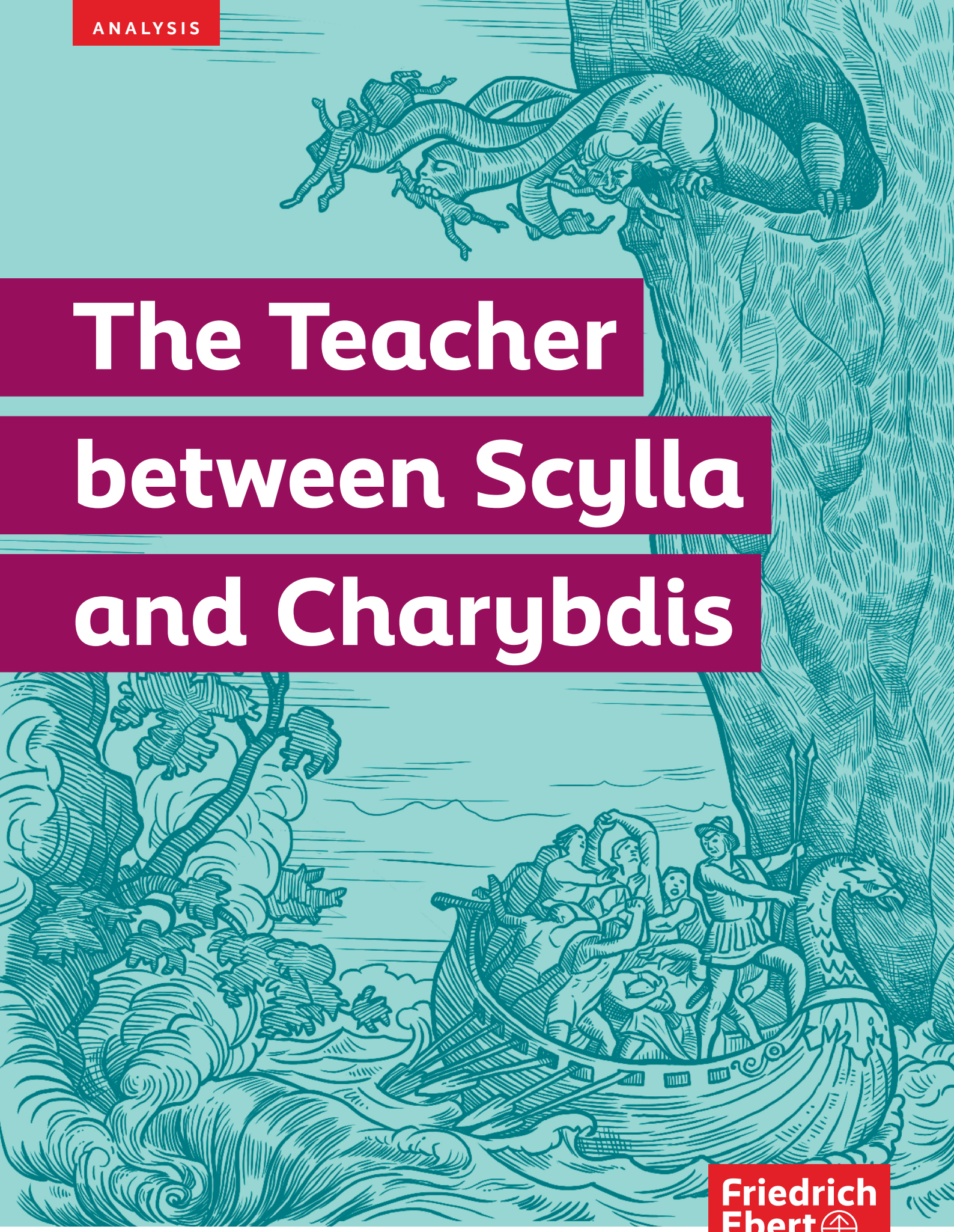
ANALYSIS

The Teacher between Scylla and Charybdis



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The author remains anonymous due to the Russian government's punitive measures against dissidents. Their identity is known to the FES Russia Programme

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Content

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The school reform in Russia is ongoing since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and is clearly geared towards implementing the state's mandate to foster loyalty and patriotism in schoolchildren. During this research, interviews have been conducted with history and social studies teachers, whose activities were most affected by new ideological standards imposed by the State. These conversations touched upon the changes impacting the daily life of schools, teachers and students.

