes with wood stoves, they would host us. [...] I'd work with one group of kids, then go to another house. [...] Teachers had set up classrooms in their own houses — tables, chairs, a learning space. [...] That's how we finished the school year. Then came September 1st. It was clear: there would be no Russian school here. We remained a Ukrainian school, working under the Ukrainian curriculum. I gathered the teachers and held a small pedagogical council — we made our decision. We continued giving assignments to students, often via their parents. The parents supported us. We didn't abandon the students — and we never will.

One university teacher emphasized that some apparent accommodation strategies may, in fact, reflect local defiance. This points to the complexities and "gray zones" typical of military occupation contexts (Tönsmeyer 2015; Buschmeier 2024). In her words—emphatic and provocative:

> It's been ten years [of occupation in Crimea], and [some] Ukrainian teachers there are still trying — even a decade later — to tell the truth [in subtle ways]. [...] . So, the real question becomes: what does more harm? When a teacher refuses to work (and is replaced by Russian teachers), or when they agree to stay — but continue trying to preserve Ukrainian narratives and tell the truth? That moral dilemma, for me, is the greatest challenge teachers face under occupation.

The (2) *concealment of working materials* was another form of defiance motivated by concerns for student safety and local communities. Educators feared Russian soldiers would steal

resources or retaliate against children's relatives who served in the Donbas war (2014-). Some teachers and principals hid maps to prevent their use for military reconnaissance. One school principal recounted the dangers of engaging in this sub-strategy, speaking with a tone of bitterness and conviction:

> We hid our computers, laptops, TVs, and plasma screens. Some people informed on us. Later, after I was forced to write a statement, they took me to the basement. There, we were made to sign declarations of cooperation with the occupying forces. Then I was given a sheet of paper and told to list all the pro-Ukrainian teachers who were against the Russian occupational authorities [...]. And then came the final threat: if my teachers didn't return the laptops, TVs, or printers — I would not be allowed to go home. Thankfully, my team — to whom I'm immensely grateful — managed to gather a portion of the equipment and handed it over to the collaborator school principal.

The third sub-strategy, (3) *humanitarian functional innovation*, refers to how educators expanded their bureaucratic roles to meet urgent community needs, including food distribution and shelter provision. In the absence of effective state structures, educators became *ad hoc* coordinators of humanitarian aid, using their own personal and informal resources (Lavee 2022). A teacher and administrative staff from a university described how the campus was repurposed as an emergency center (several schools performed the same role) while being pressured by the new occupying authorities:

> Well, I was at my workplace, I basically lived there. We had dormitories and the main building, and in their basements there were bomb shelters. [...] I was performing my duties. And people arrived. [...] The children were afraid to go outside, they stayed in the basement. […] Kids either had nowhere to go, or thought it was safer to stay here than where their parents were. […] We cooked for all the people — fully. [...] We had it all set up so that practically everyone ate together. Because when you cook for everyone, it's more economical and easier overall.

To avoid the moral issues associated with loyalty dilemma and to ensure greater safety for themselves and their families, several education-sector SLBs adopted the sub-strategy of (4) *self-concealment*. Aware that occupation authorities might use threats or blackmail, some turned off or replaced SIM cards and avoided public appearances. One school teacher recounted, speaking in a markedly serious tone:

> To avoid problems, you just had to stay out of sight. […] I told them I didn't have time because I was taking care of my sick mother. [...] Then they said they could arrange for me to come in half-days. [...] They just showed up and said: "You're a teacher. You taught here, you taught the kids. You know the whole crowd, you know the people, who breathes what, and so on." [...] "We need to establish relationships and all that."

Educators also participated in public acts of resistance, such as anti-occupation protests – what we call (5) *civic engagement*. Initially, there was a certain degree of tolerance toward the

demonstrators, but this was soon replaced by violent dispersals, including intimidation through warning shots fired into the air. Protesters were filmed, later identified through surveillance footage or informants, and in some cases detained, interrogated, or even tortured. One university teacher described:

> They told me in the *pidval*: "We saw you." [...] Drones were flying around, everything was being recorded. After each protest, people disappeared. Then they reappeared after a few days. I know one teacher who disappeared [...] They beat him, he lost his eyesight, and so on.

