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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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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 role of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), such as teachers, healthcare workers and police officers, has garnered increasing attention in Public Administration literature. Nonetheless, a subfield of significant theoretical and empirical relevance remains underexplored—their role in wars and conflicts over territorial control. This paper aims to analyze how wars impact the work of SLBs and the strategies they adopt to cope with the adversities of these contexts. For that, we focus on the war in Ukraine, the most intense conflict on European soil since World War II. We address education professionals as an SLB subgroup since schools and universities have become pivotal targets of Russian occupation forces— a cultural frontline instrumental in the efforts to legitimize territorial annexation and assimilate local inhabitants. The analysis is based on a remote ethnography encompassing in-depth interviews with educators who experienced the Russian occupation in southern Ukraine (Kherson region), coupled with content analysis of reports from the media, human rights organizations, and state sources. The paper provides theoretical and empirical contributions by examining a context in which SLBs cope with extreme adversities: risks to life, complex ethical dilemmas and political pressures (disputes for their loyalty), as well as numerous uncertainties related to ruptures in institutional hierarchies, information flows, and sources of material resource. We develop a typology of four strategies (exit, collaborationism, remote adaptation and local defiance) underlying SLBs' motivations and risks. Our findings may contribute to an emerging research agenda on the role of SLBs in wars and political violence—situations that, unfortunately, have become increasingly frequent across the globe.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucrats; armed conflicts; collaborationism in territorial occupations; education professionals; War in Ukraine.

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Як війни впливають на державне управління та вуличну бюрократію: вчителі та освітяни на передовій російської окупації в Україні

Вісенте Ферраро, Габріела Лотта, Михайло Гончар

Анотація

Роль вуличних бюрократів (ВБ), таких як вчителі, медичні працівники та офіцери поліції, привертає все більше уваги в літературі про державне управління. Тим не менш, за своєю теоретичною та емпіричною актуальностю, залишається недостатньо вивченою їх роль у війнах і територіальних конфліктах. Ця стаття має на меті проаналізувати, як такі обставини впливають на роботу ВБ та стратегії, які вони обирають, щоб впоратися з викликами. Для цього ми зосереджуємося на війні в Україні, найгострішому конфлікті у Європі з часів Другої світової війни. Ми звертаємося до освітян як до підгрупи ВБ, оскільки школи та університети стали важливою мішенню російської окупації на культурному фронті, що має сприяти легітимізації територіальної анексії та асиміляції місцевих жителів. Наш аналіз ґрунтується на дистанційній етнографії, що включає глибинні інтерв'ю з освітянами, які пережили російську окупацію на півдні України (Херсонська область), у поєднанні з аналізом повідомлень ЗМІ, правозахисних організацій та офіційних джерел. Стаття містить теоретичні та емпіричні внески, досліджуючи контекст, у якому ВБ долає надзвичайні труднощі: загрози для життя, складні етичні дилеми та політичний тиск (оскільки воюючі сторони змагаються за їхню лояльність), а також численні невизначеності, пов'язані з втратою інституційних зав'язків, каналів інформації та джерел матеріальних ресурсів. Ми пропонуємо типологію чотирьох стратегій (вихід, колабораціонізм, віддалена адаптація та спротив), які лежать в основі мотивації та ризиків ВБ. Наші висновки можуть сприяти новому погляду на дослідження ролі ВБ у війнах і політичних конфліктах — ситуаціях, які, на жаль, стають все більш поширеними по всьому світу.

Ключові слова: вулична бюрократія; збройні конфлікти; колабораціонізм на окупованій території; освітяни; Війна в Україні.

Как войны влияют на государственное управление и уличную бюрократию: учителя и педагоги на передовой российской оккупации в Украине

Висенте Ферраро, Габриэла Лотта, Михаил Гончар

Аннотация

Роль уличных бюрократов (УБ), таких как учителя, медицинские работники и офицеры полиции, привлекает все большее внимание в литературе о государственном управлении. Тем не менее, по своей теоретической и эмпирической актуальности остается недостаточно изученной их роль в войнах и территориальных конфликтах. Статья имеет цель проанализировать, как такие обстоятельства влияют на работу УБ и стратегии, которые они выбирают, чтобы справиться с вызовами. Для этого мы сосредотачиваемся на войне в Украине, острейшем конфликте в Европе со времен Второй мировой войны. Мы обращаемся к педагогам как подгруппе УБ, поскольку школы и университеты стали важной мишенью российской оккупации на культурном фронте, что должна

способствовать легитимизации территориальной аннексии и ассимиляции местных жителей. Наш анализ основывается на дистанционной этнографии, включающей в себя глубинные интервью с педагогами, пережившими российскую оккупацию на юге Украины (Херсонская область), в сочетании с анализом сообщений СМИ, правозащитных организаций и официальных источников. Статья несет теоретический и эмпирический вклад, исследуя контекст, в котором УБ преодолевает чрезвычайные трудности: угрозы для жизни, сложные этические дилеммы и политическое давление (поскольку воюющие стороны сражаются за их лояльность), а также многочисленные неопределенности, связанные с потерей институциональных связей, каналов информации и источников материальных ресурсов. Мы предлагаем типологию четырех стратегий (выход, коллаборационизм, отдаленная адаптация и сопротивление), лежащие в основе мотивации и рисков УБ. Наши выводы могут способствовать новому взгляду на исследование роли УБ в войнах и политических конфликтах – ситуациях, которые, к сожалению, становятся все более распространенными по всему миру.

Ключевые слова: уличная бюрократия; вооруженные конфликты; коллаборационизм на оккупированной территории; педагоги; Война в Украине.

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

Vicente Ferraro, Gabriela Lotta, Mykhailo Honchar

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 subárea de grande relevância teórica e empírica permanece subexplorada — a atuação desses profissionais em guerras e conflitos territoriais. O presente artigo busca analisar como as guerras impactam o trabalho dos BNR e as estratégias adotadas por eles para enfrentar as adversidades desses contextos. Para tanto, focamos na atual guerra na Ucrânia, o conflito mais intenso em solo europeu desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Em particular, abordamos os profissionais da educação como um subgrupo de BNR, uma vez que escolas e universidades tornaram-se alvos primordiais das forças de ocupação russas — um front cultural fundamental no esforço de legitimar a anexação territorial e assimilar os habitantes locais. A análise baseia-se em uma etnografia remota, incluindo entrevistas em profundidade com educadores que vivenciaram a ocupação russa no sul da Ucrânia (na região de Kherson), complementada por análises de conteúdo de canais midiáticos, organizações de direitos humanos e documentos estatais. O artigo oferece contribuições teóricas e empíricas ao examinar um contexto em que os BNR enfrentam adversidades extremas: riscos à vida, dilemas éticos complexos e pressões políticas (disputas pela sua lealdade), bem como inúmeras incertezas relacionadas às rupturas em hierarquias institucionais, fluxos de informação e fontes de recursos materiais. Desenvolvemos uma tipologia de quatro estratégias (saída/ exit, colaboracionismo, adaptação remota e resistência local), identificando as motivações e riscos envolvidos. Nossos achados podem contribuir para uma agenda emergente de pesquisa sobre o papel dos BNR em guerras

e violência política — situações que, infelizmente, têm se tornado cada vez mais frequentes ao redor do mundo.

Palavras-chave: Burocratas de Nível de Rua; conflitos armados; colaboracionismo em ocupações territoriais; profissionais da educação; Guerra na Ucrânia.

Cómo las Guerras Impactan a la Administración Pública y la Burocracia a Nivel de Calle: Docentes y Profesionales de la Educación en las Líneas de Frente de la Ocupación Rusa en Ucrania

Vicente Ferraro, Gabriela Lotta, Mykhailo Honchar

Resumen

El papel de los burócratas a nivel de calle (BNC), como profesores, trabajadores de la salud y policías, ha atraído una creciente atención en la literatura de Administración Pública. Sin embargo, un subcampo de gran relevancia teórica y empírica sigue estando poco explorado: la actuación de estos individuos en guerras y conflictos territoriales. Este artículo busca analizar cómo las guerras impactan el trabajo de los BNC y las estrategias que adoptan para enfrentar las adversidades de ese contexto. Con ese fin, nos centramos en la actual guerra en Ucrania, el conflicto más intenso en suelo europeo desde la Segunda Guerra Mundial. En particular, abordamos a los profesionales de la educación como un subgrupo de los BNC, una vez que las escuelas y universidades se han convertido en objetivos principales de las fuerzas de ocupación rusas: un frente cultural clave en los esfuerzos por legitimar la anexión territorial y asimilar a los habitantes locales. El análisis se basa en una etnografía remota, que incluye entrevistas en profundidad con educadores que experimentaron la ocupación rusa en el sur de Ucrania (en la región de Jersón), complementada con análisis de contenido de medios de comunicación, informes de organizaciones de derechos humanos y documentos estatales. El artículo ofrece contribuciones teóricas y empíricas al examinar un contexto en el que los BNC enfrentan adversidades extremas: riesgos para la vida, dilemas éticos complejos y presiones políticas (disputas por su lealtad), así como numerosas incertidumbres relacionadas con rupturas en jerarquías institucionales, flujos de información y fuentes de recursos materiales. Hemos desarrollado una tipología de cuatro estrategias (salida, colaboracionismo, adaptación remota y resistencia local), identificando las motivaciones y riesgos implicados. Nuestras conclusiones pueden contribuir al desarrollo de una agenda de investigación emergente sobre el papel de los BNC en guerras y violencia política: situaciones que, lamentablemente, se han vuelto cada vez más frecuentes en todo el mundo.

