

“We **comply** but do not **obey**”

Everyday resistance in contemporary Russian schools

by **A. Hope & V. Milidia**

abstract

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, education has become a central arena in Russia for the consolidation of an authoritarian state project. This article examines how history and social studies teachers navigate the intensified ideological control in everyday school practice. Drawing on ten in-depth interviews conducted in late 2024, the study analyses subtle, non-heroic forms of resistance, conceptualized through James C. Scott’s notion of the “weapons of the weak”. The guiding research question is: What forms does resistance take when open confrontation becomes too costly, and how should such practices be interpreted politically? The authors identify two principal scenarios of resistance: a collective one, which they term the “besieged fortress,” and an individual one – “a stranger among one’s own”; suggesting an ambivalent character of quiet resistance in authoritarian contexts — simultaneously protective, adaptive, and potentially erosive of the regime’s normative authority.

KEYWORDS: Everyday resistance, weapon of the weak, informal public sphere, doublethink, authoritarian schooling, Russian schools.

By the early 2020s, the ideological infrastructure of Putinism had consolidated into an increasingly explicit state doctrine in the Russian Federation. Following the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, education became one of the central arenas for the institutionalization of this doctrine.¹ A series of rapid reforms including the nationwide introduction of the extracurricular program “Conversations about What Matters” (2022), the return of basic military training “Fundamentals of Security and Defense of the Homeland” (2024), and the publication of unified state-approved history textbooks (*Medinsky’s textbook*, 2024) — signaled a shift toward a tightly centralized and ideologically saturated educational regime.

These reforms are officially framed as the construction of a “sovereign education system”, designed to cultivate loyalty, patriotism, and readiness to defend the state.² Echoing broader conservative and anti-Western discourses, state officials explicitly reject post-Soviet educational pluralism as a misguided imitation of foreign models. The “Education in Russian Schools 2022–2025” report documents that “sovereignization” has entailed erosion of school-level autonomy, expanded bureaucratic oversight, increased ideological propaganda in curricula and extracurriculars, and repression of disloyal teachers.³ What is happening illustrates Michael Apple’s concept of the authoritarian consolidation of “official knowledge,” whereby the state monopolizes historical narratives, moral values, and defines normative models of civic subjectivity.⁴



Pupils of a secondary school listen to Russia's President Vladimir Putin's address at the first day of the new school year in Moscow on September 1, 2025. This is a genre photo, the people in the image does not have anything to do with the persons mentioned in the article.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER NEMENOV/GETTY IMAGES

While the expansion of ideological control has been well documented, much less is known about how teachers navigate, reinterpret, or quietly resist these demands in their everyday professional practice. After 2022, visible public resistance within Russia declined sharply, particularly in institutional settings such as schools. Yet the absence of open protest does not imply full compliance. Rather, it raises the questions: what forms resistance takes when confrontation becomes too costly – and how such forms could be interpreted politically? This article addresses that question by focusing on the everyday practices of history and social studies teachers in Russian state schools.

Conceptual framework

We examine subtle, everyday forms of resistance in Russian schools drawing on James C. Scott's concept of the *weapons of the weak*.⁵ Using the metaphor of “weapons”, he deliberately rejects the normative expectation that resistance *must* be transformative, public, or collective, thereby imbuing practices typically perceived as apathy or adaptation with political meaning. He emphasizes that subordinates (*weak*) are not merely objects of power who adapt or passively accommodate but are active (contr)agents. Sabotage, feigned compliance, concealment of information, foot-dragging, petty theft, or irony are ways of acting against power, even if not through open confrontation. The “weapons of the weak” rarely determine the outcome of a “war”, but they allow survival, wear down the adversary, undermine authority, and reduce its effective-

ness. The “weapon” metaphor captures not a promise of emancipation, but the practice of struggle in conditions where victory looks impossible, yet complete submission is equally unacceptable.

According to Scott, everyday resistance operates through the switching between *public transcripts*: what the dominated display before power (loyalty, obedience); and *hidden transcripts*: what they say and do among their own, expressing resistance, mockery, or contempt.⁶ Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov in their analysis of late Soviet society, conceptualize the skill of switching between these registers as *doublethink* and *double morality*. They conceptualize it as a structurally produced division between officially prescribed normative commitments and the practical moral orientations governing everyday action. Individuals publicly perform loyalty to official ideological norms while privately adhering to alternative moral criteria rooted in professional ethics, interpersonal trust, and situational responsibility.⁷

A POSSIBLE KEY conceptual distinction between “doublethink” or “double morality” and the “weapons of the weak” lies in how these practices are interpreted. The authors of the former concepts tend to see them less as forms of covert protest—as “weapons” of resistance—and more as instruments of survival that enable actors to avoid direct confrontation. Rather than functioning as tools that subtly undermine the authoritarian order, they operate as adaptive maneuvers that prevent open protest from

emerging and thereby prolong the existence of an uncomfortable yet familiar and habituated system.

In this article, we attend closely to the ambivalence of resistance practices in an authoritarian context. Rather than presuming that everyday acts of evasion, buffering, or withdrawal are inherently emancipatory, we analyze how they simultaneously constrain and reproduce power. By foregrounding this tension, we seek to move beyond binary categorizations of compliance versus (open) resistance and to examine how survival strategies, ethical restraint, and political dissent intertwine in ways that are at once protective, potentially system-sustaining, and capable of subtly eroding the regime from within by limiting the depth of ideological internalization and quietly hollowing out its normative authority.

