



Article

## Russian teachers dealing with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a classroom issue

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**Keywords:** controversial issues, sensitive topics, open classroom climate, pedagogical strategies in disruptive moments, teachers' beliefs

### Highlights

- Despite external pressure, there was a space for political discussion in the class, at least in the first weeks of the invasion.
- Teachers' approaches differed based on their priorities: emotional support, democratic civic education, teacher-student relationships, political proselytism, or avoidance.
- Attending to students' private emotions came into conflict with positing their political passions.
- High professional status and strong school community support teachers in taking responsibility in times of crisis.

**Purpose:** This study investigates teachers' professional judgement about Russia's war on Ukraine as an unplanned, controversial classroom issue.

**Design:** It employs 26 interviews with Russian teachers collected during the invasion's first month.

**Findings:** The analysis identifies six situations and five teaching approaches that emerged in response to these, with varying degrees of student voice and political commitment. The inclusion of student voice is limited by perceived student passivity, lack of skill, and political disagreement with students. Satisfaction with the status quo, lack of social status, and fear of harming students were obstacles to pursuing political commitment.

**Research implications:** By exploring the dynamics of depoliticisation in the classroom, this article adds to the literature on the co-construction of authoritarianism in Russia. It also highlights practices of resistance and 'everyday politics' stemming from teacher professionalism as a function of individual and structural factors.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was met internally by diverse emotional and political responses (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2023) and followed by new repressive laws, which criminalised 'discrediting the Russian army' and in practice meant prohibition of any forms of anti-war protest. Using the words 'invasion' or 'war' was penalised, as the official term to use became 'special military operation'. Apart from de-facto martial law, the teaching context was shaped by the state's effort to use school as an instrument of pro-war propaganda (Akhlaya, 2023). Different guidelines were distributed by national and regional agencies that obliged schools to participate in various 'online lessons', conduct war-related lessons using provided materials, disseminate misinformation in chats with parents, organise student performances and post on social media in support of the invasion. Teachers also received special materials containing anticipated students' questions and recommended teacher answers. In other words, teachers were expected to act according to an explicit and politically defined framework, which left no space for controversy regarding the invasion.

However, research on propaganda (Alyukov, 2023; Sharafutdinova, 2022) and educational policy implementation (Goodlad, 1979; Ball et al., 2011) suggests that it is not a linear 'top-down' process. Despite external pressure, teachers rely on their judgement regarding controversial issues (Ho, Alviar-Martin & Leviste, 2014; Chong et al., 2022; Goldberg, 2017; Dunn, Sondel, Baggett, 2019). Against this background, this study investigates teachers' professional judgement about classroom discussions of Russia's war on Ukraine as an unplanned, controversial and sensitive issue. It focuses on the approaches teachers choose in response to different classroom situations and factors that can explain those choices.

## 2 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

Controversial issues are usually defined as 'problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values' (Stradling, 1984). Such issues are contextual and ever-changing and require a teacher's professional judgment about their selection and framing (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Defining issues as open or settled is a choice teachers as curriculum actors make, and this choice is inherently political (Pratama, 2022; Geller, 2020). It is common among scholars to argue against teaching certain issues as open to avoid relativism and 'bothsidesism' (Journell, 2018; Conrad, 2020; Wansink et al., 2018).

Research on teachers' approaches shows a great diversity not limited to avoiding such issues or including them – teachers might treat an issue as open, but privilege still one perspective (Hess, 2009), try to find common ground by smoothing the edges (Kello, 2016), focus on literacy skills instead of the issue (Pollak et al., 2018), deliberately provoke the students (Flensner, 2020; Parra et al, 2022), deny the controversy by reinforcing dominant narrative (Goldberg, 2017) or teaching counter-curriculum (Tamir, 2015). Teacher's decision-making regarding such issues is situational and heavily influenced by their context

and professional beliefs (Ho et al., 2017; Savenije, Wansink, Logtenberg, 2022; Dunn, Sondel, Baggett, 2019). Recent research also pays attention to classroom political issues that emerge unplanned (Cassar, Oosterheert, & Meijer) or in schools' 'grey areas' (Jayusi, Erlich Ron, & Gindi, 2023) and require teacher's extensive professional judgement.

A safe environment and strong teacher-student relationships are prerequisites to classroom discussion (Barton & Avery, 2016; Maurissen, Claes & Barber, 2018; Siegel-Stechler, 2023; Wansink et al., 2023). Controversial issues are, however, discomforting, especially if they deal with collective trauma or touch student's identity. They also bring in a diversity of opinions that can be unpleasant for students, which requires a trade-off between a safe space and an open climate (Pace, 2019). It has also been shown that teachers tend to overestimate the students' sensitivity and prioritise their comfort, depriving students of learning opportunities that controversial issues bring (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Sheppard & Levy, 2019; Keegan & Vaughan, 2023). Instead of a safe space, teachers are encouraged to think of their classroom as a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013), as a classroom of disagreement (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019) or as a playground of democracy (Parra et al., 2021) and to practise pedagogy of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). However, dealing with students' emotions is a complicated task, and that is probably why teachers avoid controversial discussions in more diverse and 'complicated' classes (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Campbell, 2007; Knowles, 2020; Cohen & Bekerman, 2022).

Pedagogy of political trauma is one of the frameworks used to discuss appropriate teacher responses to deeply emotional political events (Sondel, Baggett, Dunn, 2018; Wansink, de Graaf, Berghuis, 2021). It suggests three teaching strategies: providing a safe space, attending to emotional needs, developing civic dispositions, fostering critical consciousness, and supporting direct action. Similarly, in a pedagogy of discomfort, negative emotions need to be acknowledged, learned from, and used for constructive civic action (Ojala, 2021; Walker & Palacios, 2016). The crucial component in both frameworks is hope, which comes from trust in institutions and other people and taking real collective actions to tackle the problem (Ojala, 2021).

Much research has investigated how teachers approach classroom political issues and how they can do it better. While not unique, the case studied here is special in its extremeness, which comes from being emotionally sensitive, highly divisive, continuous and taking place in a repressive context. The many challenges reflected in this case allow us to investigate a wide variety of teaching approaches and factors behind teacher resilience and professionalism when dealing with political controversy to inform teacher education and research.