The state schools in Russia have long been closed to independent researchers. In recent years increased ideological and administrative control over schools has exacerbated the previously existing fear of outsiders. Therefore, researchers relied on their social networks and recommendations from friends and acquaintances to find individuals with both insight into state of affairs in Russian schools and willingness to share it.'

This has always been difficult, but even 10-15 years ago, people fearing to share their opinions and preferring to keep silent were nowhere to be encountered, according to researchers. Any recommendations notwithstanding, these individuals clearly felt fear of an uncertain risk ('to avoid trouble'). As one interviewee put it: *'We are all frozen now... we prefer not to speak when there is a possibility not to; we prefer not to ask when there is a possibility not to; we prefer not to express our opinion when there is a possibility not to...'.*

Despite this fear and frequent refusals, a dozen respondents agreed to speak — teachers of history and social studies working in Russian public schools at various levels, from both cities and small towns.[1] Interviews with them, conducted in September to November 2024, formed the basis of this paper.

The empirical data obtained was used to analytically identify a number of rules common to different schools, and to identify features characteristic to schools that could be classified as elite.[2]

Troubled Times

The informants name the year 2014 (more precisely, the moment Russia annexed Crimea) when the State began to radically transform the Russian school education, first of all, in history. One of the respondents recalls, however, that the first interference from above occurred back in 2009, when a district curriculum coordinator imposed guidance on how to teach the 'Stalin era':

> *'..."make more emphasis on industrialisation, collectivisation, but in a positive way; talk less about repressions..." <...> and that was the first red flag. But, again, things did not change quickly. Until 2014, <...> everything was more or less fine. That is, no serious pressure. Textbooks — choose whatever you want. <...> It was from 2014 onwards that this active interference began, especially with regards to history'.*

Informants spoke a lot about the new formal practices introduced from above after the outbreak of war. These included new compulsory subjects ('Conversations about What's Important', 'Basics of Security and Defence of the Homeland'), new biased textbooks for schoolchildren, very controversial and often absurd methodological guidelines for teachers, ideological indoctrination, as well as collecting money and supplies for the front, weaving camouflage

1 In this paper, private schools have been left out of the discussion. They have a specific structural position, less embedded in the power vertical, which allows them to evade ideological pressure without much consequences. Opinions on how private schools make use of this relative freedom vary considerably among the informants in the study. It is however beyond the scope of this article to articulate these differences.

2 The concept of being elite is not clearly defined here. The researchers rather relied on the self-definition of their informants. Elite schools are considered to be those known in the region, where the level of education is considered to be high enough. They are popular among parents who want to make sure their children receive good education, they are more difficult to get into (there is entrance competition), and the teachers there are more competent.

nets, a surge of patriotic paraphernalia, writing letters to soldiers, etc. Many of these 'innovations' were described in interviews by teachers and schoolchildren and covered by journalists multiple times (Zotova, 2023; Zotova, Kiseleva, 2023; Inkina, 2023; Kolesnikov, 2024; etc.).

Teachers

The interviewees in the survey included people with different attitude towards politics and life in general, ranging from those who work as a teacher just for the money to those considering their work as a mission; from those who are fully loyal to the political regime to those strongly opposed to it. Three types of teachers were identified during the survey based on their individual strategies to cope with a rapidly evolving situation:

1. 'Toeing the party line': Teachers who are politically loyal and follow all signals from above wholeheartedly, adapt to rapidly changing demands, internalise the official viewpoint and may initiate actions supporting it. Actions by those striving to be 'first disciples' take the form of grassroots initiatives that creatively develop the top-down demand for patriotic education of the younger generation.[3] The researchers were not able to talk to teachers using this tactic. It is reconstructed from the stories told by other teachers.

2. 'Flying under the radar': Irrespective of their own views, most teachers tend to minimise efforts to reflect on and evaluate guidance coming from up the ladder. Without passion though obediently, they do what is asked of them, or at least pretend to. This can be the case for highly qualified subject-matter professionals as well as for people who only work for the paycheck.

3. 'Sabotage': Evading 'orders'; some teachers ('dissenters') resist new ways that they consider pointless or harmful.[4] Most interviewees who expressed this position worked in elite schools. It is this group of teachers who more often speak about their work as a mission. And it was these teachers who were more willing to engage and therefore became the focus of the research.