Palabras clave: Burócratas a Nivel de Calle; conflictos armados; colaboracionismo en ocupaciones territoriales; profesionales de la educación; Guerra en Ucrania.

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1. Introduction

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) represent the materialization of the state in everyday life. Citizens experience the state's presence directly when interacting with these professionals—such as police officers, teachers, social workers, and healthcare workers. Since Michael Lipsky's seminal work on street-level bureaucracy (2010 [1980]), research has explored the primary challenges and dilemmas SLBs face in their work.

Despite considerable progress in this field, research on SLB performance in dysfunctional contexts—such as armed conflicts, violence, territorial confrontations, crises, and emergencies—remains scarce (Farazmand 2007; Farazmand 2017; Lotta et al. 2022a; Strier et al. 2021). Yet, such contexts are present in many parts of the world, particularly in the global south (Eiró and Lotta 2024), but increasingly also in Europe and the US. We argue that, due to the extreme nature of wars, analyzing the role of SLBs in these contexts may provide a valuable theoretical contribution and open a new line of research—one that, unfortunately, may become increasingly significant in the coming years.

Given the existing gap in the literature, this article seeks to address two fundamental research questions: (1) How do wars and territorial confrontations affect the performance of street-level bureaucrats? (2) What strategies do SLBs employ to cope with the adversities of these contexts? We examine SLB interactions with both citizens and higher echelons of state bureaucracies, encompassing downward and upward influences (see Gofen 2024).

As a methodological strategy, we focused on an extreme case of violence and territorial confrontation: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. Extreme cases—characterized by atypical and significant values in dependent or independent variables—serve as a productive starting point for research in underexplored areas (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 301-302). Drawing on an exploratory remote ethnographic approach, as recommended for high-risk contexts (Fosu 2024; O'Quinn 2024), we conducted in-depth interviews with Ukrainian SLBs.

Acknowledging the heterogeneity among SLBs, this study will examine a specific subcategory—education. Teachers, school principals and education professionals became a genuine frontline, confronting intensified challenges and ethical dilemmas in their work. Russian occupying forces sought to control educational institutions, pressuring them to adopt the Russian school curriculum and claiming that local inhabitants were finally being reunited

with their “true” homeland and protected from Ukrainian "Nazi" elites subservient to Western powers (see Honchar 2022; Ferraro 2024).

The results show that educators faced conditions that offer substantial theoretical contributions to street-level bureaucracy literature, specifically: (i) The transformation of street-level bureaucrats into a focal point of contention between conflicting parties, who pressured them to demonstrate loyalty. Remarkably, SLBs play a pivotal role in asserting territorial control, projecting political legitimacy, and fostering a sense of normality and stability for both local and external audiences. (ii) The partial or complete breakdown of institutional connections with higher levels of state bureaucracy, leading to disrupted information flows and significant uncertainties in their work.

The paper is structured into five sections: a literature review on SLBs in dysfunctional contexts, a methodology section, research findings on how wars impact SLB performance, SLB coping strategies, and a discussion. We end the paper with the final remarks.

2. Street-level bureaucrats amid crisis, conflicts, and violence

The study of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in crisis and violent conflict settings is an emerging field that still requires further investigation. Scholars have pointed out the lack of research in this area (Gofen and Lotta 2021; Farazmand 2007; Lotta et al. 2022a; Semigina and Gusak 2015; Strier et al. 2021).

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, such as resource scarcity, uncertainty, high demand, and pressures from various levels of authority. Broad and vague regulations, created far from street-level realities, often require SLBs to use their discretion for interpreting policies for specific cases (Matland 1995). The exercise of this discretion is shaped by a variety of individual, organizational, and systemic factors (Cohen 2018; Lotta et al. 2022b), meaning that the same policy can produce different outcomes depending on the context. When SLBs exercise discretion in complex situations, they often face ethical and moral dilemmas, balancing competing demands that may challenge their normative judgments and moral sensitivity (Zacka 2017).

During crises, SLBs' discretion tends to increase, as existing regulations and previous experiences may not address the new challenges they face (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. 2021), weakening leadership and triggering unpredictable shifts (Farazmand 2007). In such contexts, routine practices may become ineffective, forcing SLBs 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).

Most of these insights, nonetheless, have mainly come from studies of crises related to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, and may not fully capture the dynamics of wars and political conflicts, where additional factors are at play.

One key difference in armed conflict contexts is that the increased discretion and reliance on personal values can lead to greater biases, conflicts, and tensions, ultimately affecting service delivery (Strier et al. 2021; Ramon et al. 2006). At the same time, 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 (Ramon et al. 2006), as well as the lack of support from higher authorities.

In conflict zones, SLBs frequently may face moral dilemmas in deciding whether to follow the law or adhere to professional ethics. They are confronted with the harsh reality of public frustration due to limited resources (Elsana et al. 2023). SLBs must decide whether to remain silent about abuses they witness or risk retaliation from local elites if they speak out (Weissman 2011). Additionally, SLBs may not always act in the best interests of their clients, as they can perpetuate stigmas, display xenophobia, and deny services based on rigid legal interpretations, further marginalizing vulnerable groups (Bhatia 2020).

To cope emotionally, many SLBs “normalize the abnormal,” finding resilience in their efforts to provide services despite the ongoing conflict (Ramon et al. 2006). Others may adopt different strategies, such as surrendering to the situation, abandoning specific policies, excluding difficult cases, negotiating with violent groups, or confronting the situation head-on (Lotta et al. 2022a).

Although existing research has deepened our understanding of SLB performance in crises, there remains a significant gap in understanding how wars and territorial confrontations impact their work and coping strategies, especially in terms of their interactions with clients and superiors (legitimate or not). 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. Methods and data collection

To address the research questions posed in this article, we decided to study street-level bureaucrats from the Kherson region in southern Ukraine. With approximately 1 million inhabitants before the 2022 invasion (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2022), the Kherson region represents a unique case study for several reasons. De facto state borders have shifted throughout the war on its territory, leaving deep scars on the local political and social landscapes (see Zubchenko 2023; Soroka 2023; Homanyuk et al. 2022). It was the only Ukrainian region where the regional capital was occupied during the 2022 invasion. Educational institutions were primary targets of Russian forced assimilationist policies; local school principals and teachers demonstrated significant resistance against them. Kherson city was among the few cities (and the largest) that the Ukrainian army managed to reconquer, though Russian troops remained just a few meters from the city center, positioned on the opposite bank of the Dnipro River. This exceptional and extremely rare context enabled the conduction of remote interviews with SLBs with minimal risk, as all respondents were in Ukrainian-controlled territory at the time of the interviews.

To carry out the case analysis, we utilized a three-stage research approach.

In the first stage, we conducted a bibliographic survey on the situation of education professionals in southern Ukraine (Kherson region) from the early days of the 2022 invasion. We collected approximately 40 documents, which allowed for a content analysis with an initial codification of the war's impacts on SLB and their strategies to cope with adversities. The documents include:

- Reports and interviews from Ukrainian, Russian, and Western media outlets.
- Resolutions and informative notices from Ukrainian state bodies, including the Ministry of Education and Science and the *Verkhovna Rada* (the national parliament).
- Resolutions and informative notices from the Russian occupying authorities.
- Reports from human rights organizations, such as the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union and the "Zmina" Human Rights Center.
- Works by Ukrainian scholars on occupied territories.