### **3 PRESENT STUDY**

This article explores teachers' approaches to controversial issues using qualitative case study as a research strategy. A case study implies an intensive analysis of one unit or a bounded system to 'gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved' (Merriam, 1998, p.19). The case studied here is the beginning of the full-scale

invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a classroom political controversy in Russia. As ‘an instance drawn from a class’ (p. 28), this case illustrates how a contemporary and deeply divisive political event is dealt with in teachers’ professional decision-making and practice. This case study falls in line with other studies that focused on teachers’ response to one current issue or event, such as the US elections in 2016 (Dunn, Sondel, Baggett, 2019) and in 2008 (Journell, 2012), or a terror attack (Wansink, de Graaf & Berghuis, 2021). As a case study, this research is interested in the diversity of responses and the process behind teachers’ professional judgement (Merriam, 1998, p. 33). It is interpretative and aims to explain the phenomenon by borrowing analytical strategies of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

To specify the boundaries, this case is limited to early and voluntary responses of the teachers working in Russia. The time frame of interest is the first month after the 24th of February 2022. This period was marked by intensified attempts to include teachers in propaganda efforts. However, teachers’ relationships with propaganda, school administration and authorities are beyond the scope of this particular article. Instead, this study highlights teachers’ professional judgments when navigating ‘unmarked territory’ of classroom interactions prompted by the beginning of an active war as a common political context. More specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What teaching approaches arose in response to the war as a classroom issue in the first month of the invasion?
2. What factors can explain teachers’ preferences for specific approaches?

### **3.1 Russian context**

The lack of competitive politics and free elections, along with the suppression of free speech and dissent, characterises the political regime in Russia as undemocratic (Freedom House, 2022). As a personalist autocracy (Gel’man, 2021) and informational autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2019), Russia has low political mobilisation and violence levels. The regime’s dominance is maintained through media control and manipulation of information that aims to promote political apathy and distrust (Alyukov, 2022). In other words, Russian propaganda does not want you to believe it but to stop believing in anything (Shields, 2021). Alienation, depoliticisation and escape into the private sphere are often used to describe the political culture in Russia (Clément, 2019; Gudkov, Dubov, & Zorkajya, 2008; Muminova et al., 2022). However, regime legitimation is not a linear ‘top-down’ process, as citizens’ grievances and heuristics play a role in propaganda’s dissemination and ‘bottom-up’ legitimisation of authoritarianism (Sharafutdinova, 2022; Alyukov, 2023; Blackburn, 2020; Alexeev & Pyle, 2023).

Alternative political life in Russia stems from the nationwide protests in 2011-2012, which made oppositional politics closer to people, politicised local activism, and gave popularity to opposition leaders, especially Alexey Navalny (Zhuravlev et al., 2020). In 2021, Navalny’s return to Russia after he was poisoned and his immediate arrest at the border led to a wave of mass protests. Although minors comprised only 1.5-5% of protesters

(Arkhipova et al., 2021), they became the centre of attention in public discussion. The image of ‘naive’ and ‘silly’ kids used by opposition leaders was spread by state-controlled media, while the opposition described youth as ‘natural’ critics of Putin and the source of hope (Erpyleva, 2023). To ‘protect’ children, schools were assigned to prevent students from taking to the streets. New laws were introduced that penalised the “involvement of minors in participation in unauthorised gathering, rally, demonstration, or picketing”.

Since the beginning of the invasion, public opinion polls consistently showed 60-70% in support of it, though polls’ interpretation of an authoritarian society at war is problematic (Alyukov, 2022; Kizlova & Norris, 2022). To explain this number, many turned to imperialism as an ideology deeply rooted in Russian culture and shared by elites and the public (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022; Garner, 2023). The authors of a large-scale qualitative project, however, conclude that ‘it is not a commitment to an imperialist ideology that is the most typical factor in support for the invasion but rather precisely the opposite—the deep depoliticisation of Russian citizens, on which the support for Putin’s regime has always been based’ (Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2022). Not to deny the presence of imperialism and fascistic elements in Russia, public responses to the invasion, at least in the early period, were diverse, emotional and full of contradictions and doubts (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2023).

Regarding education, citizenship is one of the overarching goals of the Russian school, which is reflected in both subject content and extracurricular activities (Minobrnauki, 2010). Most teachers also have mentorship over at least one class, making them responsible for implementing most civics-related initiatives. This civic education, however, is usually interpreted as patriotic education in line with state patriotism as an ideology to promote regime support and militarism (Sanina, 2017; Linchenko & Golovashina, 2019; Goode, 2018). For example, since 2014, schools have been expected to celebrate Crimea’s annexation every year and create local organisations of the Young Army movement (Alava, 2021). In the weeks following the invasion, propaganda efforts mostly employed the same channels and practices already in use, although new elements were introduced later (Rozhanovskaya, 2023; Akhalaya, 2023).

Russian teachers are usually described as conservative, conformist, and aligned with the state’s patriotic agenda (Sanina, 2021). However, it was also not rare to choose a teaching career inspired by the so-called ‘small deeds theory’, which suggests that it is possible to bring social change by taking individual actions (Zhuravlev et al., 2020). It was popular among liberal teachers in some professional networks. This potential antagonism and aforementioned public framing of youth as ‘regime’s critics’ constitute another level of teachers’ professional judgement in the political context.

### **3.2 Data collection and participants**

This study is based on 26 semi-structured interviews with Russian teachers. Almost all the interviews were conducted in March 2022, except for one, which was done a month later. Maximum variation sampling (Merriam, 1998) aimed to achieve heterogeneity of

participants in four aspects: (1) professional status (subject or administrative role, experience), (2) school context (urbanicity, selectivity), (3) political dispositions, (4) approaches to war-related discussions. New participants were purposefully recruited based on the existing diversity in the sample, which required an iterative approach to data collection, preliminary analysis, and recruitment with regular debriefings between the interviewers.

Interviews followed a narrative approach (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) and prompted teachers to recall specific stories that happened to them in school in reaction to the invasion. Participants were not asked to explicitly disclose political views, as it could be seen as too invasive. The most sensitive question concerned the teacher's personal experience of the 24th of February ("How did you feel on the first day after the start of the war/special operation?"). The use of 'war' or 'special operation' to describe the invasion of Ukraine is a crucial political marker. To maintain trust and confidence, the interviewers decided to mirror their interviewees and use the terms they chose. It meant that at the beginning of the interview, only vague references to the invasion were made, such as 'events in Ukraine' or 'events of the past week'. Once the interviewees used 'war' or 'special operation' in their answers, the interviewer would stick to the term of their choice. Questions on COVID-19 as a sensitive topic in the class were used as an additional ice-breaker with some teachers to establish contact and frame the conversation as pedagogical.