Another group of teachers can be mentioned, which, faced with new realities, 'voted with their feet' against the policies of the Russian state: 'the environment has changed [in schools] from calm, more or less friendly, non-aggressive, so to say, to very toxic and aggressive. <...> That's why teachers are fleeing from schools, leaving, they don't want to work'. These teachers joined the pool of 'former' teachers. For older teachers, the increasing toxicity of the school environment became an additional incentive to retire. Younger ones went into private tutoring or other areas, or left the country altogether. For some disloyal ones, leaving the school was not voluntary: 'A struggle against the disloyal — a witch-hunt — began there. And I was declared disloyal. <...> So, I worked for three years without doing anything. They were simply unable to sack me. They just weren't giving me any workload and paid me a salary, just for being there.'

Scenarios for Resistance

Analysis of the data obtained has shown that 'dissenters' are very resourceful in their attempts to pass painlessly between the Charybdis of state repression for freethinking and the Scylla of moral torment for abandoning their own beliefs. Two main scenarios of avoidance/resistance have been observed: collective — 'a besieged fortress', and individual — 'a friend to foes'. This paper will limit itself to the most interesting case of the collective tactic of manoeuvring between these two dangers.

> *'We, in our school... So what are we doing? We are doing what we want, what we think is right. It's not leaking out anywhere.'*

There were teachers among the interviewees from elite schools, where there has historically been a close-knit group of like-minded people with a similar political stance. This is because these schools carefully select future staff according to a system of requirements adopted by the staff and supported by the administration. The role of the school administration's beliefs can hardly be overestimated.

> *'It's not like I'm going to go to any school either. Mission is important, but... <...> [professionals] go where the administration provides comfortable working conditions.'*

The interviewees considered conditions as being comfortable when mutual trust reigns among the teaching staff, contentious political issues are being discussed quite openly[5]; the school administration is not only 'covering'

3 Officially endorsed practices to line up children in the 'Z' pattern, or to make tinfoil hats to protect them from 'enemy information attacks' in response to a fake request from a prankster, etc.

4 The ever-changing demands on teachers by the education committees are particularly galling: 'They send out some programmes, different every year. Sometimes they change them several times a year. Teachers are sitting around like crazy, rewriting their so-called CTP — calendar and thematic planning — to fit them in. <...> And when you fill in the grade book, you have to write everything down from the CTP in there. There is no connection with the real thing." Another 'minefield' for the school is the classes of Basics of Security and Defence of the Homeland, or OBZR as they are referred to in Russian. The essential purpose of this subject is preparation for military service. Schools are obliged to have a course in OBZR, but an informant from one of the elite schools reported that this subject was not being taught in their school: 'It is a huge risk zone. We are obliged to have an OBZR teacher. And in order for us not to get a 'veteran of "special military operation"' thrown in, we have one teacher who is now taking an OBZR course. She feels sick there, she is shaking, she is hysterical, but she is courageously holding out there, because we need a person with an 'OBZR teacher' certificate".

5 However, 'a couple of outsiders can always slip into elite schools, but children understand everything about them at once, because even the way they interact there is different. It's simply different, because there is a different system of values in their heads.' But they try not to have political conversations in front of these teachers.

freethinking, but is also democratically discussing tactical and strategic plans for all areas of the school's activities with the staff.

Feeling supported by the administration, teachers are often not very concerned about vigilance: 'I teach exactly as I have always done, I didn't change anything. If things were different in the country now, I would have been telling the same story.' Yet it's impossible to claim that teachers 'are doing what they want to do'. Self-censorship[6] or non-verbal expression[7] often came up in the conversations.

In today's elite school, doublethink plays the role of the main defence mechanism. As almost all interviewees mentioned, the school formally reports to the state bureaucracy according to the rules established by the State. Reporting simulates a reality in which all regulations are strictly followed. What is 'really' happening is skilfully concealed from formal control. However, according to some evidence, the state officials in charge are not very concerned with finding out what's 'really' happening.

Like most teachers, school inspectors follow the 'flying under the radar' tactic. They use the good picture offered by the schools to present the situation in a favourable light to their own superiors. Finding out what's behind this picture requires not only skills and time, but also a willingness to do so, which (given the red tape overload) most inspectors lack.