For the second stage, we conducted a remote ethnography encompassing in-depth interviews in Ukrainian and Russian with six education professionals who experienced the occupation (see list in Annex 1). Recent studies have shown that remote ethnography is particularly useful in adverse and high-risk contexts, such as conflicts (Fosu 2024) and

pandemics (O'Quinn 2024). The interviewees were selected using the "snowball" method, which involved contacting Ukrainian researchers immersed in the local context. These scholars served as "gatekeepers" or "go-betweens," a key role in ethnographic research with hard-to-reach populations (Dunlap and Johnson 1998). The main selection criteria were being an active education professional during the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion and having lived for at least one month in Kherson's occupation. The interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and three hours, included open-ended questions about the challenges educators faced and the strategies they developed. Conducting remote interviews with individuals in areas under Russian occupation would entail significant risks and raise ethical concerns. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee and all interviewees received consent forms detailing the research's benefits, risks, and ethical and confidentiality principles.

In the third stage, we applied Qualitative Content Analysis to identify key themes and units of meaning related to the study's main objectives. Following Schreier (2012), we developed code 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 a result, we identified 12 first-order codes related to the "impacts" of the war on SLBs, which were grouped into three second-order codes (codes are presented in Table 1). Regarding SLBs' "reactions" to these impacts, we further developed a typology/codification of four main strategies.

While we recognize the limitations of single-case studies for generalization, we believe such studies provide valuable insights that merit further exploration through additional cases and comparative analyses.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 The impacts of war on teachers and education professionals

Based on the second-order codification of the interviews and documents, we identified three major impacts of the Russian invasion on education professionals: (1) high insecurity; (2) intense political pressures (competition for SLBs' loyalty) and ethical dilemmas; and (3) uncertainties over territorial control. In an effort to exert control over SLBs, Russian occupation forces employed both cooptation and coercion strategies.

Regarding the high insecurity, Kherson served as a key battleground during the 2022 invasion and continues (in January 2025) to be an active war front. According to the Ukrainian Helsinki Group (2024), from the start of the invasion to April 2024, approximately 820 civilians were killed, and 1,924 were injured in Kherson region. Over 6,300 homes and 165 infrastructure facilities were damaged or destroyed. The "Save Schools" project reported that, by January 2025, 302 educational facilities in the region had been damaged (approximately 38% of all educational facilities) and 70 had been destroyed (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2025). After the capital's liberation, in November 2022, the fear of enemy soldiers suddenly shifted to fear of enemy bombings (Zubchenko 2023: 93).

These data highlight the insecurity that Kherson's inhabitants have been facing since the onset of the war. Although the regional capital was liberated, Russian forces remained nearby, occupying large territories on the left bank of the Dnipro River. Teachers across Ukraine are grappling with their own trauma, fear, and insecurities, as well as those of their students and families, amid daily bombings, air raid alarms, energy shortages, and the constant need to seek shelter in bunkers—a psychological strain for which they were neither prepared nor trained. Interviewee 5 shared that only those who have lived under occupation can truly understand its meaning:

> you could disappear, and no one would search for you, and no one would even know where you are, absolutely. Even if someone looked for you, it would be pointless. So you've turned into just a thing, not even a human, not a dog, not a cat, just absolutely nobody and nothing, not worth anything to anyone. [...] Your professional achievements and your own life are just nullified; you became zero.

He also describes a feeling of being trapped as occupation and war-torn border areas face severe restrictions on movement. As noted by Zubchenko (2023: 90), numerous Russian military checkpoints, even within urban areas, were intended to disrupt local social ties as a tool of social control. People feared searches and theft by occupying soldiers, making invisibility a survival strategy (Soroka 2023). Citizens learned to move discreetly, hide cell phones with potentially compromising messages, intercept signals to bypass Russian blocks and avoid collaboration with occupiers (Zubchenko 2023: 94). With shifting de facto borders, their identities—civic, national, ethnic, professional, gender—were also profoundly threatened (Soroka 2023).

The second major impact of the conflict on SLBs was the political pressure and competition between the warring parties for their loyalty, as SLBs are crucial to maintaining control over a territory and its inhabitants – they may provide political legitimation and a sense of normality and stability. Schools and universities, key targets for Russian occupiers, were

among the first institutions affected. In the first two months, with limited planning and facing local resistance, Russian forces adopted a lenient approach toward SLBs in Kherson, allowing them some autonomy (Honchar 2022; interviewee 1). However, political pressures grew, especially with preparations for the new school year and Moscow's plan to hold a pseudo-referendum to annex the region, scheduled to September. By late April 2022, administrative buildings were seized in Kherson city, and a Moscow-controlled military-civil government was installed, with local protests harshly suppressed.

After the Ukrainian school year ended in late April and May, Russian occupying authorities began efforts to co-opt and coerce education professionals into adopting the Russian school program, a key element of the annexation project. Middle-level administrators, school principals, and university managers became primary targets; once co-opted, they could be used to pressure other teachers and educators to align with the occupiers' agenda. In May and June, high-ranking Russian officials, including the Minister of Education, visited Kherson to award Russian school certificates to students (Honchar 2022: 5-6).

The Russian occupational authorities' efforts to recruit Ukrainian education professionals as collaborators stemmed from several factors: (a) The reopening of schools, kindergartens, and universities signals stability and well-being, a message Russian authorities have aimed to spread to both domestic and international audiences via propaganda. (b) Teachers, as educators and community figures, especially in rural areas, are seen as influential public opinion leaders who can reinforce loyalty to the regime and discourage resistance. (c) In their interactions with children, teachers can gather information about family sentiments, valuable for Russian intelligence agencies. (d) Teachers who voluntarily collaborate are likely to be more motivated and diligent in executing tasks set by occupational authorities. (e) Teachers act as agents in shaping youth attitudes toward Russia, promoting the "Russian World" (*russkiy mir*) doctrine and erasing Ukrainian identity through indoctrination.

The push to adopt the Russian school program, replacing Ukrainian with Russian as the main language instruction and imposing textbooks aligned with Kremlin propaganda, placed educators in a deep moral dilemma. The struggle for territorial control became a battle for educators' political loyalty. As stated by our interviewees, in the early months, many resisted by boycotting meetings organized by the occupiers. In response, Russian officials and collaborators escalated coercion against resisters, using veiled threats, intimidating meetings with armed officers, residential and workplace searches, and kidnappings followed by extrajudicial interrogations (and even torture) in basements—practice known as "na pidval" ("to the basement").

In Kherson and other occupied areas, some educators, particularly school principals, were detained for days; upon return, they either pledged loyalty to the occupiers or left their positions and the occupied territory. In some cases, they were not permitted to leave it. Interviewees 2 and 3, school principals, reported being arrested by heavily armed officers wearing masks. While detained in the “pidval” prison for resisting Russian directives, the occupying authorities accused them of promoting a foreign school program on “Russian soil” and warned that they could face several years of imprisonment as a consequence.

The practice of kidnappings and "pidval" interrogations was not limited to educators—it extended to all politically influential groups that offered any form of resistance to the occupying authorities, including journalists, activists, municipal servants, and local political leaders. The Ukrainian Helsinki Group (2024) claims that in Kherson alone, there were 568 cases of forced disappearance and 38 cases of torture/inhumane behavior. A report from the "Zmina" Human Rights Center (Okhotnikova et al. 2023) documented 30 educators who were kidnapped in Ukraine. Such incidents served as a warning to those who persisted in resisting. Interviewees noted that local sanctions and repression were not uniform; they varied depending on the specific Russian security agencies involved and the personal attitudes of local commanders.

Ukrainian authorities also exerted pressure on educators, warning that implementing the Russian school program or other directives from occupiers would constitute treason and collaboration with the enemy. Articles 111-1 ("On Collaborative Activity") and 111-2 ("On Assistance to the Aggressor State") of the Ukrainian Criminal Code (Verkhovna Rada 2022a)—introduced shortly after the invasion—stipulate that collaborating with occupiers, including by promoting Russian educational programs, is punishable by six months to twelve years of imprisonment and a 10- to 15-year prohibition from holding specific positions. School principals, deputy principals, and administrators face the most severe penalties. The most advised course in Ukrainian official channels was for educators to evacuate temporarily to Ukrainian-controlled regions. On April 2, 2022, the head of the Committee for Education, Science, and Innovation of the Ukrainian Parliament, issued a statement to educators in occupied areas that were facing pressure to adopt the Russian school program:

> You have two options:
> 1. To do as you are told, but in doing so, you will fall under the provisions of Article 111 of the Criminal Code regarding liability for collaborationism and treason against the State, which will result in certain restrictions and a temporary ban on holding positions.
> 2. Do not comply with what they ask and terminate your employment relationship. The State guarantees that your position and salary will be restored when we conclude the liberation of the urban settlements. (Verkhovna Rada 2022b)

Resigning and being left without a source of income is not an easy or viable option for many street-level bureaucrats. This complex moral, ethical and existential dilemma was acknowledged by Ukraine's educational ombudsman:

> I do not have the moral right to advise these individuals because I am not there; I cannot fully feel what they feel and think. The only thing is not to voluntarily cooperate with the occupiers and not to support them. If we are talking about coercion under the threat of machine guns, then we do not have the right to demand heroism from them. (Antypenko 2022)

Interview 5 recalls that people under occupation were viewed with suspicion. Both Russian and Ukrainian authorities often presumed that those who stayed either supported the new regime or were indifferent. In his words, this was a profound misjudgment, as numerous factors influenced the decision to remain in the territory (see further in the "exit strategy" section).