Data was collected by three researchers (one of them is the author) from a research university in Moscow. The team implemented three recruitment strategies: (1) personal networks, (2) top-down access through the school principal, and (3) participants of a professional development network. Most interviews were done online, except for on-site data collection at two schools. All the participants gave informed consent to talk and be recorded. Interviews took an average of 40 minutes. Using this data for research was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, dnr 2022-05556-01.

The resulting sample is summarised in Table 1. The sample includes both experienced and novice teachers within different subject areas. Three interviewees occupied administrative positions, and eight taught history, social sciences or geography. Participants come from different regions of the country, with six teachers working in Moscow, three in rural areas, and the rest in urban areas with less than a million inhabitants. Although teachers were not asked directly about their political views, it is possible to derive them from their other answers to some extent. In this regard, half of the participants can be attributed as being against the war, one as a strong supporter of the war and the rest as ambivalent or apolitical with differing degrees of patriotic inclinations and passive support of the war. While this sample is not and was not intended to be representative of the general population, it manages to capture meaningful political diversity but underrepresents active war supporters.

**Table 1. Participants**

N	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Subject/role	Experience	School	Type
1	Anna	F	42	Russian & Literature	15	Moscow	E
2	Maria	F	23	History & Social Studies	<1	Moscow	C, E
3	Ivan <sup>a</sup>	M	30	History & Social Studies	9	Moscow	E
4	Anton <sup>a</sup>	M	40	History & Social Studies	20		E
5	Inna	F	43	Mathematics	8	Urban	E, R
6	Larisa	F	40	Primary	4	Urban	E
7	Alexander	M	27	English	4	Urban	A
8	Lev*	M	30	Mathematics	4	Moscow	P, E
9	Svetlana*	F	32	Deputy Principal, Russian & Literature	4	Rural	C, E
10	Lena*	F	21	English, Primary	<1	Urban	A, P
11	Boris*	M	39	Biology	<1	Rural	A
12	Kamila*	F	23	PE	<1	Urban	E
13	Nina <sup>b</sup>	F	58	Principal	32	Urban	R
14	Anastasia <sup>b</sup>	F	62	Deputy Principal, Safety Education	22		R
15	Vera <sup>b</sup>	F	50	Social pedagogue	24		R
16	Konstantin <sup>b</sup>	M	36	Literature, Art, Drama	18		E, C, R
17	Mark <sup>b</sup>	M	42	Geography, Safety Education	8		A
18	Pavel <sup>b</sup>	M	44	Informatics	22		P
19	Marina <sup>b</sup>	F	54	Social Studies	33		A
20	Timur	M	32	Geography	8		Moscow
21	Oleg	M	30	Informatics	4	Moscow	A
22	Victor <sup>c</sup>	M	52	Physics	25	Urban	A
23	Ekaterina <sup>c</sup>	F	45	Mathematics	12		R
24	Alina <sup>c</sup>	F	24	History & Social Studies	1		A
25	Ludmila <sup>c</sup>	F	52	Physics	32		A, E
26	Eva	F	31	History & Social Studies	11	Rural	A

Letters denote teachers from the same schools, \* - teachers in the same professional development program. Participants are sorted by the interview date from the earliest to the latest. Type refers to teaching approaches presented in Findings: E - emotion, C - civics, R - relation, P - politics, A - avoidance.

### 3.3 Data analysis

After transcription, the data was analysed by one researcher in three stages using abduction and constant comparison as guiding principles. Abduction is ‘an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence’ (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). It is an iterative back-and-forth movement between the data and ‘background theories’ that takes an open-minded stance towards them and treats them with theoretical playfulness. This movement is also supported by constant comparison, which is applied to all the levels of analysis, from particular units of data to memos and latent categories (Charmaz, 2006). The constant comparison method allows you to gradually reduce the working terminology and generalise as new data is processed with fewer adjustments in the hypothesis.

#### 3.3.1 Recalled classroom situations

During the familiarisation stage of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it became clear that all teachers seemed to encounter more or less the same kinds of classroom situations, so a decision was made to first analyse these classroom interactions separately and only then to connect them to teachers’ pedagogical reflections. Four inclusion criteria were applied to identify relevant classroom interactions as units of data: teachers presented them as (a) related to the invasion, (b) real (not hypothetical examples), (c) they happened to the interviewee (not other teachers), and (d) were voluntary (not a request from the administration). In total, 57 episodes were identified in 19 interviews (seven teachers could not recall any examples that satisfied the criteria). Stories that did not satisfy the four inclusion criteria outlined above (e.g., happened to a colleague or presented as a hypothetical example) were used as an additional source of information during the refinement of the categories.

Selected episodes, along with the teacher’s actions and the conveyed message, were analysed inductively. The first focuses on the factual description of the interaction - what teachers and students are reported to do, reflected in codes developed during the initial coding. Revision of these descriptive codes resulted in six broader categories (table 2): (a) working subject content, (b) answering student factual or analytical questions, (c) being part of student discussions, (d) being requested or volunteering to share opinion, (e) providing emotional comfort, (f) intervening to stop inappropriate student actions. Although there can be implicit political opinion in different types of interactions (especially in providing comfort or intervening), the ‘Opinion’ category focuses exclusively on explicit cases when the teacher is requested or volunteers to articulate their political stance in front of their students.

**Table 2. Categories of teacher's actions in recalled classroom situations**

Category	Description	Example
Content	The teacher adds or prioritises content that, in their opinion, is relevant to the current situation (historical events, literary works, concepts, skills). Links to the present are not necessarily explicit, they might be presented to students without direct comments.	I feel there is no space for them to talk about it, and I came just after [the beginning of the invasion] the literature class in 10th grade. We have two works with you in this term- «War and peace» and «Crime and punishment»... And only today we studied Tolstoy's article, which he wrote at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese war, which fits perfectly here... Well, firstly, my material allows me... I see that they need a space to discuss positions. (Konstantin)
Question	Students ask a question that requires a substantial answer, e.g. the teacher to elaborate on the news or war's background.	At school, clarifying questions began. Ukrainian soldiers and Ukrainian nationalists use "Glory to Ukraine", respectively, "Glory to heroes", what is this? Is this indeed a fascist Bandera slogan?.. What is the reason it became the identification of the entire Ukrainian side? (Anton)
Discussion	The teacher takes the role of a participant, a moderator or an active observer in unplanned student discussions.	One said that we were going to kill fascists in Ukraine, the second told him in response that we, it turns out, were fascists since we were going to kill people in a foreign country... I said let's think, let's delve into it... (Timur)
Opinion	The teacher is either asked to express an opinion (may satisfy or discard the request) or volunteers to do so.	The ninth graders tried to get my opinion, I put them down quite harshly... (Alexander)
Comfort	The teacher reacts to students' emotions and says something to support them.	They all started saying that everything is so hard. And Vanya, as I understand it, has relatives in Kyiv, and he is very worried. I said guys, of course, what is there to talk about? War is bad, it's cruel. No one wants this situation to develop for the worse... Of course, it will resolve in a good way; everything will be in order. It is required of us to study and try to please our relatives, close ones to our family, to keep peace in our home. I say, there is