Finally, some education professionals adopted the sub-strategy of (6) *military engagement*—joining the Ukrainian military, assisting volunteer units, or transmitting the coordinates of Russian troops. These actions blurred the boundaries between civilian and military roles and involved extreme personal risk. Some were detained and subjected to torture under suspicion of acting as informants.

As this section demonstrates, local defiance was the most diverse and dangerous of the coping strategies. Motivated by moral dispositions such as *loyalty to the de jure state* and *commitment to service provision and community well-being*, many SLBs reshaped their roles and risked their lives to resist occupation and uphold their professional and civic responsibilities. However, it is difficult to sustain defiance over time and SLBs may change to other coping strategies. As occupying forces consolidate control, their surveillance and repression systems grow more sophisticated, with networks of informants reporting those who resist. Educators mentioned feelings of shock, betrayal, and frustration when close colleagues joined the occupying administration. One principal highlighted with indignation: “I didn’t know whom I could talk to. […] Every word I said could be used against me”.

Remote Adaptation

The final coping strategy in our typology, remote adaptation refers to efforts to maintain loyalty to the legitimate state and continue serving clients through geographically and institutionally distanced means in repressive contexts, where traditional channels of defiance are blocked or entail significant risk. It entails the relocation of SLBs and their institutions to a safer, non-occupied region, along with the continuation of their work through online platforms. In doing so, the delivery of public services to clients—such as students still under occupation, internally displaced persons, and refugees abroad—can be maintained. Educational institutions thereby become a central resilience tool for the preservation of social networks and community ties.

This strategy is driven by a combination of moral dispositions, including *commitment to service provision and community well-being*, *self-preservation / well-being*, and *loyalty to the de jure state*. As SLBs leave the occupied area, remote adaptation shares important features with exit,

particularly in its capacity to mitigate multiple wartime impacts and in the challenges for resettlement. Unlike exit, though, remote adaptation allows the SLB to maintain ties to both their institutions and their clients.

This category represents a notable innovation in the literature on street-level bureaucracy. While it shares similarities with the experience of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are key differences.

First, the territorial restructuration. Unlike pandemic-era remote education, remote adaptation requires the physical relocation of institutions and personnel. This process involves extensive logistical efforts, substantial infrastructure investments, administrative restructuring, and *ad hoc* coordination among school principals/ university directors, parents, students, and higher-levels of the state bureaucracy.

Second, the degree of politicization and immersion in identity conflict. While remote teaching during the pandemic was marked by some level of political polarization, remote adaptation acquires a far more pronounced political significance. It functions both as an act of defiance against the occupying state and as a tool of resilience—preserving loyalty to the legitimate state, sustaining national identity, and maintaining community bonds.

Third, political tension and risk to clients. While remote learning during the pandemic aimed to protect teachers and students from a health threat, remote adaptation in wartime entails substantial danger for students. Attendance in online education promoted by the legitimate state may be seen by occupying forces as an act of disloyalty and a threat to the annexation agenda—particularly the policies of indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation.

Fourth, security-centric operation. Given the level of risk to students and their families, education professionals must implement extensive safety and confidentiality protocols. They are also responsible for addressing the psychological impacts of war on children. Many SLBs have family members and property in the occupied territory, necessitating an especially cautious approach.

One of the most successful examples of remote adaptation occurred at Kherson State University. According to a university director, after a month of occupation and continued technical difficulties, the academic council agreed to relocate staff to a safer region. Soon after, the university coordinated with the Ministry of Education, which issued a decree formalizing the relocation. In April 2022, a management center was established at Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk, far from the occupation. Later, the university secured an additional building. This new center handled key bureaucratic functions, as well as occasional in-person activities. The relocation was essential for maintaining connections with Ukrainian state infrastructure and ensuring access to administrative systems.