In summary, educators who for different reasons could not leave the occupied territory faced a profound moral and existential dilemma: collaborate with Russian forces, risking criminal penalties upon Ukraine's liberation and the stigma of being branded a traitor; or refuse to collaborate, risking job loss, income deprivation, and physical coercion from occupiers.

Finally, as the third major impact, SLBs and educators encountered three key uncertainties. First, there were questions regarding territorial control: decisions on how to act may have been influenced by expectations about the conflict's outcome and Ukraine's chances of regaining control in the near future.

The second uncertainty was the source of funding to sustain bureaucratic operations. Russia closed Ukrainian banks, gradually introduced the ruble, and severed communications (including cell phone and TV signals) with the rest of Ukraine, hindering access to Ukrainian official sites and creating risks for salary, scholarship, social benefit, and pension payments. However, as reported by our interviewees, Ukrainian banks' online services, card terminals, and payment systems continued to function to some extent, and informal channels for exchanging hryvnia and rubles also emerged. As part of a cooptation strategy, Russian officials began paying collaborators in rubles, offering higher salaries, one-time bonuses, and granting Russian citizenship to some educators and SLBs who agreed to cooperate (Yemelyanov 2022).

In an announcement made in April 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (2022b) stated that educators in occupied territories would continue receiving salaries if they kept working according to the Ukrainian school program and representatives of their educational institution could travel to Ukrainian-controlled areas for accounting procedures. Due to war conditions and restrictions imposed by occupiers, this was largely unfeasible. When

teaching became impossible, the state would place education professionals on furlough ("prostiy"), a work leave arrangement that retained at least two-thirds of their wages. Interviewees noted that, despite such uncertainties, teachers in Kherson were able to receive wages either fully or partially (if on "prostiy"), which was crucial for their survival without resorting to collaborationism. The use of electronic payment systems played an essential role, though there were suspicions that Russian authorities could cut off banking access at any time or impose further obstacles. Where school accountants had left their positions or become collaborators, normalizing payment processes took time.

The third major uncertainty involved broken connections with higher Ukrainian bureaucratic levels. School principals, teachers, and administrators could no longer reliably communicate with other state agencies. SLBs operated within a well-defined legal and political framework that required familiarity with Ukraine's national, regional, and local administrative systems. However, following the invasion, they were abruptly compeled to navigate and adapt to a new, uncertain and unclear political-administrative order imposed by the occupying authorities. These authorities, while illegitimate, exercised de facto control over the territory, wielded coercive power, and managed the allocation of resources for local public services.

The impacts of the war on street-level bureaucracy are summarized below.

Table 1. Impacts of conflicts and territorial confrontations on SLB

Second-Order Codes	First-Order Codes
High insecurity	Risks to personal life and self-devaluation
	Risks to loved ones, family members, and students
	Trauma from living with daily violence and bombings
	Destruction of public, educational, and private infrastructure
High political pressures (competition for SLBs' loyalty) and ethical dilemmas	Ethical, moral, and existential dilemmas (pressures to accept the new political order and adopt the Russian school program)
	Intimidation, threats, abusive searches, unlawful detentions, kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial interrogations ("pidval" practice)
	Risk of job loss and income deprivation
	Risk of criminal or extrajudicial punishment, as well as social stigma for collaborationism and treason
High uncertainties	Concerns and uncertainties about territorial control and war outcomes
	Concerns and uncertainties about the source and supply of material resources

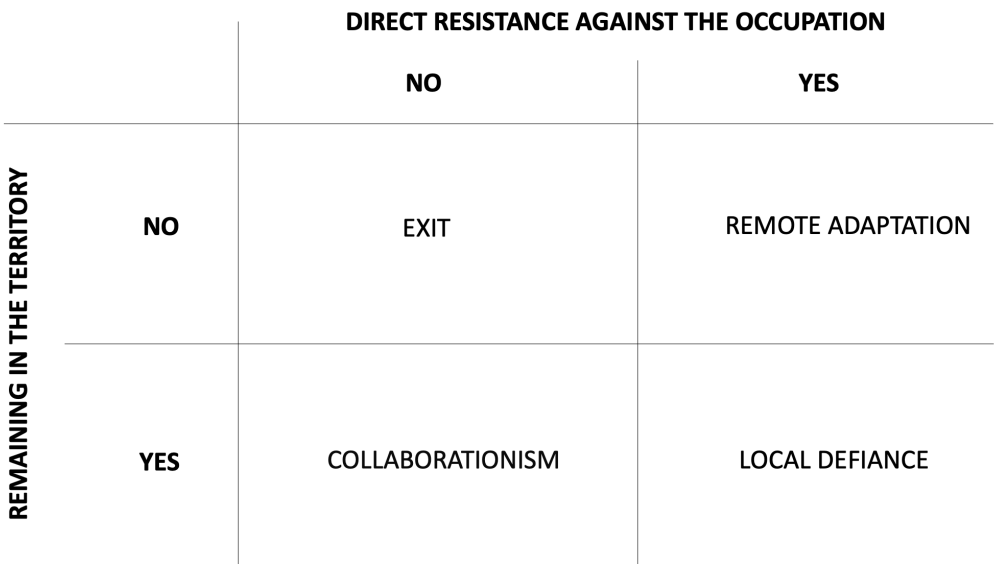
	Disruption in connections with higher echelons of the Ukrainian local, regional and national bureaucracies
	Necessity to adapt to an unknown and unclear political order

Source: elaborated by the authors.

4.2 Teachers and educators' strategies in wartime

Based on the impacts of the war outlined above, along with insights and codifications from in-depth interviews and the collected documents, we developed a typology with four main coping strategies: exit, collaborationism, remote adaptation, and defiance. This typology is structured around two SLB decisions: a) whether to remain in or leave the occupied territory, and (b) whether to engage in political resistance against the occupying forces or abstain from such actions.

Figure 1. Typology of strategies adopted by SLBs and educators in conflicts and territorial confrontations



Source: developed by the authors.

Amid the war and territorial confrontations, school principals and teachers were forced to adopt one of four strategies. Below, we analyze each strategy, highlighting their motivations and associated risks.

A. Exit

The "exit" strategy—circumventing direct resistance to invaders by leaving the occupied territory, in line with Hirschman's (1970) classic model—was among the most widely adopted approaches by Kherson's inhabitants and, to some extent, by street-level bureaucrats. Relocating to another region or country provided a safer alternative in light of the life-threatening risks posed by armed conflict, political pressures, ethical dilemmas, and uncertainties. Opting for exit required careful consideration of the economic and social prospects in the new location, as well as the personal risks associated with such a drastic decision.

By November 2022, near the end of the city's occupation, approximately 80% of Kherson's population had evacuated (Suspilne 2022a), reducing from 279,000 to an estimated 60,000 residents. In September 2022, forecasts indicated that 30% to 40% of students and at least 20% of educational professionals had left the region (Antypenko 2022).

The decision to emigrate is complex, involving both practical considerations and emotional factors. It is more viable when individuals can count on relatives in other regions or countries willing to provide shelter, access to social networks that support local integration, sufficient financial resources for relocation expenses, and prospects of finding work and housing (particularly for those with higher professional qualifications).

The Ukrainian government strongly encouraged the evacuation of occupied and frontline areas. Early in the war, temporary humanitarian corridors were established. On March 28, 2022, the Minister of Education, Serhiy Shkarlet, issued a decree instructing municipalities and educational institutions to hire displaced teachers if positions were available and to support displaced students (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine 2022a). Teachers could also take "prostiy" leave, and many Ukrainian schools, particularly in high-risk areas, implemented online learning (as shown further). Modest monthly cash transfers for internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been in place since Russian aggression began in 2014, though the coverage of this benefit was significantly reduced since March 2024 (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine 2024).