Category	Description	Example
		such an aphorism, do what you must and come what may. (Anna)
Intervention	The teacher actively stops students' discussions, jokes or other activities.	I told him I'm sorry, but many of our guys are dying there now. I see no reason to laugh at what is happening in Ukraine. (Inna)

The second dimension describes meaning - what ideas the teacher expresses in this interaction. Initial inductive codes, such as 'no polarisation', 'violence is bad', or 'cannot discuss when know nothing', were grouped into six categories (table 3): (a) common ground, (b) critical consciousness, (c) privatising, (d) political disclosure, (e) avoidance of normative judgement, (f) request not to discuss politics.

**Table 3. Categories of teacher's message in recalled classroom situations**

Category	Description	Example
Common ground	An attempt to make everyone agree that a war is a tragedy, a call to show compassion to people involved and patience to people they disagree with	I tried to answer as neutrally as possible... that the most important value is human life, that it is wrong to kill (Timur)
Critical consciousness	Highlighting civic agency, positioning students as political actors, questioning student beliefs and news consumption, focusing on individual efforts to develop well-informed opinions	We concluded that not only Vladimir Vladimirovich introduced this provision, that [the parliament] does it, he is not the only one responsible. For this reason, the sanctions apply to the entire country because we elected [the parliament], we elected the president, and we are responsible for him, for those whom we elected. (Maria)
Privatising	Focus on survival, crisis as a new opportunity, explicit call not to engage in politics, but instead focus on private lives (studies, family)	We study, we work, what can we change? Little depends on us. We are out of politics, we are doing our job and doing our job well (Nina)
Political disclosure	The teacher explicitly expresses political opinion or hints about it (jokes, name-calling, etc.)	A boy approached me at the break and asked: how do you feel about Putin's policy, do you support it or not? I said, "No, I don't." He said "I see" and left... He was interested in whether I would say "no" or not. (Konstantin)
No judgement	The teacher avoids normative judgements, tries to 'stick to the	In the 17th century, we annexed the half of Ukraine closest to us, but the second

Category	Description	Example
	facts' (perceived as neutral) or listens to students' responses without adding anything.	half of Ukraine remained part of Poland, and we annexed it only a hundred years later. And I explained this to them simply at the level of plain facts. Why are these "for", why are these "against"? Because this is how the historical situation developed without any value judgments. It just happened like that. (Eva)
No politics	The teacher actively prevents war-related talk.	School is not a tribune. If you want to give political speeches, do it at home or in the street, but we recommend not doing so. (Mark)

### 3.3.2 Justifications and teaching approaches

This stage focused on teacher justifications for addressing (or not) the issue of invasion in the classroom and used the analytical framework developed by Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer (2023). Following Kelchtermans (2009), they see justifications as personal interpretative frameworks - "a lens through which teachers look at their job, give meaning to it and act in it". This framework was used for a priori codes during the initial coding of teachers' reflections that either were directly related to particular classroom interactions or were expressed as general ideas in response to more abstract questions (table 4). Data units with the same code (e.g., 'professional beliefs') were additionally labelled with more specific inductive codes (e.g., 'island of stability', 'multiperspectivity', or 'no interference into the family').

**Table 4. A priori codes from Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer (2023) about the data**

Element of justification	Description
Immediacy	The urgency to address the issue of war due to the occurrence at a specific moment in time.
Past experiences	Specific episodes recalled by the teacher that directly influenced their decision to address the issue
Future orientations	Reference to a desired state of being in the future for either themselves or students
Emotions	Feelings elicited by the issue
Personal beliefs	Reference to teachers' personal beliefs and values
Professional beliefs	Reference to the broader aims of education
Task perception	Practical implications for addressing the issue
Context	Reference to context as part of justification (not applied when general description)

Next, in line with Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer (2023), one or several visual maps were created for each interview to identify common patterns of justifications. After half of the interviews had been analysed in this manner, five patterns emerged and were then refined using the rest of the interviews: (a) emotion, (b) civics, (c) relation, (d) politics, and (e) avoidance. Table 5 in the Appendix shows the relationship between elements of justifications and these five patterns. Most of the teachers were labelled with one predominant pattern, six teachers expressed two and one teacher three patterns (the last column in Table 1).

Finally, a co-occurrence matrix was made to explore the relationship between these patterns of justification and recalled classroom situations (analysed in the previous stage) (table 6 in Appendix). Not to 'fall back on the linear assumptions of quantitative analysis' (Patton, 1990, 423), identified intersections were again analysed in the data against the larger context of the interview to verify the consistency of intersections' interpretations across multiple instances. Adding reported classroom experiences to these five patterns of justifications allows us to discuss the patterns as teaching approaches that connect what teachers do and what meaning they give to it.

### **3.3.3 Factors of teacher's professional judgement**

To move to the theoretical level of analysis (Charmaz, 2006), five teaching approaches derived from the previous stage were compared to identify the key variables (dimensions) behind them and to model the relationship between the categories. These dimensions were then analysed in another cycle of comparisons, this time going back to the data and looking for associated factors on the level of individual teachers and situations.

### **3.3.4 Limitations**

Several important limitations come from the context of data collection. First, the sensitivity of the topic and the real political risks made participants sometimes limit themselves to vague and unclear answers, hints, and allegories, which were also hard to follow up without risking the whole interview. Second, the interviewees came from a university with a very distinct liberal and 'pro-Western' reputation, which impacted both participants' recruitment and the way some teachers positioned themselves during the interview. Third, as mentioned before and partly due to the previous point, the sample has few active supporters of the invasion.

## **4 FINDINGS**

This section presents five teaching approaches. It also shows a model to describe the differences between these approaches and discusses potential factors to explain teachers' preferences for some approaches over others.

## 4.1 Teaching approaches

### 4.1.1 Emotion

In this approach, the war is described as a private issue and a deeply emotional personal experience that requires empathy and stoicism. Immediacy in this approach comes from perceived students' emotions and feelings that the teacher thinks need to be addressed during the lesson or the break. Teachers refer, for example, to a younger student bursting into tears in the middle of the lesson, older students hiding behind the wall of gallows humour and not being present for the lesson, a classroom feeling 'tense', or just a perceived 'emotional need' of students. Teachers compare this experience to other emotionally loaded situations in the classroom, such as studying a tragic story.