> *'Furthermore, there are people there among [controllers] who have normal beliefs but don't show them off, they don't flaunt them, but you can still tell. There are people with no beliefs at all who say that we are small people, let's do it and forget it, so that we aren't given a hard time, that's all.'*

> *'They care about the result, you know, in the end — both parents and our officials. What grades the children have, <...> how competitive they are in relation to their peers. What are their results, their final assessments, whether they can enter a university, and so on. And nobody here is particularly [interested] in the inner workings <...> We are treated so [well] because we bring a dividend, so to say, to the bureaucracy. Roughly speaking, head of the local administration gets his bonus depending on how many Magna cum Laude's they have in the district, what the National Test Exam results are in their area, and so on.'*

Even when teachers' 'misdeeds' were as serious from the State's point of view as, for example, signing anti-war letters at the beginning of the war, the district administration could privately only mildly scold the headmaster: 'Make sure you work with the staff so they don't stand out so much!'.

The informants in the survey did not highlight any difficulty in their relationships with the supervisory authorities, but stressed the importance of having documents that are 'properly' filled in:

> *'It's impossible to check. In the outgoing documentation, everything complies with [the official line]. My curriculum is based on the textbook written by those from the Ministry of Education's list. <...> I do lesson planning with page numbers, paragraphs, and homework, and all these papers are stored in a proper folder, so that the inspectors come and check: everything is upright.'*

In elite schools, teachers themselves are generally exempt from the ever-expanding bureaucratic reporting. Interviewees said their schools had whole departments in place to deal with the 'meaningless work' the State is imposing: 'We have an employee responsible for documentation [to be sent to the controlling authorities]. <...> That is to say, we do everything required, we don't grumble, <...> but we continue to work as we see fit.'

Several informers, for example, reported only purchasing these new unified state-approved textbooks of Russian history by Medinsky and Torkunov (released in 2023) for reporting, just to check the box. One respondent said they had purchased one textbook per class, while children were reading other literature recommended by the teacher including a book by contemporary American historian and social scientist Sheila Fitzpatrick! 'The main textbook <...> by Medinsky <...> is stored in the basement, and there is another one that is approved and can be worked with.'

The interviewed teachers from elite schools do not aim to instil opposition views in students. It is primarily about fos-

6 The 'dissenters' from among class teachers who have to teach the so-called 'Conversations about what's Important' — an all-encompassing extracurricular activity introduced to indoctrinate patriotism and 'traditional values' — face particularly major problems: 'Outwardly, we demonstrate full compliance with all expectations. Inside, we are afraid of snitching, because those 'lessons about what's important' are taught in all classes, including the younger ones <...> And children there can just say something wrong, without meaning anything bad or to hurt anyone and without realising what they are saying. And the parents can be different. So, for almost all topics we somehow carefully pretend that we have understood the topic in this way, and find some of our own materials...'.

7 Intonation and facial expressions can be used: 'I am kind of talking about what is written in the Constitution, and even if I don't use words — and I do — kids can read on my face what I think about these 2020 amendments, what I think about some nuances, about the Constitutional Court, about the powers of the President <...> But I am careful, I am clever and careful — I make it clear, but in such a way that it would be difficult to pin anything on me.'

tering critical thinking, avoiding discussions about current politics as much as possible: 'We don't give grades for right or wrong views, God forbid! That is, whatever your views are, if you are able to adequately present them, backing them up with something — well done...'. On the other hand, in private, teachers talk to students quite openly about everything.

When asked about the fear of snitching (these stories often circulate online), informants said they kept that in mind, but it had never happened in their practice so far. Only one case was mentioned, when a student upset with a teacher over a bad grade told his parents about the teacher's disloyal pronouncements. Parents came to the school to complain about the teacher's alleged unreliability. However, the school administration hushed it all up, merely telling the teacher off for not being careful enough[8]. Typically, all issues of this kind stay within the school and are sorted out one way or another by the administration: 'Otherwise, what's the administration for? It's needed, among other things, to serve as a buffer between the teacher ... and the parents, who may not like a lot of things.'