The decision to remain in the territory is fraught with significant complexities and risks, but it is also driven by rational considerations. Concerns include insufficient resources for survival in a new location, difficulties in securing employment and housing, lack of support networks, and fears of severing ties with native places, as well as losing contact with family and friends. Many people feel a deep attachment to their homes and communities, as they embody a lifetime of memories and meaningful connections (interviewee 6). There is also the fear of losing property, as occurred in Donbas after 2014, where homes of those who migrated

were confiscated by Russian-backed militia and allocated to new residents. Starting over, especially amid uncertainties such as career changes or leaving elderly relatives who require care or are unwilling to migrate, can be daunting (interviewee 5).

Migration also involves logistical concerns. In the early months of the conflict, many feared crossing multiple military checkpoints in humanitarian corridors. Interviewee 5 noted that Ukrainian authorities did not offer a clear evacuation plan; most evacuees had to organize their departure independently, often paying high fees to private transporters, and the corridors posed risks of bombardment and extensive searches by soldiers at Russian-controlled checkpoints. Currently, there are no formal corridors between occupied and unoccupied areas in Kherson. While some SLBs, such as police officers and employees of the regional prosecutor's office, received organized evacuation support—allegedly due to the heightened risks associated with their politically sensitive work—teachers and education professionals were largely left to fend for themselves (Homanyuk et al. 2022; interviewee 5).

Finally, some individuals may have chosen to stay due to complicity with the occupiers and the "Russian world" (*russkiy mir*) doctrine—a perspective held by a minority, but still notorious, as we explore further in the next section.

B. Collaborationism

Among the strategies, "collaborationism"—remaining in the territory and aligning with the occupiers—is arguably the most controversial, involving deep ethical concerns and moral dilemmas. Nonetheless, it does not always reflect a conscious decision to betray the state. Collaborationism can be divided into two types: "passive," which is generally associated with coercion by the occupiers, and "active," often linked to cooptation and ideological alignment with their political agenda. As with other strategies, individuals weigh the potential harms and benefits of their positioning.

"Passive" collaborationism

In general, two primary motivations drive "passive" collaborationism: adaptation to adversity and fear of coercion.

The adaptation can be seen as a voluntary choice prompted by the desire to maintain employment under the new (geo)political realities of occupation and the fear of losing income. In this case, teachers are not driven by ideology but by the need to survive in difficult

circumstances, adapting to new professional requirements. It includes idealists who believe that their vocation remains unaffected by political upheavals. They may not see themselves as collaborators, claiming that their work is apolitical.

One instance of this is an English teacher from Kakhovka who agreed to continue teaching at a local school reopened under the Russian educational program (Center for Journalistic Investigations 2023b). According to former colleagues, her collaboration was simply a means to keep her job and a steady income, with no pro-Russian sentiments or career ambitions. As security in Kakhovka worsened in October 2022, she left via a safe corridor through Ukraine to Europe, where she obtained refugee status.

Fear of disrupting daily life may have been a significant factor driving some educators toward an adaptive stance. Faced with uncertainties around relocating, some teachers who had to choose between "exit" and "collaborationism" opted for the latter. Interviewee 6 suggested that in small towns, indifference toward territorial control—as long as it did not drastically affect daily life—may have contributed to passive collaboration. For instance, in Henichesk, many local officials retained their positions after annexation. For some educators, the need to care for disabled and elder relatives who refused to leave compelled them to remain in the occupied area, making them unwilling hostages of their circumstances.

Resistance might seem viable if there are expectations of Ukraine regaining control in the short to medium term. However, without positive prospects, resistance becomes less practical. According to interviewee 2, officials who pressured her to collaborate claimed that Russia’s conquest of new territories would only increase. Russian-language billboards in Kherson reinforced messages like "Russia will be here forever" and "Russians and Ukrainians are one single people," while Ukrainian flags, symbols, and books were gradually removed and replaced by Russian ones in public institutions.

Additionally, individuals may hold negative views of the occupiers but still comply with their mandates, acting as passive collaborators, due to various threats, such as: persecution, abduction, detention, violence, torture, or other physical and psychological punishments (which have indeed occurred in some well-documented cases), as well as fear of reprisals against family members and loved ones.

A particularly disturbing incident occurred in March 2023 in the village of Tavrychanka. The Russian occupational administration attempted to reopen a school under Russian school program. Most Ukrainian teachers had left, and those remaining refused to collaborate. In response, Russian soldiers placed bags over their heads, threatened them with death, and later released them nearby (Center for Journalistic Investigations 2023c). Interviewee 5 recounted

being coerced into recording a video expressing support for Russian authorities. After Russian soldiers searched his home and office, he realized that refusal could result in the "pidval" treatment—torture, assault, or other forms of violence—as had happened to some of his acquaintances.

Following the liberation of Kupiansk in the Kharkiv region in September 2022, a local school principal reported that the occupiers had used various forms of pressure on educators, including intimidating interrogations, meetings conducted in the presence of heavily armed personnel, phone inspections, searches of homes and workplaces, detention, and psychological torture (Sokolova-Stekh 2022). All subjects were mandated to be taught in Russian, with Russian books and supplies brought in, although teachers were reluctant to use them. Ukrainian state and cultural symbols were removed from the school and replaced with Russian ones. The principal noted:

> [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.

When the Ukrainian army reclaimed the territory, the principal and other educators were interrogated by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) on suspicion of collaborationism. Many SLBs and civilians fled to Russia, just a few kilometers away, fearing prosecution. Among those who stayed, some reported feelings of depression and shame for collaborating. The principal shared that, during her tenure, she received disapproving calls from former colleagues who criticized her decision to collaborate and accept a salary from the occupiers. Authorities argued that she could have relocated to a safer area to avoid collaborationism and continued teaching remotely. However, a colleague defended her, suggesting that only active collaborators—those who publicly supported the occupiers by waving flags and joining pro-Russia rallies—should face punishment (Sokolova-Stekh 2022). Another colleague added:

> God is the judge of all. I don't want to be a judge or a lawyer. We need to analyze each case […] Do you understand what occupation is? If you don't want to cooperate – they will speak with you in a more "convincing" manner.

"Active" collaborationism

In regard to "active" collaborationism, one can outline three main motivations: material benefits, career advancements, and ideology/ identity considerations.

As mentioned above, Moscow employed a combination of coercion and cooptation strategies. Significant investments were directed toward rebuilding public and private

buildings, coupled with promises of higher salaries, enhanced social benefits, and pensions—all aimed at projecting the image that the "new territories" would be better off under Russian control. When Russian forces withdrew from Kherson city in November 2022, the appointed occupying mayor warned that people would eventually see the economic advantages of being with Russia, as some public services (like gas delivery) were offered for free. He remarked that "the youth and children who went to the square with tears of happiness and joy" [over the city's liberation by the Ukrainian army] "will probably understand this over time" when the usual fees return (Krym Inform 2022a).

Russian state media widely circulated photos of a reconstructed Mariupol in a report titled, "In 30 years, Ukraine hasn't done as much." (Narmania 2022). The promise of high compensation was a key motivator for undecided teachers. By mid-2022, Russian authorities in Kherson were offering teachers and school principal relatively high wages compared to those Russia (NUSh 2024).

Aware of the risk that occupational authorities might "buy off" teachers in the absence of financial stability, the Ukrainian government legally ensured that teachers unable to perform their duties due to the war would receive the aforementioned work leave ("prostiy"), with monthly payments equivalent to two-thirds of their base salary (around $150), regardless of their location. While modest, this support has encouraged many educators in occupied territories to resist collaboration. As a teacher from Kherson expressed:

> 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. Yes, it was very frightening, but no one threatened us with weapons; people just wanted a bigger slice of the pie. (Pavlenko 2023)

Interviewee 5 noted that most school teachers resisted collaboration due to these payments; however, there was uncertainty about whether Russians would continue allowing salary payments or whether these payments might face further reductions. Despite these legal income assurances, in May 2024, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science ordered the termination of employment and payments for teachers who remained in occupied territories, citing the impossibility of local authorities to ensure these funds reached the intended recipients (Center for Journalistic Investigations 2024).

Those engaging in "passive" collaborationism might consider certain benefits of cooptation, but those involved in "active" collaborationism typically enjoy greater rewards, including career promotions to high-ranking official and political positions. Former political

figures saw opportunities for swift advancement. For instance, Vladimir Saldo, previously a mayor and deputy, became a de facto governor, while Kirill Stremousov, an activist and blogger who had unsuccessfully run for mayor and deputy, was appointed vice-governor. Individuals without prior administrative experience were also appointed to high-ranked positions due to their early support for the invaders and the "Russian world" doctrine—some likely had previous connections with Russian intelligence. In short, swift allegiance offered rapid career advancement and access to political and material resources.