Today, dozens of universities from occupied or frontline areas have adopted remote adaptation. During fieldwork, we visited the new premises of Kherson State University and Mariupol University—both of which had reasonably well-developed infrastructure. Despite the emphasis on online learning, in-person activities are occasionally held for students who can travel to these locations.

Many primary schools have also implemented remote adaptation, although unlike universities, they lack new physical headquarters. As of October 2023, the Ministry of Education and Science reported that 268 general secondary schools from occupied areas of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions were operating remotely in evacuation (Kuberska 2023). The Ministry of Education of Ukraine claims that over 62,000 students in occupation are attending these classes (Human Rights Watch 2024). Teachers remained in Ukrainian-controlled territories or abroad. The total number of offline schools established by Russian occupation authorities remains unclear, though interviews suggest that few such institutions are functioning in some localities.

One municipal head of education, who had relocated to a Ukrainian-controlled territory, emphasized that the shift to remote adaptation was driven by teachers' *commitment to service provision and community well-being*, as well as their *loyalty to the de jure state*. Speaking with conviction, she noted:

> These are our children… children from our community! We've done everything possible to preserve our school community—both teachers and students—as much as we could. […] Of course, for young children, it's much better to learn and socialize in person—when you go to school, meet, and interact with other kids. But under occupation, the conditions are such that online learning is the only form of socialization available. At least they can see their teacher and classmates on the screen instead of being completely isolated in their apartments, where they have to hide because of the danger. […] In our community, the occupiers failed to open [physical] schools. This shows that our teachers are united and hold a patriotic stance. Of course, there are a few exceptions—some individuals "switched sides"—but the vast majority have remained loyal to Ukraine, and we continue to educate our children according to the standards of our country!

One major challenge faced by education professionals has been providing psychological support to students amid the trauma and intensity of war. In an improvised and informal manner, they were compelled to develop strategies beyond their formal duties. One school principal exemplified how she coped with this challenge by drawing on her personal experience within her own family:

> At that time, unfortunately, we didn't have any psychological training, so we tried to act simply as human beings — from the heart. We said the same things to our students that we said to our own children at home: how we calmed them down, how we encouraged them — that's exactly how we supported our students. [...] But now, as the war has lasted so long, we have already completed training courses — both in psychological preparation and in psychological stress relief. And now we are more aware of these things, because our children — we can even, in an online setting, more or less assess a child's condition, and then possibly follow up individually, involving a psychologist or the child's parents. […] [During remote

> teaching] we understood we couldn't ignite in the children some kinds of hyper-patriotism because considering their teenage age, their emotional nature, their romanticism, we could have accidentally encouraged [them to dangerous actions]. It was incredibly difficult to maintain that balance — giving the children a sense that we are Ukrainian […], but at the same time not stirring them to actions that could endanger them.

Participation in Ukrainian online classes remains a risk factor for children and their families in occupied zones. Teachers must adapt to this by offering flexible attendance and accommodating assignment deadlines. As one principal noted, in a cautious tone, "there might be someone next to the child who could interfere with the communication; so this added a huge psychological challenge." Some students "disappear" for several days. One school teacher described this reality with a voice marked by concern, but also pride:

> It is very dangerous and very risky — both for the children and for their parents. Children sometimes do this at night, hiding under the table. Some of them even submitted poems to me [...] recording them at night, not, you know, in daylight, but by candlelight or a flashlight. The situation there is extremely dangerous because the occupiers don't want the children to study — not even remotely. They want them to switch to education according to the Russian curriculum. That's why parents are very afraid — afraid of ending up in a *pidval* themselves, of having their children taken away, and then deported somewhere.

Occupation authorities used coercion and co-optation incentives to drive enrollment in Russian schools. According to interviewees, families were offered financial aid in exchange for attendance and threatened with the loss of parental rights. Many children simultaneously attend Russian in person schools and (secretly) Ukrainian online ones.