From this perspective, the mode of action articulated by one of our interviewees and used in the title of this article can be interpreted: “we comply” (*podchinyaemsa*) refers to the production of a correct *public transcript*, while “but do not obey” (*ne povinuemsa*) denotes the preservation of an autonomous *hidden transcript* in which the state’s demands are neutralized, ironized, or simply disregarded at the level of substance. In this article, we aim to show how transcript switching works in different contexts; how teachers explain to themselves and their students the need for “doublethink”.

At the beginning of the analysis of empirical data, we identify two configurations that generate qualitatively different forms of everyday resistance and expose teachers to unequal levels of risk: whether resistance is organized *collectively*, within a cohesive school community, or *individually*, by a teacher occupying the position of a “lone dissenter” within the school.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES become possible in schools where an *informal public sphere*⁸ oriented toward resistance has developed, enabling shared meanings, evaluations, and courses of action to be articulated, coordinated, and stabilized as a hidden transcript in Scott’s term. In such contexts, resistance takes the form of maintaining and defending organizational boundaries that separate internal pedagogical practices from external bureaucratic and ideological control. Everyday resistance here is collective, routine, and embedded in organizational arrangements that protect teachers from direct exposure in an increasingly toxic environment. As one of our interviewees from elite school noted:

We live as if in a besieged fortress. (interviewee 2)

By contrast, individual strategies emerge in cases when the opposition-minded teacher is isolated within the school. Here, resistance is shaped not by shared norms or institutional buffering but by individual bargaining power, labor-market oppor-

tunities, and the structural fragility of the organization. These practices often gravitate toward exit-based strategies, following Albert Hirschman’s classic exit / voice / loyalty framework.⁹ These strategies denote a form of resistance in which pressure on an organization or authority is exerted through the possibility of withdrawal (exit), whether real or anticipated.¹⁰

Taken together, these contrasting configurations provide an analytical lens for examining the specific practices of quiet resistance discussed in the following sections: “the besieged fortress” (collective strategies) and “a stranger among one’s own” (individual strategies).

Methods and material

This study is based on ten in-depth interviews conducted in October–November 2024 with history and social studies [obschestvoznanie] teachers in state secondary schools in Russian large

cities and smaller towns. We used biographical interviews that focused on experiences at the school and reflections on changes in recent years.

The Russian state school has long been a closed institution for independent researchers, and intensified administrative control over the past decade has further restricted access. Many potential participants declined interviews, especially recorded ones, highlighting diffuse fears and uncertainty. As social science teacher from elite school explained:

We’ve all been frozen now [...] we prefer not to speak if we can avoid speaking; not to ask if we can avoid asking; not to express an opinion if we can avoid expressing it.

(interviewee 1)

“WE’VE ALL BEEN FROZEN NOW... WE PREFER NOT TO SPEAK IF WE CAN AVOID SPEAKING; NOT TO ASK IF WE CAN AVOID ASKING; NOT TO EXPRESS AN OPINION IF WE CAN AVOID EXPRESSING IT.”
(interviewee 1)

The covert nature of everyday resistance makes its scale difficult to assess. Our goal is therefore not to measure prevalence, but to identify and describe concrete practices of resistance at both the collective (particular school) and individual levels. Given the risks involved, all informants and institutions are anonymized.

Initially, the study aimed to capture a wide range of responses to educational reforms, from loyalist adaptation and apolitical disengagement to conscious active resistance. However, only critically minded teachers ultimately agreed to participate, often explicitly framing their evasion of official directives as a conscious ethical and political choice rather than indifference. For them, everyday resistance was tied to personal and professional dignity, an emancipatory understanding of pedagogy, and a commitment to school autonomy and democratic practices.

The repertoire of resistance practices depends largely on the structural conditions in which teachers find themselves. Below, we will consider examples of collectively organized and individual resistance.



"Conversations about What Matters" (Russian: Razgovory o vazhnom), is a name for a series of compulsory school lessons in Russia introduced in 2022 that covers various topics from the Russian government's perspective, such as national identity, public holidays, and world events. Important Conversations lessons take place every Monday morning during the school year, following the flag-raising ceremony.



As part of the "Conversations about What Matters" classes, the Ministry of Emergency Situations employees spoke about the work of firefighters.

PHOTO: MINISTRY OF EMERGENCY SITUATIONS OF RUSSIA

School as "the besieged fortress"

The empirical basis for reconstructing collective strategy of resistance comes from interviews with six interviewees working in elite schools in large Russian cities, with particular attention to four teachers (two of them also hold positions in school administration) employed at the same school. Through long-standing hiring practices prioritizing both professional competence and compatibility with a democratic ethos, this school has developed a cohesive teaching staff sharing broadly similar critical and humanistic orientations. Interviewees describe a collective willingness to defend institutional autonomy against incorporation into the state's administrative and ideological vertical. As one interviewee put it:

We do what we deem necessary, but nothing ever leaks out; [...] we carefully hide the fact that we exist.

(interviewee 1)

This formulation captures a core mechanism of collective quiet resistance: the deliberate construction of a strong boundary between the intra-school space and the external world. We describe *Bureaucratic shielding* and *Moral and communicative buffering* as examples of this collective strategy of resistance.