The occupation also provided a path for educators with prior legal issues or dismissals to reclaim their former positions. A school principal in Kakhovka found guilty of corruption by a Ukrainian court in 2018 had been dismissed but was reappointed by the occupational administration (Center for Journalistic Investigations 2023a). Collaborationism, therefore, became a way for some individuals to reclaim their lost status, while the occupiers, in return, gained experienced professionals to implement Russian educational programs.

Beyond career ambition, "active" collaborationism may also have been driven by ideological, cultural, and identity factors. This group of "active" teacher-collaborators often did not hide their pro-Russian sympathies even before the full-scale invasion, viewing Russia as a powerful and fraternal state. It often concerns educators of retirement age, who are nostalgic for their youth in the Soviet Union and perceive the occupation as a return to a stable past.

According to the outdated 2001 Ukrainian census, 14.1% of Kherson region's population identified as ethnic Russians (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001) and 24.86% reported Russian as their mother tongue (Datatowel 2001); in Kherson city, these numbers were 20.0% and 42.52%, respectively. Being an ethnic Russian or a Russian speaker does not necessarily indicate alignment with Putin's "Russian world" ideology, as demonstrated by the strong resistance to occupation and migration from Eastern and Southern regions. Standardized census figures obscure Ukraine's complex regional, ethnic, and linguistic landscapes, as well as its hybridity (see Sasse, 2023). Nonetheless, a minority of "active" collaborators may have aligned with the occupiers not only for material gains but also out of identity considerations, sharing the view that Kherson is and should be part of the "Russian world."

An illustrative example of "active" collaborationism that combines material benefits, career advancement, and ideological or identity motivations within the educational sphere in Kherson is Tatiana Kuzmich, the current vice-governor of the occupying administration (as of January 2025). In an interview with a Russian newspaper (Sharypova 2022), Kuzmich stated that she had been teaching Russian language and literature since 1989 and had long questioned

the “oppression of the Russian language” in Ukraine. She cited examples such as the replacement of Russian literature classes with world literature (actually, Russian literature remained, but with less prominence) and the shift from Russian to Ukrainian as the primary language in schools that previously taught in Russian.

In 2003, she founded the Russian ethnic community "Rusich" in Kherson, which received funding from the Russian government. Kuzmich regularly met with Russian diplomats and attended cultural and political events in Russia and occupied Crimea. According to her, from 2019 onwards [five years after the beginning of the Russian aggression], receiving resources from Russia became practically impossible. She was criminally charged with espionage and treason against the state and was detained on one occasion. On the date of the Russian full-scale invasion, she awaited a court hearing.

Following the invasion, Kuzmich joined a group of collaborators, the "Salvation Committee for Peace and Order," and quickly rose through the ranks of the occupying administration, eventually being appointed (occupying) vice-minister of Education and Science of Kherson. Members of this committee experienced similar rapid career advancement. The following excerpt from her October 2022 interview in the Russian press sheds light on Kherson’s eight months under occupation:

> 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 the teachers to return to work]. [...] But they hid; they were afraid. Only a few are working now. (Yemelyanov 2022)

The interview reveals that, despite months of occupation and pressure, most principals and teachers in Kherson did not adopt a collaborationist stance ("active" or "passive") and did not align with the ideological tenets of the "Russian world" doctrine (as confirmed by our interviewees). While Kuzmich materially benefited from her political stance, gaining appointments as vice-minister and later vice-governor, her allegiance to the occupiers was not merely opportunistic—it was also rooted in her identity and prior political-ideological beliefs.

Embracing "active" collaborationism carries significant risks. Individuals may face criminal liability if Ukraine regains control, social stigma, psychological pressure, and threats from colleagues due to their morally contentious stance. Nationally, they could face media exposure, inclusion in traitor databases (with personal information disclosed), or even threats

to their life, as evidenced by bombings and shootings targeting mid-level collaborators. "Passive" collaborationism, while less severe, can still lead to social stigma and potential legal consequences under the Ukrainian Criminal Code.

Interviewee 1 noted that while Russia applied violence against defiers in Kherson, she believed those who chose collaborationism did so primarily for economic and career gains rather than out of coercion or intimidation. Interviewee 5 emphasized that while career ambitions and material incentives were major motivators, fear of coercion and ideological support for Russia also played a role for some educators. Meanwhile, interviewees 3 and 4, both school principals who resisted the Russian school program, endured physical and psychological coercion, including threats, harsh interrogations, and nearly four days in the "pidval" prison under difficult conditions. In some cases, individuals reportedly became collaborators after torture in the "pidval" and warned others that they too would face similar treatment if they refused to cooperate (as reported by interviewees 3 and 4).

Last but not least, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and regional prosecutor's offices have conducted thorough investigations into collaborationism and state treason cases. In January 2023, shortly after Kherson was liberated, the Regional Prosecutor's Office investigated and reported 140 cases of suspected treason, collaborationist activities, and assistance to the aggressor state (Badyuk 2023). Many collaborators fled to Russian-occupied areas when the city was retaken. In November 2023, a school principal who actively collaborated was sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison for blocking teachers' access to the school, recruiting them for the Russian school program, and illegally providing confiscated housing (from people that refused to collaborate and left the occupation) to teachers from Russia (Ryba 2023). Interviewee 5 noted that, while teachers can face formal charges for collaborationism, most legal cases have targeted only middle-level managers (principals and directors), leading to public dissatisfaction over the lack of accountability for several former collaborators.

C. Remote adaptation

"Remote adaptation," which entails resisting occupation while not remaining in the occupied territory, has proven to be a promising strategy for coping with the effects of war. Numerous schools and universities in occupied or frontline areas transitioned to online operations, with teachers and administrators working from other parts of Ukraine or abroad. Many students that migrated elsewhere or stayed in occupied areas have remained connected

to their schools and teachers. Remote teaching was bolstered by advances in communication technologies, the digitalization of academic and government services, and the experience gained by educators, students, and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of social networks, messaging apps, and teaching platforms.

The remote adaptation offers several advantages. Bearing similarities with the exit strategy, it reduces risks to life and trauma, as well as diminishes political threats and pressures from conflicting parties. Employment uncertainties are greatly reduced: educators maintain their institutional ties with their organizations and the national bureaucracy, continue receiving salaries, and operate within familiar organizational structures without needing to adapt to new institutional frameworks or educational programs imposed by occupiers. Additionally, it provides a psychological benefit, fostering a sense of belonging to a resilient community and a national resistance movement, while preserving connections with colleagues, superiors, and students.

Nonetheless, remote adaptation also faces challenges and risks. First, it requires extensive coordination among the institution's staff, higher bureaucratic authorities, parents and students. Teachers and administrative staff must negotiate to leave the occupied territory and arrange to continue their work remotely in a safer location. Second, while medium-term success has been achieved in many cases, the long-term effectiveness remains uncertain, particularly with regard to new enrollments and courses that require practical, hands-on learning. Third, practical issues persist for those in occupied areas, including degree validation, competition with physical (offline) institutions under the control of occupiers, and limitations in digital infrastructure for students (such as appropriate devices and internet quality). Frequent blackouts and internet outages in Ukrainian cities, resulting from attacks on critical infrastructure, impact class quality. In occupied areas, Russian authorities have attempted to block Ukrainian websites and cell phone signals, compelling students to use VPNs to access Ukrainian content safely. Finally, there is the risk of political coercion against families of students in occupied areas who participate in Ukrainian remote learning—a concern raised by most interviewees.

One of the most successful examples of remote adaptation took place at Kherson State University. In the early weeks of the invasion, its buildings became shelters for university community members and civilians fearful of bombings and the occupiers' presence (Klym 2022); classes shifted online. According to interviewee 4, after a month of occupation and facing technical challenges, the academic council reached a consensus to temporarily relocate staff to a safer, non-occupied region. Soon after, the university administration coordinated with the Ministry of Education, which issued a decree to formalize the relocation.

In April 2022, a physical management center was set up at Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in the Ivano-Frankivsk region in western Ukraine. This center handled critical bureaucratic functions such as salary and scholarship payments, website and academic services, student transfers, and diploma issuance, along with occasional in-person student activities. The relocation was essential for maintaining connections with Ukrainian bureaucratic systems and ensuring access to state accounting and operational tools (Kotyelnikova 2022). Classes remained online, with teachers also offering informal psychological support to students under heightened tension. In June 2022, vice-rector Maksim Vinnyk, which had remained in Kherson, was abducted for several days; after his release, he left the occupation (Suspilne 2022b).