While remote adaptation has shown promise in the medium term, its long-term sustainability remains uncertain. Challenges include new enrollments, degree recognition, unequal digital access, the delivery of practical courses, and the psychological strain resulting from the absence of in-person interaction among children and young students. Frequent blackouts and infrastructure attacks disrupt learning. Occupation forces attempt to block Ukrainian sites and signals, forcing reliance on VPNs. As with exit, displaced educators face difficulties settling in new areas due to low wages and limited state assistance.

As shown in this section, remote adaptation represents a major innovation in wartime street-level bureaucracy. While it resembles pandemic-era remote teaching, key distinctions include territorial relocation, political conflict and tensions, security risks for clients, and the SLBs' intensified focus on safety. Thanks to technological innovation, SLBs can leave occupied territory—as in exit—but simultaneously maintain ties to their clients and communities.

The table below summarizes the four coping strategies, the war impacts they seek to mitigate, and the moral dispositions that drive them.

Table 3. SLB Coping Strategies in Wars

Coping Strategy	Definition	Moral Dispositions	Targeted War Impacts	Consequences for Service Delivery
Exit	The SLB leaves the occupied territory and her/his public service position.	b) Self-preservation / well-being. c) Loyalty to the *de jure* state.	Forced interaction with enemy actors; *bellicization* and political weaponization of bureaucracy; loyalty dilemma; double victimization; physical risks; moral dilemmas.	Complete disruption of services.
Accommodation	The SLB remains in the territory and continues to perform public service under occupation, without engaging in resistance.	a) Commitment to service provision and community well-being; b) Self-preservation / well-being; d) Affiliation with the *de facto* state; e) Search for institutional stability.	Physical risk; bureaucratic rupture/ service disruption.	Services are provided, but clients become target of the occupying state's identity policies and indoctrination efforts, as well as victims of its strategies of co-optation and coercion.
Local Defiance	The SLB remains in the territory and actively resists occupation through covert or public acts.	a) Commitment to service provision and community well-being; c) Loyalty to the *de jure* state.	*Bellicization* and political weaponization of bureaucracy; loyalty dilemma.	Services are provided in a precarious and improvised manner, posing risks to both SLBs and clients.
Remote Adaptation	The SLB relocates to a safe area but continues delivering services to the clients remotely.	a) Commitment to service provision and community well-being; b) Self-preservation; c) Loyalty to the *de jure* state.	Forced interaction with enemy actors; *bellicization* and political weaponization of bureaucracy; loyalty dilemma and double victimization; physical risks; moral dilemmas.	Services are delivered in a more organized fashion, yet clients still face risks. They may be simultaneously exposed to SLBs who have adopted accommodation.

Source: authors.

Discussions and Conclusions

This paper aimed to analyze the implications of war and territorial contributions for street-level work. The analyses make several theoretical contributions to the literature.

First, the paper develops an analytical framework to analyze SLB in wartime, showing the relationship between a) the challenges of this type of crises; b) the coping mechanisms developed by SLBs to face them and c) the moral dispositions that underpin the coping strategies. This analytical framework can be used for future research on SLB during crises, in general, and on war and territorial conflicts, in particular. And it can be particularly useful to understand the reasons behind the selection of different types of coping strategies, an underexplored issue in the literature.

Second, our findings contribute to the theory by demonstrating that war constitutes a distinct for of crises with far-reaching implications for SLBs. While previous studies analyzed SLBs during crises – especially pandemic and democratic backsliding (Gofen and Lotta 2021; Lotta et al 2024; Piotrowska 2024; Brodkin 2021), this paper makes a contribution by showing how wars disrupt state

sovereignty and legitimacy, introducing contested rules, violence and new types of conflicts. These conditions exacerbate bureaucratic rupture, render institutional mandates unstable, and force SLBs into situations of structural and moral disorientation that go far beyond classic accounts of resource scarcity or workload stress (Lipsky 2010 [1980]; Tummers et al. 2015). Moreover, it shows that, under war and armed conflicts, SLBs become strategic targets of a process of bureaucratic *bellicization*. This goes beyond prior analyses of bureaucratic politicization (Sager and Gofen 2022; Lotta et al. 2024) as it involves destabilizing authority, SLBs professional identities, ethical commitments and roles.