Bureaucratic shielding

Teachers consistently report that contemporary schools are subjected to an intensifying bureaucratic burden, driven primarily by frequently changing mandates and reporting requirements imposed by educational authorities. Importantly, this pressure is not necessarily articulated through direct ideological prescriptions. Rather, it operates through the relentless expansion of paperwork and procedural obligations, which increasingly structure teachers' everyday labor. Reporting on various patri-

otic events, for instance, does not so much impose substantive ideological control as it adds yet another layer to what teachers describe as an already colossal volume of "senseless" bureaucratic work.

This dynamic is vividly illustrated by one interviewee's account:

They send down programs from above, different every year. Sometimes they change them several times within a single year. All the teachers, like lunatics, [should] sit and rewrite their so-called KTPs – curriculum plans – accordingly. [...] So, you finish writing, and suddenly at the end of August a new model program arrives. [...] The same content, only the topics are reordered, the wording has changed, and some other things too. [...] Redone. In October, the next version arrives—they've invented something else. Redone again. A real slog. And then, like a nightmare, you have to forget it all. And when you fill in the journal, you have to copy everything exactly from the KTPs [even though] it bears no relation to reality.

(interviewee 6)

This statement allows us to reconstruct a core mechanism of authoritarian governance in education: control is exercised not through substantive oversight of teaching practices, but through *procedural formalism*. Curricula, lesson plans, and electronic registers function as performative artifacts of subordination. They must be rewritten, updated, and reproduced exactly as prescribed, even when teachers openly acknowledge that they "bear no relation to reality".

By forcing teachers to devote significant time and cognitive resources to meaningless labor, the system disciplines them through exhaustion, while simultaneously limiting their capacity to critical reflection, effectively preparing for lessons and paying more attention to pedagogical and substantive issues. At

the same time, the emphasis on formal indicators rather than substantive content creates structural conditions under which collective forms of *bureaucratic shielding* become possible, sustainable, and even efficient.

Collective resistance to bureaucratic pressure is institutionalized through the *intra-school redistribution of bureaucratic labor*. Compliance with documentation rituals is delegated to specialized administrative actors who monitor changing requirements and translate them into the appropriate reports. Teachers are involved only if necessary. As one interviewee explained:

We have a person who is responsible for documents, [...] He comes in and says: so, the program needs to be updated. [Formally] we do everything, we don't complain [...] It is impossible to verify. Outwardly – on paper – everything matches. [...] We buy [state approved] textbooks, but they sit in the basement; we don't use them. I have a syllabus drawn up according to this textbook. [...] I prepare detailed lesson plans – with page numbers, paragraphs, and homework assignments – and all these documents are kept in the designated folder so that, if an inspection comes, they can look and see that everything is fully orthodox. (interviewee 1)

Bureaucratic mimicry is thus collectivized and routinized: a fully loyalist public transcript is centrally constructed, enabling the emergence of a relatively autonomous hidden transcript at the level of classroom interaction. As one of history teachers noted, this arrangement effectively insulates classroom practice from external interference:

[...] I am quite free in how I teach. [...] I changed a lot in the curriculum to suit myself, and there is absolutely no control in that regard. [...] Well, only the formal reporting [...] In reality, freedom is quite significant. But one has to assume that many insane requirements simply never reach teachers. The administration somehow resolves things at its own level [...]. (interviewee 4)

Through this *delegation of ritualized subordination*, school administrations act as *institutional buffers*. By producing the required documents, they protect teachers from direct bureaucratic intrusion and minimize the likelihood that ideological enforcement will penetrate everyday pedagogical practice.

Crucially, this arrangement is stabilized by the orientations and constraints of mid-level educational bureaucrats themselves. As one of the teachers and a member of school administration explained:

[...] The district education authorities – the education administration – basically have plenty on their plate. They simply don't have the resources to go to schools. There are no true ideologues there [maybe just a few of them]. No one displays that hyper-fixation or the Soviet-style zeal of the early years of Soviet power – the idea that everyone must be remade, re-forged, and start thinking and feeling differently. What are they responsible for? Indicators: checkmarks, ticks, numbers, percentages. And what do they demand from us? Checkmarks, ticks, numbers, percentages. We provide these [formal indicators] perfectly well. They are not interested in the price at which they are obtained. The worst-case scenario is when some other bodies actually show up – the prosecutor's office, or something like that [...]. (interviewee 1)

This account points to the absence of ideological zeal among inspectors and administrators at the intermediate level. Rather than functioning as committed agents of political re-education, they operate as bureaucratic functionaries embedded in an

accountability regime defined by numerical targets and formal documentation. Their limited resources, combined with weak ideological investment, reduce both the capacity and the motivation to look behind the façade of compliance. Inspection thus becomes a mutually convenient ritual: schools supply the expected indicators, and officials accept them at face value.

At the same time, the reference to the prosecutor's office marks the

boundary of this fragile equilibrium. *Bureaucratic shielding* is effective as long as control remains administrative and internal to the education system. When oversight shifts toward coercive intervention by law enforcement agencies, this protective buffer may collapse (the “worst-case scenario”).

Bureaucratic shielding is not merely a form of individual evasion but a collectively sustained accommodation between schools and the state. Quiet resistance persists not because the state is absent, but because its presence is mediated through formalism, delegation, and indifference to substance – conditions that schools actively exploit to preserve a limited zone of professional and moral autonomy.