This approach is strategic and has clear future orientations, which prioritise their students' safety and personal happiness. Teachers presenting this view also highlight the importance of maintaining social ties, saying that 'we will have to live together' even after this. 'Island of stability' is a metaphor that often appeared in teacher-targeted media in that period, and it is no surprise that this metaphor also emerged in several interviews. The idea is to create a safe space where nothing has changed, and a child can find some security that is not guaranteed at home. Put to practice, it leads teachers to perceive students' emotional comfort as their main task, which also requires them to watch out for potential conflict. However, this comfort does not negate or ignore the tragedy of the war, which makes teachers pay attention to the moral boundaries of their class.

Finding common ground is a very important theme for emotion-oriented teachers and is conveyed through multiple types of interactions (working with content, answering student questions, giving opinions and interventions). 'Common ground' responses try to re-establish the notion that 'peace is good, war is bad' and that it is something everyone should agree with (see an example in Table 3). They focus on moral aspects, such as the condemnation of violence and hate, and call for keeping peace among relatives and friends to avoid polarization and ruined relationships. They ask students to treat the issue seriously and consider the feelings of other people (both in Ukraine and in Russia), framing the war as a tragedy and non-normalcy.

'Privatising' is another characteristic theme of emotion-oriented teachers. It deals with personal fear and anxiety related to survival and life plans and emerges when teachers comfort their students (see an example in Table 3). Teachers employed examples from their experience of the economically harsh 1990s or limited consumption in the USSR. Responses like these also ask students not to waste their time on politics and to devote it to something they have control over – their family and studies. They represent the war as a natural disaster – we can help the people involved, but we have no control over it. Refraining from normative judgements is also present among these teachers when working with content, student questions and discussions.

This approach focuses on students' well-being and the community's social fabric. The classroom climate that is represented here is open, student-centred and humanistic. It also potentially reproduces some problematic political beliefs, deprives students of their political agency, limits opportunities for cognitive and political engagement and feeds the vicious cycle of learned helplessness that helps co-construct autocratic rule. While this approach dominates the earlier half of the interviews, it is absent among later ones, even though participants were directly asked to reflect on their earlier experiences. This could be explained by the time and contextual differences, as earlier interviews were conducted with more professionally and politically engaged teachers.

#### 4.1.2 Civics

In this approach, the war is acknowledged as a political, public issue that could be discussed in the classroom with the help of subject knowledge. It was present in the interviews of four social sciences, geography, and literature teachers. This approach is the closest to what is usually expected from the teachers in civic education literature.

Students' questions and comments create immediacy, but this time, they are perceived as motivated by political interest or academic curiosity. Teachers compare these situations to similar classroom interactions when they deal with politically relevant content in the curriculum, such as migration and economic policy in geography or political repressions in literature. Their justifications for addressing them the way they do are rooted in principles of multiperspectivity and openness that are distinct from relativism. This includes connecting to students' lifeworld and experiences, often described as a regular part of their teaching practice. Therefore, the teacher's task is to deepen students' understanding and develop their critical thinking about social issues. Teacher's actions are strategic and oriented towards the ideals of critical citizenship and humanism, which they explicitly tie to social change and democracy.

Civics-oriented teachers either avoid value judgements or stress critical consciousness. In the first case, teachers try to 'stick to the facts' when working with content or answering student questions to appear neutral. Critical consciousness was conveyed through answering student questions and moderating student discussions. Although this theme is defined by its emphasis on political agency, almost none of the 'civic dispositions' responses talk explicitly about any form of political participation. Maria's example (shown in Table 3) is the only one that does it, but it also presents an unrealistic picture of elections in Russia. However, applying this normative logic, as if Russia had free democratic elections, positions students as having agency and civic responsibility. Most responses with this theme focus on news consumption and participation in political discussions, highlighting the effort and responsibility to have well-informed opinions.

Civics-oriented teachers see political discussion as a part of their job as subject teachers. Their representation of classroom climate is also open but in an analytical and relatively more political way. However, even teachers with strong civics orientation struggle to

implement it fully, avoid explicit political framing and do not have much to offer regarding opportunities for real political participation. They focus on either critical thinking and reading skills or building students' factual knowledge of the issue.

### 4.1.3 Relation

This approach uses political issues as an opportunity to build and maintain teacher-student relationships. These teachers see themselves as equal participants in informal conversations with students, who are perceived as mature and informed. A teacher's identity as someone who deserves students' respect is an important element, and political conversations with students are believed to build trust and respect for the teacher who is not afraid to talk about it. According to these teachers, a teacher's political disclosure is permitted or even required when talking about politics.

For politically ambivalent or 'patriotic' teachers, this approach is a way to maintain relationships with their liberal students:

I am working, my students come to me - being foolish... They reason well; they understand more than I do... Their views about the country have been formed for a long time. We don't talk about it, but... They can say something; if I have a different opinion, I just say what I think. My students are very interesting; they will tell me more than I know. I am not afraid to talk to them. (Ekaterina)

Teachers with 'safe' political views do not see the political climate as limiting and believe that Russia has freedom of speech. It is not external risks they are primarily 'not afraid of', but their students. It contrasts with politically liberal teachers, who are aware of repressions and for whom being 'not afraid' means taking political risks.

Although relations-oriented teachers seem to be the most open and relaxed regarding political conversations with their students, most of them could not recall any specific examples related to the war and mostly used hypothetical ones, which were not included in the episode analysis. However, there still seems to be a correspondence between actions and intentions, as teachers who recall specific examples report informal discussions or exchange opinions with their students.

Relation-oriented teachers, mostly interested in building trust and maintaining identity, describe a distinct picture of classroom climate for political discussions. This representation of classroom climate can also be called very open. However, in a permissive and low-stakes manner, the teacher does not seem to have any specific educational expectations. Neither comfort nor political agency comes up as an issue to deal with. Although emotion-oriented teachers also pay attention to relationships, they focus more on relationships between the students as a part of students' general well-being. In contrast, these relation-oriented teachers seem concerned about relationships between students and the teacher.

#### 4.1.4 Politics

Some of the teachers are open about being explicitly political in their approach. Two interviewees strongly preferred this approach in their interactions with students – a committed war supporter (Pavel) and an opposition activist (Lev).