Third, our paper contributes to the understanding of SLBs moral agency, building and advancing on Zacka's (2017) previous work. Our analyses show that, under war and territorial conflicts, new moral dispositions arise, as SLBs must navigate multiple and competing allegiances: to the *de jure* state, the occupying regime, their communities, and their own survival. Therefore, wartime discretion is marked by new moral dilemmas and ethical reasonings.

Fourth, our paper also contributes by expanding the coping strategies previously identified during crises. Inspired by the classical *exit*, *voice* and *loyalty* (Piotrowska 2024; Hirschmann 2004 [1970]), our findings show that the coping strategies during wartime involve existential and political decisions: whether to flee, collaborate, resist, or reorganize remotely. Based on that, we propose a new form of strategy: the remote adaptation. While previous studies on the pandemic analyzed the remote work (Malandrino and Sager 2021), our paper shows a distinct form of strategy, in which SLBs maintain public service provision across territorial divides. This new concept offers a particularly innovative lens for theorizing state continuity and resilience from below. Moreover, our findings also contribute to the theory by showing how each strategy is sustained by different constellations of moral dispositions.

Last but not least, we demonstrated that, amid the war's destabilization of institutional order and moral boundaries, each coping strategy entails specific consequences for service delivery—entailing varying degrees of disruption, improvisation, precarization, and risk for both SLBs and service users.

As part of a future research agenda, several promising avenues could deepen our understanding of street-level bureaucrats in wartime contexts. It would be especially valuable to investigate whether the patterns observed among education professionals also apply to other categories of SLBs, such as healthcare workers, emergency responders, and law enforcement personnel. Further research could also examine how the nature of the conflict (e.g., interstate versus intrastate war, organized crime, ethnic violence), the identity of belligerent actors (e.g., state or non-state forces), and territorial characteristics (e.g., rural versus urban settings) shape SLBs' coping strategies, as well as how wars and these coping strategies impact public service users. Finally, the

structural impacts of war, the four coping strategies outlined in our typology, and the moral dispositions that guide SLBs in such settings merit sustained and in-depth investigation in future research.

Our study opens an important research agenda at the intersection of street-level governance in crisis contexts, state legitimacy, territorial control, and political violence—issues that, regrettably, are becoming increasingly salient in recent years.

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Appendix 1: Statement of Positionality

This research was motivated by our collective commitment to addressing injustices and crimes committed during wars—particularly in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine—and by our concern for civilians who are highly vulnerable to political violence in these scenarios.

One of the authors, responsible for collecting data is a postdoctoral scholar with extensive experience conducting interviews and fieldwork in multicultural and violent environments. Although a foreigner, he lived in Russia for three years (2012–2015), including time in a border region with Ukraine, when he first visited the country. While based in Moscow, he witnessed the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and observed how these events were politically instrumentalized by Russian elites—an experience that sparked his academic interest in the topic. In an effort to reduce cultural distance and mitigate potential bias stemming from greater exposure to Russian narratives, he engaged in the study of Ukrainian language, politics, and society, and developed sustained professional exchange with Ukrainian scholars.

Throughout the interviews and fieldwork, respondents often expressed deep emotion and sorrow as they recalled their experiences under occupation. At the same time, they showed great appreciation for our effort to convey their voices to an international and academic audience. The researcher acknowledges his distance from the lived reality of military occupation, his limited experience as a street-level bureaucrat (SLB), and the fact that only those who have endured such conditions can fully comprehend them. We sought to address this gap through a posture of empathy and solidarity, refraining from judgment and carefully transcribing participants' accounts in their own words. Conducting the interviews in Ukrainian, along with the use of consent forms in the same language, further strengthened respondents' trust in the researcher.