Empirical examples illustrate how bureaucratic shielding operates in practice.

[...] schools are allocated funds for the purchase of textbooks. [...] The sums are large, but they are strictly targeted. We [...] are obliged to spend them exclusively on the purchase of textbooks from the approved official list. Which is what we do. At the same time, according to the Law on Education, schools have the right to use

“AS FOR HISTORY, THE MAIN TEXTBOOK IS THE MEDINSKY TEXTBOOK THAT WE BUY, BUT IT SITS IN THE BASEMENT, AND OTHER BOOKS ARE USED IN LESSONS.”

(interviewee 2)

so-called teaching aids, which are not classified as textbooks [and are not so strictly regulated]. And we can completely legally include such a book in our official curriculum [...] As for history, the main textbook is the Medinsky textbook that we buy, but it sits in the basement, and other books are used in lessons – books that have the status of teaching aids. That’s how it works, basically. (interviewee 2)

This is a typical case of what Scott would describe as *false compliance*. At first glance, the school appears fully subordinate to state directives: it receives targeted funding, purchases state-approved textbooks, and formally integrates them into the official educational infrastructure. Publicly, loyalty is unquestioned. In practice, however, this subordination is thoroughly undermined.

The key step lies in exploiting the legal and bureaucratic distinctions inherent in the system—particularly between textbooks and teaching aids. By strictly adhering to the letter of the law while undermining its ideological thrust, school representatives transform state-imposed regulation into a resource for autonomy. Medinsky’s textbook becomes a symbolic artifact of subordination, not a pedagogical tool: it exists, is purchased, can be shown to inspectors, but is pedagogically inert (“it’s in the basement”). Actual learning is relegated to an informal public zone, sanctioned by law but less tightly controlled.

Bureaucratic shielding exemplifies how quiet resistance in schools is institutionally mediated, ambivalent, and ethically calibrated. Through routinized mimicry, administrative delegation, and strategic exploitation of structural loopholes, teachers collectively preserve a zone of professional and moral autonomy.

Moral and communicative buffering

A crucial feature of the context in which collective strategy takes shape is trust among “one’s own”—those with whom politically sensitive issues can be discussed relatively openly, and with whom a shared, meaningful silence can be sustained. Awareness of the (im)possibility of speaking directly, or even communicating through hints and glances, functions as a key marker of the boundary between “insiders” and “outsiders”. As one of our interviewees described it:

‘[our people] understand everything without words’ whereas ‘I don’t talk to strangers about my views and don’t see the point’, ‘in their [outsiders] presence we don’t have such [risky] conversation’. (interviewee 1)

This trust operates as the basis for an informal infrastructure of resistance: it delineates a safe communicative space and enables coordination without explicit articulation. Within this circle, political meanings are conveyed implicitly – through tone, irony, habitual jokes, allusions, or deliberate silences – rather than through direct statements.

The collective strategy presupposes that these relations of trust link not only adults with one another, but also teachers and

high school students (10th- and 11th-grades). As one of our interviewees explains:

They [the students] understand everything right away. [Among the teachers] there are one or two outsiders, and the kids immediately see who they are, because even the manner of speaking is different. Just different – because there’s a different value system in their heads. There are people who are entirely in their own [subject], some in mathematics, [...] and not about this at all. And then there are the others, who from time to time make a joke here, a joke there – and everything becomes clear immediately. (interviewee 1)

This fragment shows that collective silent resistance is sustained not only through *bureaucratic shielding*, but also through a finely calibrated moral and communicative order within the school. Both teachers and students share the ability to “read” political positions through indirect cues – style of speech, irony, humor, or conversational habits – rather than explicit declarations. In Scott’s terms, such interaction belongs to the realm of *infrapolitics*: political meanings circulate below the threshold of overt articulation, embedded in everyday practices and intelligible only to those who share a common moral and interpretive framework.

AT THE SAME TIME, schools are organized around asymmetrical moral responsibilities to children. Teachers’ choices are constrained by pedagogical ethics, care obligations, and complex relationships with students, parents, and administrators. Resistance must therefore be carefully calibrated to avoid exposing children to harm or overt political conflict, producing practices that are indirect, pedagogically mediated, and often ambivalent.

There was a discussion about the politicization of children. And at that moment NN said something like: ‘Dear colleagues, we all understand everything, we all share the same views. But please, let us not politicize children, because we are intelligent, we are adults, we are restrained, whereas children are eager to go out into the streets – and that is simply dangerous’. (interviewee 1)

This episode illustrates how depoliticization operates not through ideological conformity, but through a language of responsibility and care. Political engagement is presented as dangerous not in the abstract, but specifically for children, who are constructed as impulsive, affectively driven, and therefore vulnerable. From this perspective, restraint functions as a moral virtue rather than as capitulation. The refusal to politicize students becomes an ethical judgment grounded in an awareness of unequal exposure to risk and unequal capacity to bear the consequences of political action. Silence here is not simply imposed; it is actively chosen as a way to prevent harm to those deemed more vulnerable.