Pavel was the only teacher in the sample who was very enthusiastic about teaching materials developed by the state. Although teachers' approaches to these materials are not covered here, Pavel's case stands out. He showed the video lesson on 'special military operation' to the class he supervises during their class hour and did it in all his regular Informatics lessons with other classes. He also included his thoughts in the presentation:

I managed to show the film in its entirety. I provided more explanation from my point of view... We need to discuss it. We do not know how they discuss it at home because there are different families. (Pavel)

Lev, in contrast, engaged with gallows humour and emotional comments in an attempt to provoke students and break the 'apolitical' silence of the classroom:

I want to say something, but I can't think of any other form than to joke about it. I want to say that this is happening. To remind them again that our lives will not be the same and that what is happening is not normal. (Lev)

Lev admits that his motivation is mostly rooted in his emotions, but he also believes that representing a political minority is part of his mission as a teacher. While other teachers in this sample wanted to provide comfort and stress the continuity in students' lives, Lev pointed to the invasion as a life-changing event they should be uncomfortable with.

Despite being total opposites within the political spectrum, Pavel and Lev have similar structures in their justifications. They are unsatisfied with students' political attitudes, have strong political commitments, and see the teacher's role as inherently political. Both see themselves as opposed to their school's political majority. However, their political positions are unequal, and what is permissible for Pavel would be impossible for someone with Lev's political views.

Both Pavel and Lev express strong opinions. However, it is also possible to hold a politicised position less vocally, as did Lena when intervening in student talk and asking not to discuss politics. As a novice teacher and an outsider to the community, she describes it as the easiest way for her to stop her students from using ethnic slurs and advocating for violence, which she cannot accept but also cannot counteract openly.

#### 4.1.5 Avoidance

Finally, many teachers strongly prefer avoiding political conversations to 'keep the school out of politics'. For these teachers, political talk by the students is seen as a provocation, distraction, or potential conflict, which they believe should always be avoided. They fear that even their looks can disclose their political views and thus see avoidance as the only way to stay neutral.

Professional beliefs that support this approach deal with the question of teacher responsibility. First, political conversation is seen as something that should happen at home, as teacher's interference might create conflict between student and parents, which is even less acceptable in times like these. Second, these teachers, including teachers of broad social studies, say that political discussions are not part of their job and should be done by 'specialists'.

References to the context beyond classroom factors often support this approach. These teachers explicitly discuss political risks and recall nationwide scandals involving teachers seen as 'acting out of their role'. Some teachers with this approach also mention being novices and newcomers to the school community, where they feel like a minority.

Teachers who strive to avoid politics may have different approaches to practice. They report shutting down political talk when asked about their personal opinion, but they also can give what they believe to be a neutral 'common ground' answer. They also recall working with subject content, answering questions, or being involved in student discussions, but they express their neutrality by avoiding any normative judgements.

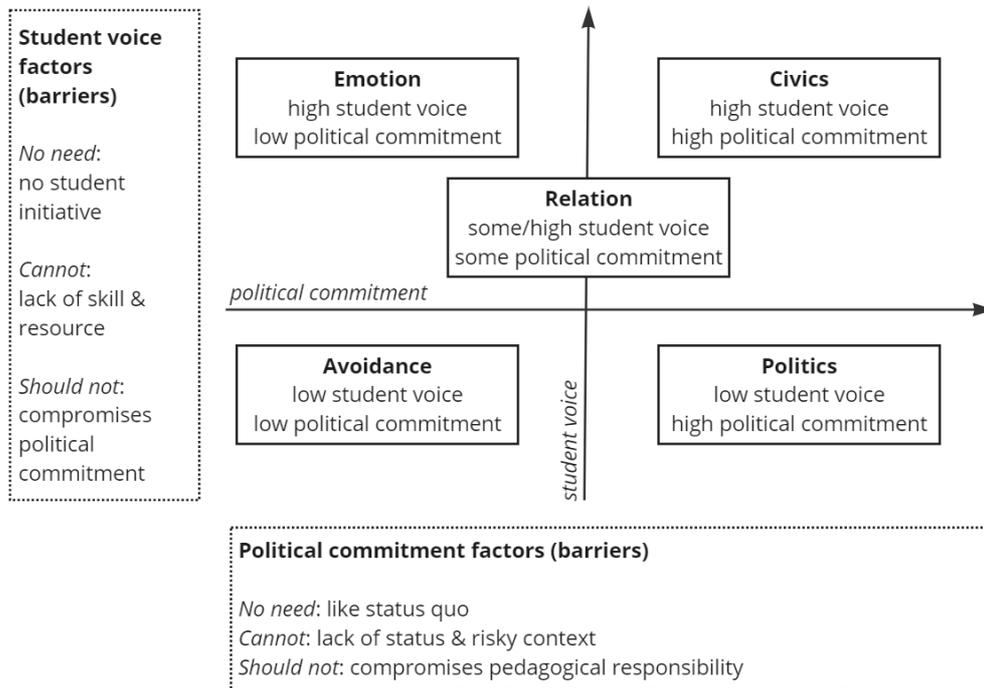
The analysis above shows that teachers with different approaches have a lot in common regarding the type of actions they engage in. Subject teachers tried to stick to the curriculum but did it in a way that rarely framed the war politically. Instead, they chose safer framings like the economy, critical thinking and, to some extent, history. Even those teachers who say they prefer avoidance to some extent engage with the issue of war when answering student questions or even volunteering to highlight subject content relevant to the conflict's background. To put it differently, it seems there is nothing controversial about sticking to the textbook, even if it relates to the news of the day:

What is the teacher equipped with to discuss these topics? I discussed the economy of our country. Sometimes, we have a topic in the syllabus, and you need specific examples. Here it is, the situation is happening, so we have to talk about it. (Marina)

## 4.2 Factors of teacher's professional judgement

Although many teachers recall the same kind of classroom situations, their responses to them differ in line with their 'interpretative frameworks'. Picture 1 represents their qualitative differences along two dimensions - student voice and political commitment. The student voice axis captures pedagogical differences between approaches that can be called more or less student-centred. Emotion-, civics-, and relation-oriented teachers all try to include student voices by providing space within their classroom where students can express their concerns and opinions and talk to each other or the teacher openly.

**Figure 1. Teachers’ approaches to war-related classroom interactions**



The second dimension is political commitment, which reflects teachers’ attempts to nurture certain political values and attitudes among students. Civics-oriented teachers do that by prioritising critical thinking and civic dispositions, while politics-oriented engage in some forms of political proselytising. Relation-oriented teachers might have more or less political commitment, as their primary concern is maintaining their identity in front of students. Two dimensions - welcoming student voices and pursuing political commitment - can be used to describe teachers’ space of professional judgment. The next section presents the factors behind them as three groups of barriers: necessity (no need), ability (cannot), and consideration (should not).