In the collective scenario, the teacher can feel free enough to present the teaching material, but has to accept the fact that some of his students will have to take the USE (Unified State Exam), where the 'correctness' of answers is dictated by the State:

> *'We explain to children in a targeted way that there is a certain adequate understanding of processes, and this is what you do at school <...> And there is a need to earn marks to go on to study elsewhere. This is how we write it here, don't ask why. <...> We write and we forget — that's it! And we do it consciously.'*

Pessimism among dissenting teachers made one of the informants confess that they 'encouraged children to emigrate. And at school, we create a place where you can still be yourself, kind of. But in general, little by little, we are feeling like we are in a besieged fortress.' Like many other teachers, they do not believe the regime can radically change any time soon, so the above scenario of coping with the situation seems unsustainable to them: 'I don't think it can last long in the current conditions. <...> ...It's all hanging on by such a thin thread right now, and it's so much dependent on specific people, God bless them, that ... it's all in a very big jeopardy.' Therefore, the metaphor of a 'besieged fortress' fits perfectly with the definition of those elite schools where there is collective resistance to the ideological aggression of the State. The closing statement of a teacher from this school is revealing: 'We go to great lengths to conceal our existence.'

8 In a regular school, researchers were told, this would likely be cause for dismissal.

Summarised Conclusions

Studying practices that help cope with the bureaucratic pressures of the current fluid transition might serve as a worthy illustration for the phenomenon described in detail by James Scott as the 'weapons of the weak.' Researchers have seen schools that 'obey, but do not comply.' A subordinate may agree with the will, the desire, the order of their superior, but is in no hurry to execute it or, when they do, they do it only partially.

As the research has shown, the practice of doublethink, known since the Soviet time, plays a major role in schools. Two realities were shaped in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union: in one, life was governed by customary law and informal rules (re)produced every day that no one specifically established or controlled, but which were perceived as the norm; in the other, the official public sphere, there were formal rules and their observance was closely monitored by the State. The rules of correct behaviour in the latter prescribed to say the right words and show support of the State.

Outside the official public sphere, one could commit unlawful acts (from the point of view of formal law) with impunity or demonstrate disloyalty. The main rule was to avoid doing in the official public sphere what was permissible under informal rules, for example, avoid saying what one was used to say in their kitchen at an official staff meeting. And the boundary between these two spaces of communication had to be clearly understood in order to promptly move from one system of rules to the other.

Consciously or not, teachers cultivate in their students the same doublethink that is inherent in themselves. Students are thus taught to adapt more effectively to the upcoming 'adult life' (which is a school task in itself), where it is now the norm. When asked how one interviewee feels about the fact that they actually teach doublethink to their students, they accurately articulated it as follows: 'Well, yes, in fact, nowadays, in this sense, this is what the whole school education system in social studies and humanities seems to be about. While chemistry, perhaps, can still be taught somehow at face value, the rest is literally about teaching doublethink.''

Though it had almost disappeared in the 1990s, institutionalised Soviet doublethink, whereby customary law dominated over codified law, continues to have an impact on people's everyday behaviour.

With few exceptions, schools ignore most of the guidance they get from above, regardless of the ideological leanings of the school administration. As in Soviet times, sugar-coated reporting practices are still in place, because the fate of a subordinate depends on their superiors. What's really happening in schools escapes the supervisors' attention or does not even interest them much. When this reporting is reaching the very top, it's been so polished on

every rung of the hierarchical ladder that a basic understanding of the school reality becomes impossible.

Even if education officials wanted to visit schools to monitor them, they could do so very rarely due to personnel shortage and a huge bureaucratic workload. These circumstances create a convenient environment for schools to ignore their superiors' expectations. Even loyal school administrations have to put up with the self-will of dissenting teachers who refuse to conduct ideological classes or express disloyal views. On the one hand, the administration itself could be exposed to a risk of publicity if the conflict gets outside, and, on the other hand, dissenters leverage the teacher shortage as a way to 'blackmail' their superiors.

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The Teacher between Scylla and Charybdis

In recent years, Russia's school education system has undergone significant changes, particularly in the humanities. Since 2014, and especially after the full-scale war against Ukraine began, state control over schools has tightened, turning them into instruments of patriotic upbringing. However, despite intense pressure, Russian teachers respond to these changes in different ways—ranging from full compliance to subtle resistance.

The Russian Programme of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation invites you to explore a study we supported last year, which examines these dynamics. Based on interviews with history and social studies teachers working in Russian schools, the research explores their strategies for adapting to the new conditions. While the ideological shift in education continues, many schools still harbor pockets of freedom where teachers find ways to navigate between official directives and genuine educational goals. How exactly this happens, and what survival strategies educators adopt, is explored in this research.

Further information on this topic can be found here:
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