One of our interviewees describes a critical rupture in the everyday mode of silent resistance, when routine practices of

bureaucratic protection and coded communication prove insufficient. The outbreak of war in February 2022 produces an affective emergency: students experience fear, confusion, and an acute demand for meaning, while the official school environment responds with silence, tension, and visible distress. The 11th-grade students approached their teacher with the request, “Could you arrange for someone to talk to us?” – and asked for advice: “Could we go out to Nevsky Prospekt with an [anti-war] poster?” (interviewee 1). The school administration organized a meeting with the 10th- and 11th-grades students and talked to them:

We talked about what we were feeling and what we were thinking. [...] They saw that we are living people, [...] we can talk to them, and they can rely on us in that sense. We talked to them about the risks they would face if they expressed their position publicly. We explained to them that the machine would grind them down without mercy. And we said that yes, of course, this would also affect the school – but overall, that is not the worst thing. And we asked them to be cautious not because of the school, but because they themselves would be crushed. We are absolutely convinced of this. We told them that we consider our state to be a cannibalistic one. We said this openly [...].

(interviewee 1)

From a Scott-inspired perspective, this moment represents a temporary and carefully controlled movement of the hidden transcript into a semi-public (or informal public) space. Prior to this rupture, critical orientations toward the state were maintained through indirect means – irony, abstraction, jokes, and the disciplined separation between formal compliance and substantive interpretation. The extremity of the situation, however, legitimates a limited suspension of this regime. The conversation with senior students is not an act of mobilization, nor does it amount to overt political dissent; rather, it constitutes a calibrated disclosure, triggered by the students’ explicit request for recognition, explanation, and adult presence.

ALTHOUGH STUDENTS had long been able to “read” the teachers’ critical orientation through irony and coded communication, the affective rupture caused by the war rendered this implicit regime insufficient. Hints and abstraction could sustain a shared understanding under routine conditions, but they could not provide normative clarity or practical guidance in a moment when students contemplated public protest and faced real risk. The request for disclosure thus signals a demand for explicit moral anchoring and adult responsibility. The ensuing conversation constitutes a carefully delimited suspension of the hidden

transcript – less an act of mobilization than an act of pedagogical care under conditions of crisis.

Crucially, the educators’ intervention is structured around a double pedagogical gesture. On the one hand, teachers and administrators articulate an unambiguous moral judgment of the state, explicitly naming the violence of the regime and rejecting the fiction of ideological consensus. In doing so, they recognize students as ethical subjects capable of moral reasoning and political understanding. On the other hand, this moral clarity is immediately paired with a sober assessment of risk. Students are warned against public political expression, not in the language of obedience, but through a stark depiction of repression as an impersonal, grinding “machine” that destroys individuals regardless of intention or sincerity.

Students, according to our interviewees, are not passive recipients. They demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of where political boundaries lie and actively adjust their modes of questioning accordingly:

**“BACK IN 2014
– 2015 – 2016,
UNCOMFORTABLE
QUESTIONS CAME UP
VERY OFTEN [LIKE]
‘STATE YOUR OPINION’
AND SO ON. WHEN
THINGS STARTED
TIGHTENING, ALL OF
THIS FADED VERY
QUICKLY.”**
(interviewee 1)

Back in 2014–2015–2016, uncomfortable questions came up very often [like] ‘state your opinion’ and so on. When things started tightening, all of this faded very quickly. Not because they’re personally afraid of something, but because they understand that it’s better not to do this. You shouldn’t set anyone up – neither others nor yourself. [...] They don’t ask questions like: ‘NN, what do you think about P...?’ – that is, of a personal political nature. They might ask something like: ‘NN, what do you think about the concept of a hybrid regime? We know democracy, we know autocracy, and there’s also a hybrid regime.’ That kind

of question is fine. But they don’t ask what you think about Putin.

(interviewee 1)

The key phrase: “[don’t] set anyone up, neither others nor yourself” – signals that silence here functions as an ethical decision under conditions of asymmetric power and distributed danger. The actors do not necessarily refrain from speaking because they personally fear punishment; instead, they recognize that speech may expose colleagues, students, or school community to harm. In this sense, the refusal to speak becomes a form of preventive care: a way of minimizing potential damage within fragile relational networks.

WITHIN A LIBERAL framework of citizenship, the refusal to “express one’s opinion” is often interpreted as self-censorship or a loss of autonomy. However, in the tradition of the ethics of care, associated with thinkers such as Nel Noddin, moral action is not defined primarily as the assertion of an individual position at any



The publication of unified state-approved history textbooks signaled a shift toward a tightly centralized and ideologically saturated educational regime. President Vladimir Putin during a meeting with editors of history textbooks. PHOTO: MIKHAIL METZEL/TASS

cost. Rather, it involves attentiveness to vulnerability, contextual judgment, and responsiveness to the needs and risks of others.¹¹

From the standpoint of care ethics, the subject is not imagined as an isolated bearer of opinion, but as a relational agent embedded in webs of interdependence. Speech is not treated as an abstract right detached from consequences; it is understood as an act that can trigger institutional repercussions affecting others. Choosing selective silence, indirect questions and remote topics that touch on significant political issues, then, can be read as an exercise of responsibility and contextual practical judgment, rather than as passive submission.

Direct, personalized political questions can be avoided, while abstract and conceptual inquiries, framed in the language of political theory, are treated as legitimate and safe. This distinction signals the acquisition of a practical competence in navigating authoritarian speech regimes: students learn not whether politics can be discussed, but how it can be discussed without generating institutional risk. Silence, irony, and abstraction function as ethical gestures, signaling concern for others' safety while preserving the possibility of critical thought.