Data review and analysis were also conducted by a coauthor who is a foreign scholar and professor with extensive expertise in the literature on street-level bureaucracy, including in contexts marked by crisis and violence. Her extense experience in studying vulnerable contexts and SLBs and citizens under vulnerable conditions enabled her to adopt a critical but empathetic perspective about the data. Her limitations regarding the specific context and the language were decreased by the partnership with the two other coauthors.

In addition, the analysis was reviewed and complemented by a Ukrainian coauthor who resides in Ukraine and experienced both the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions. Besides his academic role, he previously held municipal administrative positions in the field of education. His city is currently under occupation, and he holds the status of an internally displaced person, now residing in a Ukrainian-controlled area. He also works with a national association of Ukrainian municipalities, providing him with in-depth knowledge of the local realities across the country.

Appendix 2: Interview Guidelines

1. Could you please state your profession?
2. How long did you remain under occupation, and in which region?
3. What was the first day of the war like for you?

    Follow-up: How was this day at your workplace?

4. What were the three most significant challenges you faced in fulfilling your professional duties during the military occupation?

    Follow-up: And more broadly, during wartime in general?

5. During your time under occupation:
    a. Were you able to receive your salary?
    b. Were you able to work online and communicate with your students?
    c. Were you able to contact your superiors and colleagues?
6. Did the occupying authorities attempt to contact or communicate with you?

    Follow-up (if yes): Did you experience any form of threat or intimidation?

7. Have you witnessed or heard of cases involving violence, unlawful detention, or other forms of pressure against education professionals?
8. Were there education professionals who worked in the institutions established by the occupying authorities?

    Follow-up (if yes): Could you please comment on these cases?

    In your view, what were their motivations?

    Do you believe coercion may have played a role in their decisions?

9. Were there cases of education professionals who engaged in acts of resistance against the occupying authorities or their directives?
10. What specific measures were developed to support the provision of services and assistance to the population during the occupation?
11. Did you engage in remote learning?

    Follow-up (if yes): What were the main obstacles you encountered?

    Were there specific risks for students living under occupation?

    How did you manage these risks?

    What administrative difficulties did you face?

12. Did you remain in the occupied territory or decide to leave?

    Follow-up (If the respondent left the territory):

    What motivated your decision to leave?

    What were the main challenges you faced when relocating to another region?

Follow-up (If the respondent remained in the territory):

What motivated your decision to stay in the occupied area?

13. In your opinion, why do education professionals choose to stay in or leave occupied territories?

***

Conflict of interest statement

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Declaração de conflito de interesse

O autor declara que não há conflito de interesse.

***

Research Data Availability Statement

The entire data supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself.

Declaração de disponibilidade de dados da pesquisa

Todo o conjunto de dados de apoio aos resultados deste estudo foi publicado no próprio artigo.

***

Ethics Committee

The research protocols, methods, and questionnaires were approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Beings of Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV-CEPH). All participants received the Informed Consent Form and expressed their consent.

Comitê de Ética

Os protocolos de pesquisa, métodos e questionários foram aprovados pelo Comitê de Conformidade Ética em Pesquisas Envolvendo Seres Humanos da FGV da Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-CEPH). Todos os participantes receberam o Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido e manifestaram seu consentimento.

***

Funding

This work was supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) under postdoctoral grants 2023/01522-2 and 2024/13950-1.

Financiamento

Este trabalho foi financiado pela Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), bolsa de Pós-Doutorado, processos nº 2023/01522-2 e 2024/13950-1.

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Declaration of authors' contributor roles

Vicente Ferraro: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition (recipient of a FAPESP's postdoctoral grant); Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Gabriela Lotta: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Methodology; Supervision; Writing – review & editing.

Mykhailo Honchar: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing – review & editing.

Declaração de contribuição dos autores

Vicente Ferraro: Conceitualização; Curadoria de dados; Análise formal; Captação de financiamento (beneficiário de uma bolsa de pós-doutorado da FAPESP); Investigação; Metodologia; Administração do projeto; Visualização; Redação – rascunho original; Redação – revisão e edição.

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