To date university's management center remains in Ivano-Frankivsk, with a reduced number of employees in Kherson city (Kherson Rayon 2023). From the city's liberation to April 2024, the university's main buildings endured four attacks by Russian forces (Moklyak 2024). Kherson State University has withstood three major wars and occupations (the First and Second World Wars and the current invasion) and stands as a symbol of resilience for Ukraine (Sviy Dim 2022). Other higher educational institutions in Kherson, which also endured major wars, have followed similar procedures, temporarily relocating to safer regions.

Many primary schools have also adopted remote adaptation. As of October 2023, the Ministry of Education and Science reported that 65 institutions in occupied areas of Kherson were operating remotely (Kuberska 2023). Interviewees 1, 2, and 3 shared that, after leaving the region, they continued managing their schools remotely. According to interviewee 1, teachers played a critical role in providing psychological support, especially for teenagers. They supported patriotic feelings toward Ukraine but discouraged emotive actions against occupying forces that could endanger the students. Some students may have also attended Russian-controlled schools, but Ukrainian remote teachers avoided probing into these sensitive matters.

The exact number of schools opened by Russian occupying forces remains unclear. Reports suggest that in some areas, few if any schools were opened. Factors such as proximity to the frontlines, emigration, low adherence to collaborationism, and reluctance of Russian teachers to work in dangerous areas likely contributed to this outcome. In Nova Kakhovka, the region's second-largest city, which remains under occupation along the frontline of the Dnipro River, all schools adopted remote adaptation, with staff operating from Ukrainian-controlled areas; by August 2024, Russian authorities managed to open only one school, as reported by interviewees 2 and 3. Interviewee 2, which was arrested in the "pidval" by occupiers, mentioned that out of 650 students, more than 500 remained after transitioning to remote learning, with

nearly 250 still in occupied areas, accessing classes as best they could. Challenges for the school included loss of teachers, difficulties in validating grades for students attending schools abroad, and a lack of formal protocols to address the needs for those in occupation.

Interviewees 2 and 5 highlighted further difficulties, including bureaucratic obstacles and insufficient support from the Ukrainian state. They emphasized the need for teachers and students to feel supported by the state and questioned the absence of salary supplements for displaced teachers. In their words, some educators reportedly returned to occupied areas due to the high cost of living in relocation areas. Ukrainian educators' wages are significantly low.

The Ukrainian state faces a real dilemma. With nearly five million internally displaced persons, social demands are intense. Meanwhile, military spending, territorial and human resource losses, and limited international aid make meeting these demands challenging. Backed by greater economic resources, Russia exploits these gaps to strengthen its cooptation strategies.

D. Local defiance

"Local defiance" (or "sabotage") involves street-level bureaucrats remaining in occupied territory while openly or covertly resisting the occupation. This high-risk strategy includes actions like protesting, sharing information about enemy troops with state security agencies, and discreetly maintaining links with Ukrainian bureaucracy. For teachers and educators, defiance can mean openly or secretly refusing to implement the Russian school program, ignoring other occupiers' directives, or abandoning their posts.

As with other strategies, defiance requires weighing risks and benefits. Key benefits include psychological and moral satisfaction, as it allows individuals to actively resist the threats against their community. This choice is also influenced by subjective assessments of liberation prospects by the Ukrainian army: if liberation seems likely, defiance may be worthwhile; if unlikely, it may seem not prudent.

The occupiers reinforced control over school principals and SLBs through "exemplary" repression of defiant individuals. For example, a school principal in Kherson was detained in the "pidval," later recorded a video supporting the Russians, and eventually left the occupation—her case became widely known among local educators, as stated by interviewee 1. Interviewee 3 recounted that during her time in the "pidval," she met female prisoners who had been tortured and raped for allegedly aiding the Ukrainian army with coordinates of Russian troops.

Defiance is difficult to sustain over time. As occupiers consolidate control, their surveillance and repression systems become more effective, with networks of collaborators and informants reporting defiers. According to interviewee 5, mutual distrust was widespread, as people often did not know who might be collaborating with the occupiers. Pro-Ukrainian individuals faced the risk of being reported by neighbors or colleagues to the occupying authorities. This pervasive mistrust reminded interviewee 6 of the harsh Stalinist surveillance culture and purges during the 1930s, stirring fears of history repeating itself. In a notorious local incident, a teacher reportedly denounced her pro-Ukrainian school principal (interviewee 1). In the "pidval" prison, interviewee 3 was pressured to identify educators with strong pro-Ukrainian views. When news spread that the Ukrainian army had entered Kherson city, many feared it was a trap set by the occupiers to identify disloyal citizens eager to celebrate the event (interviewees 5 and 6). As a survival strategy, people developed public, private, and emotional coping mechanisms.

Educators who secretly teach the Ukrainian school program or work remotely for Ukrainian institutions risk detection and harsh punishment. Additionally, those refusing to work under new conditions may feel compelled to return if they lack economic resources for an extended period.

In the early months of occupation, before invaders had full territorial control, defiance was more feasible. As evidenced by interviews and collaborator accounts presented above, most teachers and principals in Kherson refused to collaborate. Some continued conducting online classes and concealed school documents, equipment (to prevent looting), and Ukrainian-language books—especially those on literature and history, which Russian propagandists labeled as "Nazi" content—to protect them from destruction, as occurred in Mariupol and other cities (Miroshnikova 2023; Persikov 2022). Interviewee 1 asserted that staff hid equipment in their homes (a practice also mentioned by other interviewees) and destroyed documents showing some fathers' involvement in the Donbas war, which could pose a risk to them if discovered by Russian officers. Interviewee 3 reported being released from the "pidval" only after ensuring her school's equipment was returned. Interviewees also expressed fears that Russian soldiers might find pro-Ukrainian messages on their phones or pro-Ukrainian books in their homes.

The collaborator Kirill Stremousov, deputy head of the Russian military-civilian administration of the Kherson region (deceased in an alleged car accident in November 2022), acknowledged the local defiance by educators:

> We planned to reopen schools after May 10 [2022], but the sabotage by some teachers, who have crossed the line of adequacy, [hindered it]—everywhere people say they continue to teach (according to the Ukrainian program), this is fascism, this story continues. (Krym Inform 2022b)

The politicization of street-level bureaucracy in conflict zones can heighten workplace insecurity. Teachers who resisted occupation reported feelings of shock, surprise, and frustration when close colleagues joined the invaders, taking over control of their schools. Collaborators blocked defiant teachers from accessing school buildings and their belongings. Their cabinets were confiscated, they were formally forbidden from entering the school, locks were replaced, and armed personnel closely monitored the premises (interviewees 2 and 3). Some schools in Kherson secretly continued teaching the Ukrainian program online even after the Russian program began in September 2022 (Troyan 2023). Interviewee 5 claimed that he kept teaching remotely at his higher education institution and continued to receive his salary; he withheld this information when questioned by occupying authorities. As mentioned, the ability to receive full or partial salaries from the Ukrainian state significantly supported teachers' defiance.

Defiance was also evident among civilians who refused to send their children to Russian-controlled schools. The occupiers attempted to manage these cases through cooptation, offering stipends and humanitarian aid to families whose children attended these schools (Pryseds′ka 2022). Rumors circulated that parents who did not enroll their children in Russian-run schools risked losing custody (Pavlenko 2023), though occupying authorities officially denied these claims.

5. **Discussion**

Identifying the war's impacts on street-level bureaucrats and the strategies they adopt to cope contributes significantly to street-level bureaucracy literature, especially on the subfields associated with SLBs' ethical dilemmas and their role in wars, crises, and political violence.

As previous research noted, street-level bureaucrats are not just policy implementers—their values and attitudes directly shape how policy unfolds (Lipsky 2010 [1980]). Our analysis contributes to the theory by showing that their strategies involve complex calculations, balancing urgent and difficult decisions, material interests, personal values, worldviews, identity, political ideologies, emotional ties to their native places, concerns for those affected by the policy, and expectations about the conflict's outcomes.

In a war setting, their discretion is amplified, as they must decide whether to stay in the territory or migrate to a safer area and whether to resist the occupiers or prioritize self-preservation. Street-level bureaucrats' connections to their territory influence how they respond to adversity (Lotta et al, 2022a; Lotta and Marques, 2020). In the present study, we demonstrate that uncertainties over who will control the territory are crucial to SLBs' survival choices. Given that each territory is under the rule of a political power with defined boundaries, neutrality is impossible—bureaucrats must choose a side, a decision fraught with profound risks and moral dilemmas. Even non-action, like abandoning one's work, becomes a political stance and a form of defiance.