A particularly vivid illustration of this moral and communicative buffering is the deliberate teaching of *doublethink* during preparation for state-mandated examinations. One interviewee describes this practice explicitly and without euphemism:

We do this consciously. We explain very clearly to students that there is a certain [critical and reflective] understanding of the processes [...]. At the same time, you need to earn grades in order to move on to further education. We write it exactly like this here – don't ask me why it has to be written this way. Because there are [powerful] people who want to see it. Because this is the course of the party and the government. We write it, forget about it – and that's it. We do this intentionally. I do this completely consciously.

(interviewee 1)

The articulated practice functions as a direct exercise in *doublethink*. Students learn to draw a clear distinction between what must be written in an exam and what can be meaningfully understood, discussed, or believed. Compliance with external evaluative requirements is decoupled from internal conviction: students are taught how to reproduce ideologically loaded formulations without internalizing them or accepting their normative premises. The teacher's role extends beyond the transmission of subject knowledge to mediation between coercive institutional demands and the cultivation of student agency. The school becomes a site where students are implicitly trained to distinguish between genuine analytical engagement and the speech forms required in public or official contexts.

At the same time, this practice underscores the ambivalence inherent in moral and communicative buffering. Teaching students "how to write the right answers and then forget them" simultaneously protects them from institutional sanctions and habituates them to a political environment in which truth and public articulation are structurally misaligned. What operates as care, solidarity, and ethical guidance in the short term may, in the long run, normalize a pattern of ritualized ideological compliance and strategic silence. By learning to separate conviction from performance, students become adept at navigating power without confronting it. While this strategy minimizes immediate harm, it risks stabilizing the very structures it seeks to mitigate, as the refusal of a public voice becomes routinized and the transformative potential of dissent remains suspended.

"A stranger among one's own": Exit-based resistance as an individual strategy

We acknowledge that a collective strategy of resistance is only available to a small number of opposition-minded teachers working in Russian public schools. Most are forced to confront the situation as a minority or even alone within the school community,

deprived of support and protection. In this situation, resistance still exists, but other strategies are chosen.

The empirical basis for individual configuration consists of interviews with four respondents: two working in mainstream public schools in large cities and two in schools in small towns. We describe different forms of exit-based resistance as individual strategies.

ONE KEY PROTECTIVE factor for teachers in the contemporary authoritarianized school environment is the growing labor shortage, which generates leverage for passive or indirect forms of resistance. Under such conditions, educators can refuse assignments or directives without fear of immediate sanction, as replacement personnel are scarce. One teacher recalled:

[...] when the ‘special military operation’ began, we were sent a set of guidelines [...] basically instructing us to conduct a thematic lesson on relations between Ukraine and Russia. The guidelines were for grades 7–8 and 10–11. The deputy principal came up to me and said: here, you need to do it. I refused. [...] I understood [...] that [given the acute teacher shortage in the region] I could refuse. That was the position I was in: I could say ‘no,’ and there would be no sanctions, because they simply would not find another teacher [to replace me]. (interviewee 6)

This account illustrates a form of resistance grounded not in public dissent but in the structural vulnerability of the system itself—namely, chronic teacher shortages that redistribute power in everyday institutional interactions. The refusal to conduct a centrally mandated “thematic lesson” is not framed as protest; it takes the form of a quiet, matter-of-fact “no,” made possible by the practical absence of enforceable sanctions.

In Albert O. Hirschman’s terms, this is a clear example of *exit-based resistance*. The teacher does not employ *voice*: she does not argue with the administration, invoke professional ethics publicly, or attempt collective mobilization. Instead, she relies on the latent potential of exit—not necessarily a physical departure, but a credible possibility that shapes institutional behavior. Under conditions of acute labor shortages, the possibility of exit becomes an *unspoken form of leverage*: administrators recognize that strict enforcement could result in losing a teacher they cannot easily replace.

Crucially, this form of exit is structural rather than heroic. Its effectiveness depends on shared awareness of staffing shortages and on an asymmetry of costs: the institution stands to lose more from enforcement than the individual does from refusal.

At the same time, the protective capacity of this strategy is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it preserves professional and moral autonomy, shielding teachers from direct repression. On the other hand, it does not translate into collective voice or challenge the mechanisms of ideological governance; it produces individualized exceptions that the system can tolerate, leaving broader authoritarian structures intact.

A subtler, exit-adjacent strategy involves *curricular avoidance* or selective non-compliance within the classroom. History teachers, in particular, face the challenge of teaching official post-Soviet narratives alongside propagandistic interpretations of recent events, especially the “special military operation.” In schools where colleagues and parents are largely loyalist or indifferent, opposition-minded teachers often sidestep ideologically toxic topics, invoking workload, time constraints, or exam priorities as justification:

I don’t have time... Well, we’ll go as far as we go. [...] Beyond Perestroika, I’m not going anywhere, of course. About the 1990s, perhaps something could be added, but I try not to touch it anymore... (interviewee 7)

“I HAVE THE FEELING THAT EVERYONE AT SCHOOL KNOWS ABOUT MY POLITICAL POSITION. AND MY IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR WHO IS A HARDCORE PUTIN SUPPORTER AND AN ARDENT SUPPORTER OF THE WAR ALSO.”
(interviewee 6)

Teachers do not openly challenge the official narrative; instead, they circumvent it tactically, ending lessons in 1991 or delegating sensitive topics to unmonitored self-study. In Scott’s terms, this preserves a distinction between public and hidden transcripts: formally, the curriculum remains intact; substantively, ideological content is neutralized.