**4.2.1 Student voice factors**

Factors behind this dimension are identified pairwise, comparing avoidance-emotion and politics-civics approaches within and between teacher interviews. The necessity to include student voices comes from perceived students’ engagement. Teachers see no need to reach out to students if they do not show initiative or interest themselves:

They don’t fully understand what it is. They are still children. It’s much more important to them who started dating whom and how they will pass the exams. (Eva)

Awakening student political interest is not seen as a pedagogical task. Such avoidance can also come from the place of care, as some teachers believe it is better to protect children from harsh reality by allowing them to stay immersed in their everyday concerns.

The ability to include student voice relates to the teacher's professional skills and resources, such as self-regulation:

I'm not sure that I'm ready to do it... to support the children and to listen if they have something to say. I start to cry if I hear something [about the war], not right away, maybe, if in a lesson I would restrain myself, and at the break I can go out and cry (Lena)

Several teachers acknowledge that providing comfort and attending to students' emotions are important in these circumstances but refer to the mismatch between their skills and this task. They suggest a 'specialist' (such as a school psychologist) should address these situations. Lev, one of the politics-oriented teachers, also mentioned the lack of skill as an important factor, saying that neither he nor his students would be ready to participate in discussions or debates, typical for democratic civic education.

Finally, for some teachers, limiting student voice is also a political choice, as they fear that allowing more voice will give space for sentiments they do not approve of. For instance, pro-war politics-oriented teacher Pavel silenced a female student who openly opposed him for showing propaganda videos. Another teacher with a patriotic identity, Inna, demonstrates a movement from emotion to avoidance, as she believes it is important 'not to rock the boat' and 'not to make a big deal about this issue'. Although much more gentle, she also tries to limit student talk about the war and has political motivation for it.

Somewhat similar reasoning is expressed by a very liberal Svetlana, a deputy head in a tiny rural school. Based on unsuccessful previous experiences, she decided to avoid classroom discussions with her students, as she is afraid of opening a Pandora's box she cannot control:

We will be in the minority. We will have to fight back... It is generally difficult for these children to express their point of view, and they do not always have it. In general, they are bad at speaking; they are bad at reading. They do not compare to kids from the city. (Svetlana)

Although this concern about the quality of student talk is also pedagogical, Svetlana has a strong political commitment to democracy. She fears that an open discussion will reinforce students' undemocratic views.

### 4.2.3 Political commitment factors

This dimension is explored by comparing emotion-civics and avoidance-politics. Pursuing a political commitment stems from dissatisfaction with the status quo. For politically liberal teachers, it means a commitment to democracy and teacher identity that is closely related to their political aspirations for both civics- and politics-oriented teachers:

Education will save our country. The more educated people there are who think critically, the more they will ask questions when someone is sent out there to do something bad. (Timur)

Why I came to school became even more important with this situation. It's important to have people with different points of view at school. But I know for sure that they are now in the school where I work, and many children will hear my point of view. (Lev)

However, the status quo can also refer to the local context of the school or classroom, like in the case of pro-war Pavel, who is dissatisfied with his students being more liberal. The opposite situation is also possible when more liberal teachers see no need to be political with their students, whom they perceive as already on their side. Both Konstantin and Ivan focus more on emotions, as they believe political concerns to be out of the question already:

Students' position is unambiguous; they call what is happening the same way... They do not accept it. I don't have to demonstrate any position myself, just to provide a space for a discussion. If there was a dispute between the positions, then it is clear that I would have to disclose [my views] somehow. (Konstantin)

[We need] to foster values regarding all this. However, they seem to have already been sufficiently worked out. They understand the horror of this whole situation (Ivan).

The ability to pursue political commitment relates to the teacher's status and context. Novices and 'outsiders' seem more sensitive to political risks and more afraid of sanctions from the administration or the authorities. The national political climate is one of the reasons why Svetlana chose to do a rather abstract critical thinking lesson instead of discussing the war directly:

I used to be bolder, I could say directly that I am talking about the protests in Belarus. Why did they happen, what happens to people, that people are beaten? Why did people take to the streets in Moscow? Now, I only use analogies. This is an inner fear that is growing. (Svetlana)

On the contrary, the school community and the teacher's professional status might be a positive factor. All relation-oriented teachers, who are also open to being political, have a lot of teaching experience and professional reputation and work in schools with strong communities. Politics-oriented Lev, however, can risk his part-time teaching job as he works full-time as a software engineer in a big IT company. Ludmila, who is not political with her students but alone resisted pro-war propaganda in her school, also feels very confident professionally:

Now, I'm probably not afraid of anything. Now I know that I am of retirement age, I can go and do what I want, I know what I am worth (Ludmila)

The final factor behind the political commitment dimension comes from teachers' concerns about how being political might compromise their pedagogical responsibility. Novice teachers seem especially afraid of abusing their authority and influencing student's

relationships with family. Emotion-oriented teachers say that they are afraid that engaging with multiple perspectives and discussing this issue politically might be too painful both for students and for the teacher:

Judging who is right and who is wrong is very difficult, it is almost impossible. The first day, I listened to television. Next, there is information from the UK and Ireland. [Students from there] broadcast completely different information to me. [A friend] from Ukraine gives the third kind of information. It's all so contradictory to figure it out. This is mentally exhausting. It's nerve-wracking and physically exhausting, and you can get sick. It just ruins life, right? (Anna)

Some of them are aware that focusing solely on emotions is depoliticising but explain that the time is not right yet to talk about anything but personal experiences:

This situation tortures students, and they need help to relax and accept it. What I can do for them is to make them talk. At the same time, it is obvious that organising discussions is not right; these are completely personal monologues, maybe dialogues in some very small groups, but not a collective public space. It's not exactly a topic for discussion. It is a very painful situation. Many people have very acute personal and family issues connected to this. Taking private life to the public space is wrong now. (Anton)

These teachers are student-centred and care deeply about students' psychological well-being and school community, making them turn away from unsafe and discomforting aspects of politics and 'deep' multiperspectivity.

## 5 DISCUSSION

This study explored teacher professional judgement when working with controversial issues in the case of Russian teachers in the first month of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It showed six common types of classroom situations they experienced and five pedagogical approaches that emerged in response to them. These five approaches can be explained by two dimensions - including student voice and pursuing political commitment. The analysis suggests that the inclusion of student voice is limited by perceived student passivity, lack of skill, and the teacher's political disagreement with what they anticipate students will say. Satisfaction with the status quo, lack of social status, and fear of harming students were obstacles to pursuing political commitment.