Crises create unpredictable dynamics; prior experiences often fall short of addressing new challenges and pressures (Henderson 2014; Dunlop et al. 2020). Governance structures become destabilized, causing significant anxieties for SLB (Farazmand 2007). This study corroborates these findings and makes an original contribution by showing a unique stress factor linked to territorial confrontations not previously observed: uncertainties over territorial control, connections with both legitimate and enemy's state bureaucracy, and the source of resources needed to sustain SLBs and their services.

In conflicts, SLBs face anxieties related to exposure to violence, bombings, death threats, and military checkpoint inspections (Ramon et al. 2006; Strier et al. 2021). We found the same patterns in the Ukrainian case. SLBs face life-threatening risks from (a) the violent dynamics of territorial confrontation and (b) political pressures from occupying forces, including intimidatory interrogations and "exemplary" kidnappings, such as those seen in the "pidval" practices. While not widespread, these violent acts may have effectively deterred other SLBs from resistance and defiance. Alongside coercion, occupation forces employed cooptation instruments, offering career advancement, security, status, and material benefits.

Our paper also contributes to the theory by evidencing another pressure point: the deep ethical and moral dilemmas faced by local actors in conflict settings (see also Elsana et al. 2023; Weissman 2011). In Ukraine, these dilemmas were uniquely complex. SLB are crucial for territorial control and the sense of political normality, stability, and power legitimation. Education became a cultural and ideological battleground, with Russia using it to legitimize territorial annexation and assimilate the local population. Teachers faced a difficult choice: accept Russian mandates (implementing the Russian school program), risking criminal judgment and stigma for "betraying" Ukraine, or refuse to collaborate and face material, psychological, or even physical violence from Russian forces. Any decision carried profound trade-offs and negative outcomes.

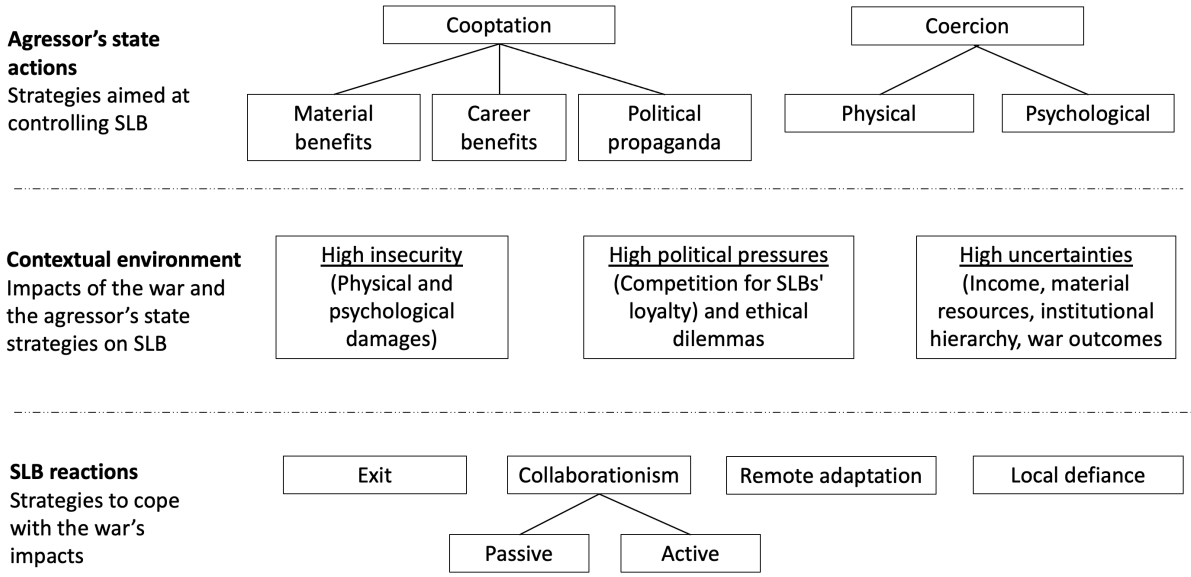
Studies have outlined political tensions among SLBs with differing identities and views in conflicts (Semigina and Gusak 2015; Semigina 2017; Strier et al. 2021). In Ukraine, we observed similar polarization between those who collaborated with occupiers and those who resisted. SLBs operated in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, fearing that colleagues or citizens who secretly collaborated might betray their resistance efforts.

Some studies have examined the strategies employed by SLBs in crises and conflict (Brodkin 2021; Lotta et al. 2022a), including adaptation, coping, resistance, and policy abandonment. We ad to the theory by developing a typology for armed conflicts and territorial confrontations, focusing on SLBs' decisions to remain in the territory and directly resist occupation. Each strategy carries its own risks and challenges. "Remote adaptation" proved the most successful and resilient, while "local defiance" was the riskiest. "Collaborationism" presents significant ethical and moral dilemmas, while "exit" raises concerns about job security, income, and adjusting to a new location.

Last but not least, while exit, collaborationism, and defiance strategies are not entirely new in the literature, the "remote adaptation" strategy offers a novel approach with promising potential for future research on SLBs in crisis and dysfunctional settings. Initially implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, this strategy has proven effective in the war in Ukraine. Leveraging new communication technologies, educators can maintain connections with students in occupied areas and abroad. For the Ukrainian state, remote adaptation serves as a resilience tool, helping preserve ties with citizens and fostering their continued loyalty.

The chart below (Figure 2) summarizes the three dimensions covered in the paper: the aggressor state’s actions, the contextual environments (impacts of the war), and SLB reactions. These dimensions can be further analyzed in other war contexts, including in former major conflicts, to enhance theoretical understanding of SLB in adverse conditions.

Figure 2. SLB in wars



Source: developed by the authors.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this research hold both theoretical and empirical significance for understanding contexts involving wars, armed conflicts, political violence, and territorial confrontations. We made a significant step in identifying and theorizing the instruments employed by belligerent states in their attempts to exert control over street-level bureaucrats, the overall impacts of wars on SLB, and the strategies adopted by SLB to cope with these adversities, underlying the motivations, risks, and concerns involved.

While this research offers valuable contributions, some limitations should be acknowledged. This study focused on an extreme case and relied on a small sample of interviewees selected through the "snowball" method, as well as on content analysis of secondary sources such as media, NGO, and government reports. While these methodological strategies are recommended for high-risk and violent settings, they naturally present certain limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, due to ethical considerations and concerns with respondants' security, we did not interview individuals currently on the other side of the front line. As a result, apart from the information gathered from secondary sources, their perspectives could not be fully explored. Lastly, while remote ethnography is a practical approach in conflict settings, it inevitably lacks some of the nuanced insights that are typically gained through on-site ethnographic work.

As part of a future research agenda, several promising areas could deepen our understanding of street-level bureaucrats in war contexts. Firstly, it would be valuable to examine whether our findings on education professionals also apply to other categories of SLBs, such as healthcare workers, emergency workers, and police officers. This would help identify which characteristics, motivations, and concerns are common across SLBs and which are specific to each field. Secondly, our findings could be tested in other conflict settings worldwide, as well as in different regions of Ukraine, using a larger sample, to assess the broader generalizability of these insights. Thirdly, future research could explore how the nature of conflict (e.g., interstate or intrastate war, organized crime, or ethnic violence), the characteristics of the belligerent actors (e.g., state or non-state), and the territorial configuration (e.g., rural or urban) influence the strategies SLBs develop to cope with hardships. Finally, each of the three overarching wars' impacts, as well as the four strategies outlined in our typology, warrants more in-depth analysis in future studies. The "remote adaptation" strategy, given its novelty and potential as a resilient tool in violent environments, make it especially deserving of further exploration.

The findings of this study may open new avenues for an emerging research agenda on the role of street-level bureaucrats in wars and political violence—circumstances that, regrettably, have become increasingly common worldwide.

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Appendix

Annex 1. Interviews conducted with education professionals from Kherson region in 2024

Code	Sex	Profession	Institution	Period in Occupied Territories in 2022	Municipality
1	F	School principal	Primary/ Secondary Education	Partially	Kherson
2	F	School principal	Primary/ Secondary Education	Partially	Nova Kakhovka
3	F	School principal	Primary/ Secondary Education	Partially	Nova Kakhovka
4	M	Administrative manager	Higher Education	Partially	Kherson
5	M	Professor	Higher Education	Fully	Kherson
6	F	Professor	Higher Education	Fully	Kherson

Source: elaborated by the authors.

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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.

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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.

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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.
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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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