[...] it’s very naïve to include paragraphs about the ‘special military operation’ in textbooks – no one is ever going to get to them. [...] It’s the 11th grade; they simply don’t care anymore – they’re preparing for the Unified State Exam (EGE). And for those who take history, the EGE checks this with just a single paragraph – learn this one thing, and that’s it. (interviewee 6)

As a result, ideologically charged material about the last 20 years of Russian history becomes functionally irrelevant: it exists on paper, but not in pedagogical reality. This illustrates a broader pattern of bureaucratic ritualism. State demands are met at the level of documentation and formal compliance – the topic appears in the textbook; the exam includes minimal mention of it—while substantive interaction is quietly emptied. This also reveals the limitations of authoritarian control over the educational process. By relying on formal inclusion rather than mandatory pedagogical practices, the system creates opportunities for hidden avoidance. Viewed through Hirschman’s lens, this

represents a form of *internal exit*: teachers remain physically present and formally loyal but selectively withdraw effort from politically charged content.

Exit can also take a longer-term, career-oriented form. One teacher reflected:

After 2022, things became difficult. At first, I thought it would all end quickly. By 2023, when new subjects were being introduced and ideological initiatives were actively promoted – networks were being created, and money was being directed there – I realized I needed to act. I decided to retrain as a mathematics teacher.

(interviewee 7)

In this case, exit becomes *professional repositioning*. Rather than confronting the system, the teacher relocates within the educational labor market to reduce exposure to politically charged assignments. As in other exit-based strategies, the move protects individual autonomy without producing public dissent. Yet its systemic effect is again ambivalent: it removes potentially critical actors from ideologically sensitive positions, thereby allowing the system to function more smoothly.

One of our interviewees, whose responsibilities as a home-room teacher include conducting the extracurricular sessions “Conversations about What Matters” (Monday, 9:00 a.m.) and “Russia – My Horizons” (Thursday, 9:00 a.m.), does not conduct them because of ideological reasons. Instead, she allows her 11th-grade students to come to school an hour later on those days.

When asked by the interviewer how this is possible, she refers to the support of parents who are “strongly oriented toward an academic/scientific track” and who believe:

Why should my child come at nine in the morning for something unclear, when that child can sleep an extra hour, arrive at ten, be more productive, perform better, win all the Olympiads², and get into university?.

(interviewee 6)

At the same time, she admits that she herself “doesn’t understand how it works that they don’t pressure me or force me to conduct these lessons”:

[...] I have the feeling that everyone at school knows about my political position. And my immediate supervisor who is a hardcore Putin supporter and an ardent supporter of the war also. [But for now, all is quiet.]

(interviewee 6)

Here, curricular refusal operates *as an internal exit*. But, unlike earlier examples, this strategy is reinforced by *relational shielding*. The teacher builds a coalition of protection: parents provide pragmatic justification (“productivity,” university admission), students participate in maintaining silence, administration appears to tolerate or strategically ignore the deviation. Instead of fabricating paperwork, she mobilizes performance-oriented

parental logic as a depoliticizing cover. Ideological refusal is reframed as educational optimization. This is a subtle transformation of the public transcript: the ideological lesson disappears not as dissent, but as inefficiency.

The most analytically striking dimension, however, is her open political discussion with students:

With my class, especially the 11th grade, [...] there’s a certain atmosphere – we calmly talk about everything [...]. And, well, yes, I still haven’t been fired.

Interviewer: So no one reports on you?

Well, somehow, we’ve made a kind of pact with the class: I do everything possible to ensure your comfortable existence in this school. You, in turn, do everything possible so that I can continue working here until you graduate.

(interviewee 6)

In Scott’s terms, in this case the classroom becomes a protected site where the hidden transcript is temporarily spoken aloud. Outside, neutrality or formal loyalty is maintained; inside, critical voice emerges. Yet this is not public protest. It is localized voice, confined within a trusted micro-community. The “pact” with students is crucial. It institutionalizes mutual silence: she provides care and protection; they provide discretion. This is a classic Scottian mechanism: hidden transcripts require collective guardianship. The students’ silence is not passivity but active participation in maintaining a protected counter-public.

This case exemplifies the deep ambivalence of authoritarian resistance. It creates a genuine micro-sphere of autonomy, suspends ideological rituals, and fosters critical discussion. Yet it rests on silence and trust rather than institutional guarantees. The supervisor is described as a “hardcore Putin supporter,” yet enforcement does not occur. This suggests a form of pragmatic authoritarian governance, where ideological enforcement is uneven and selective. The regime tolerates localized deviations as long as they remain contained. Thus, like many forms of quiet resistance, this strategy simultaneously protects individuals and stabilizes the broader system.

Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical material shows that opposition-minded teachers are remarkably inventive in their efforts to navigate, with minimal damage, between the risk of state repression for dissent and the threat of moral distress resulting from betraying their own convictions.