This study also shows how high professional status, strong school community, and pride and joy in the job might encourage teachers to renormalise authentic political discussion, create political friendships with their students across ideological divides (Allen, 2006), and take a political stance when needed. Teacher professionalism, inseparably connected to the question of purpose (Biesta, 2015), manifests itself in taking pedagogical and political responsibility.

It contrasts with a more general trend of depoliticisation as a product of more than two decades of deliberate authoritarian policies with a neoliberal twist (Casula, 2013; Crowley, 2021; Matveev & Zhuravlev, 2022; Minina, 2017). Avoiding substantial discussion and focusing on personal emotions instead of political passions (Ruitenbergh, 2009; Thompson & Zizek, 2013), many teachers promote already widespread escape into the private sphere and post-truth relativism and nihilism, both actively used in state propaganda (Alyukov, 2022). As Tamir (2015) puts it, ‘the neutral view is not a view from nowhere, but a view from the centre or, to use John Rawls’ term, from the heart of the overlapping consensus’. What if there is no consensus? Like their colleagues in other contexts, teachers in Russia tried to ‘smooth the edges’ by making everyone agree that peace is better than war (Pollak et al., 2018; Kello, 2016), despite the fact this idea will have completely different implications for supporters and opponents of the invasion (Sokolova, 2023). Unintentionally, they depoliticised the issue by choosing non-political framings, like teachers in Israel, such as economics and reading skills (Pollak et al., 2018).

By exploring the dynamics of depoliticisation in the classroom, this article adds to the literature on ‘bottom-up’ regime legitimation and co-construction of authoritarianism in Russia (Clément & Zhelnina, 2020; Blackburn, 2020; Sharafutdinova, 2022). However, it also highlights practices of resistance and ‘everyday politics’ stemming from teacher professionalism as a function of individual and structural factors.

As a case study, this article mostly invites naturalistic generalisations by the reader with attention to all the contextual differences (Stake, 1982). The following sections discuss several observations that might be relevant to teacher education and research.

First, in some cases, teachers of all subjects have to deal with unplanned sensitive political issues as a part of their job, simply because politics in school and students’ lives is not limited to social science classrooms but breaks through in all the school’s ‘grey areas’ (Jayusi, Erlich Ron, & Gindi, 2023). While I do not argue that teachers are responsible for everything, anticipating what might happen can help teachers be better at noticing educative moments and responding more intentionally and confidently. Typical situations identified in this article might be used to organise such discussions with aspiring teachers.

Second, to address perceived student passivity, teachers can create conditions for an open discussion and know when and how to actively reach out. An open climate is a product of building relationships and deliberate teaching strategies (Siegel-Stechler, 2023). For instance, teachers can use peace circles, like Kamila, choose stimulating content, like Konstantin, or sometimes just ask, ‘How is it going?’, like Anna, to open up for the student voice. While teacher disclosure is a big discussion, in line with other papers (Journell, 2016; Barton & McCully, 2007), this data suggests that it might be an important tool for creating mutual trust, which is necessary in a divided and repressive context.

Third, managing a diversity of opinions pedagogically and politically informedly is challenging: creating multiperspectivity in like-minded classes where it does not emerge naturally (Hess & McAvoy, 2014) and dealing with extreme statements (Parra et al., 2022). Both liberal teachers of humanities, Svetlana avoided discussions with her ‘patriotic’ rural

students, while Konstantin's lesson in his selective urban school turned into a liberal safe space. As Svetlana's students could have benefitted from exposure to anti-war perspectives, so could, theoretically, Konstantin's students from learning how to talk to their pro-war relatives and not only to their like-minded liberal peers. Balancing multiperspectivity with clear moral boundaries is a challenge. Still, as Barton and McCully (2007) argued, in divided societies, it might be better to allow a broader political spectrum and make bridges instead of exclusions. Additionally, seemingly like-minded classes might have more diversity than it seems because of the spiral of silence and other group processes (Håkansson & Östman, 2019; Journell, 2012; Noelle-Neumann, 1976).

Fourth, as shown in many other works, in classroom political discussion, openness and quality are not the same (Beck, 2013; Lo, 2022). Quality might be defined as a general commitment to democracy, as factual correctness (Wansink & Timmer, 2020), as disciplinary thinking and civic reasoning (Bermudez, 2015; Tväråna, 2019; Sandahl, 2019; Jerome, Liddle, Young, 2021), as social justice and empowerment (Gibson, 2022; Swalwell, 2015; Nelsen, 2020), or as other ideological and pedagogical priority that is different from simply being student-centred. This distinction helps move to deeper multiperspectivity that allows for several perspectives and compares and evaluates them to avoid the 'anything goes' approach. Literature suggests a multitude of strategies to scaffold this kind of multiperspectivity, such as structured academic controversy (Lo & Adams, 2018), civic litigation (Hlavacik & Krutka, 2021), socratic dialogue (Davies & Sinclair, 2014) or double crux (Sabien, 2017). Once again, not every conversation needs to be turned into a full civics lesson, but exposure to best practices like these sets high expectations to guide teachers' professional judgment.

Fifth, finding hope can be a tricky task, and yet another one teachers have to solve when coming to a class. In line with other research, this study shows that in an attempt to alleviate students' negative emotions, teachers can be too quick to provide 'shallow' hope that is based on wishful thinking and underestimates the issue (Ojala, 2021; Duncan-Andrade, 2009). In contrast, critical hope (Giroux, 2018) requires acknowledging the seriousness of the problem and using experienced negative emotions, such as worry or anger, for empowerment (Ojala, 2007). The first step, therefore, is to let students face the trouble, verbalise and make sense of it (Ojala, 2021) and not pretend that you, as an adult, have an easy answer. In this case, one way to do it was to approach political talk on equal terms informally, as relation-oriented teachers, or by providing space to discuss without giving any words of comfort, as did emotion-oriented Konstantin and Kamila. Some civics-oriented teachers tried to develop critical consciousness. However, their way of doing it was limited and closer to the 'reflective spectator' ideal of 'standby citizenship' (Ekman & Amnå, 2012) than to activism expected by critical pedagogy, as they positioned their students only as media consumers and participants of political dialogue. Real political processes and institutions were absent from teachers' responses or used to give a normative, unrealistic political agency model.

To conclude, disruptive moments like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine require teachers to make responsible professional judgements and to navigate both pedagogical and political considerations. Although few teachers deliberately engaged in propaganda, it was a student-centred but politically uninformed approach that seemed to promote de-politicising and relativistic propaganda narratives. Teacher professionalism is needed to work with issues like these. It comes from having the skill and attitudes and from the teacher's position about students, the school community, and society.

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