The everyday resistance practices documented in this study – Bureaucratic shielding, Moral and communicative buffering, Exit-based resistance – may appear modest and politically inconclusive. Yet under conditions of intensified ideological control, such practices acquire significance precisely because they operate below the threshold of repression.

Our findings suggest that everyday resistance in Russian schools functions neither as a prelude to open opposition nor as mere adaptation. Instead, it occupies a liminal space in which authoritarian power is simultaneously undermined and stabi-

lized. In elite schools, collective doublethink can temporarily shield institutional autonomy through trust, coordination, and administrative buffering. In ordinary schools, individual teachers exploit systemic vulnerabilities—staff shortages, administrative overload, parental pragmatism—to carve out fragile zones of autonomy. In both cases, resistance remains intentionally non-public, carefully calibrated to avoid escalation.

As Michael Apple reminds us, micropolitical resistance within schools often remains defensive and fragmented, protecting local spaces of autonomy while leaving the broader structure of ideological domination intact. From a Freirean perspective, the pedagogy that emerges under authoritarian constraint preserves critical awareness but curtails collective agency.¹³ Post-Soviet critiques of doublethink and double morality sharpen this ambivalence. Practices that shield teachers and students from repression may also socialize young people into a deeply instrumental and cynical relationship with politics. Learning to “write what they [system representatives] want and forget it”, to separate truth from performance, and to treat public discourse as a hollow ritual risks reproducing what Alexey Yurchak described as hypernormalized power.¹⁴

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE of these practices lies not in their transformative capacity, but in their persistence. They prevent the full internalization of state ideology and slow the work of indoctrination, even as they defer the possibility of collective articulation. Whether such practices will eventually erode authoritarian control or continue to sustain it by displacing open conflict remains an open question—one that can only be answered by tracing how hidden transcripts might, under changing conditions, become public ones. ❌

A. Hope and **V. Milidia** are both independent researchers writing under pseudonyms.

references

- 1 Petr Kratochvíl and Gaziza Shakhonova, “The Patriotic Turn and ReBuilding Russia’s Historical Memory: Resisting the West, Leading the Post-Soviet East?” *Problems of Post-Communism* vol.68, no. 5 (2021): 442–456, Jonna Alava, “From Patriotic Education to Militarist Indoctrination – Disciplinary Power and Silent Resistance in Russia after the Onset of the War against Ukraine,” *Problems of Post-Communism* vol.72, no. 5 (2025): 429–440.
- 2 Sergey S. Kravtsov, “Suverennaya sistema obrazovaniya v Rossiyskoy Federatsii: aktual’naya obrazovatel’naya politika” [National Education in Modern Russia: Systemic sovereignty and Current Education Policy], *Modern Education and Society* vol.1, no.1 (2024): 7–12.
- 3 *Obrazovanie v rossijskikh shkolah 2022–2025* [Education in Russian Schools 2022–2025]. 2025. Accessed February 15, 2026. Available at <https://www.peremena.school/>.
- 4 Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 5 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 6 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 7 Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, “The Informal Public in Soviet Society: Double Morality at Work,” *Social Research* vol.69, no. 1 (2002): 49–69.
- 8 Following Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, the informal public sphere refers to a space of communication, meaning-making, moral evaluations, and practical coordination located between the private and the officially public, where shared evaluations of social and political reality are produced outside sanctioned institutional discourse. This sphere plays a key role in authoritarian contexts by enabling coordination, moral judgment, and limited collective agency without open confrontation with power. (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov, *The Informal public...*)
- 9 In this framework, “voice” refers to the public expression of dissatisfaction and demands for change; “exit” to refusal of participation (leaving an organization, changing jobs, or disengaging from cooperation) whether real or anticipated; and “loyalty” to the factor that restrains both exit and voice. In authoritarian and repressive contexts, withdrawal, or the credible threat of withdrawal, begins to perform the function that public criticism (“voice”) would play under less restrictive conditions. (Albert O. Hirschman. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
- 10 Exit becomes resistance—rather than merely an individual survival strategy – when withdrawal imposes tangible costs on the system (such as staff shortages or organizational disruption), when authorities recognize the possibility of exit and incorporate it into managerial calculations, and when exit is deployed selectively and strategically rather than as a mass departure. (Hirschman. *Exit, Voice...*)
- 11 In Nel Noddings’s framework, pedagogical responsibility is asymmetrical: the teacher bears a heightened moral obligation toward the student. This asymmetry creates a situation in which any form of resistance – or public political expression – must be evaluated against a prior ethical question: does it risk harming the child? As a result, resistance in schools cannot take the form of a purely political act. It is inevitably filtered through relations of care and the ethics of pedagogical responsibility. (Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press. 2005).
- 12 In the Russian educational system, school Olympiads are subject-based academic competitions in disciplines such as mathematics, history, or literature, organized at municipal, regional, and national levels. High achievement in these Olympiads is prestigious and can provide significant advantages in university admissions, including exemption from entrance exams or bonus points.
- 13 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).
- 14 In Alexei Yurchak’s analysis, hypernormalized power refers to a political condition in which official ideological discourse becomes widely recognized as detached from lived reality, yet continues to structure public life because everyone reproduces it as if it were meaningful. Power persists not through genuine belief, but through ritualized participation in a system whose artificiality is collectively understood yet rarely openly challenged. (Alexei Yurchak. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2013).