

# "Strategies for Teaching the War in Ukraine" Webinar Highlights

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On March 15th, 2022, APSA convened the webinar "Strategies for Teaching About Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." The panel brought together scholars with regional expertise on Russia and Ukraine, post-Soviet political development, international relations, global civic engagement, and political science instruction. Moderated by Michelle Allendoerfer, APSA's Director of Teaching & Learning, the five panelists included John Ishiyama (APSA President, University of North Texas), Alison R. M. McCartney (Towson University), Yoshiko Herrera (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Paul Poast (The University of Chicago) and Olga Onuch (The University of Manchester). The aim of this event was to address the opportunities and challenges for teaching political science in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Members of the panel offered insights on how political science can shed light on the origins, dynamics, and consequences of the conflict, as well as practical suggestions for how to incorporate the events in Ukraine into classroom discussions and activities. In the following, I distill some of the core ideas that emerged in the panel discussion, which I organize around three key roles instructors can play during this time. Scholars of political science can provide students with relevant and accurate information about the conflict, help students to understand the conflict through the lens of political science, and empower students to take action on behalf of those affected by the conflict.

## GIVING CONTEXT, COUNTERING MISINFORMATION

First, several panelists emphasized the role of instructors as sources of credible information about the conflict. Every dimension of the war in Ukraine has historical antecedents, and instructors can shed light on the current crisis by offering students contextual information about the region's history and politics. Panelists offered numerous examples, such as Vladimir Putin's rise to power amid the lingering political and economic chaos of the post-Cold-War era, NATO's founding and expansion, Ukraine's democratization and color revolutions, and Russia's expansionist wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Crimea.



**Frank Wyer**, is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he studies the causes and consequences of civil war. His dissertation focuses on the Colombian conflict and the 2016 peace accords, and addresses topics ranging from armed group financing and recruitment strategies, to public support for peace agreements. Wyer is also a fellow in the APSA Public Scholarship Program.

Further, panelists emphasized the critical role of instructors in countering mis- and disinformation and fostering informational literacy among students at a time when governments are increasingly adept at spreading propaganda through social media. According to Olga Onuch, this can include both outright falsehoods disseminated by propagandists, such as the idea that Ukraine is governed by Nazi sympathizers, as well as several common misconceptions surrounding the conflict. One such misconception is the idea that Russian-speaking Ukrainians identify as Russian or welcomed the invasion—in fact, Ukrainians' civic or national identities are often distinct from their linguistic preferences. A second common misconception portrays Ukraine as a flailing post-Soviet democracy with a weak civil society when in reality, Onuch noted that Ukraine has a thriving civil society that developed over decades during multiple protest movements and democratic revolutions. And third, while media reports often depict Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky as a comedian with no political experience or ideology, Onuch emphasized that he originally trained as a lawyer, and that the political satire he produced as a comedian reveals a consistent set of ideas about Ukrainian politics and identity. While troubling, the spread of misleading narratives during this conflict may offer a valuable opportunity for instructors to teach students how to spot mis- and disinformation and how to identify credible domestic and international sources of information.

## POLITICAL SCIENCE HELPS UNDERSTAND THE CRISIS

A second key theme emerging from the panel is the role of instructors in helping students apply the tools and ideas from political science to understand the conflict in Ukraine. The goal here is not to frame the conflict as confirmation of a particular theory or paradigm, but rather, to encourage students to think critically about these theories and the extent to which they do or do not help explain the current crisis. Panelists offered several particularly helpful examples relating to the causes of the conflict, its dynamics, and its eventual outcome.

Many readers will doubtless be aware of the controversy among political scientists over the claim that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was motivated by the perceived threat of NATO expansion. Rather than ignoring this controversy, Paul Poast suggested that it offered a valuable opportunity for students to learn about and critique theories about the causes of war. Poast asked his students to provide evidence for or against this explanation, as well as to evaluate alternative explanations for war, such as offensive realism or domestic political factors.

Another set of ideas from political science particularly relevant to the current crisis concerns the nature and function of dictatorships. Do Russians support Vladimir Putin? Does the military? Could he be ousted in an election or a coup? Yoshiko Herrera suggested that

such questions offer instructors the opportunity to introduce useful concepts from political science research like coup-proofing and electoral authoritarianism, which help explain how autocrats retain power in the face of elite or popular opposition. And, in more advanced courses, instructors might use the challenge of assessing public opinion in an authoritarian regime like Russia to motivate techniques for dealing with non-response bias.

Ideas from political science are useful not only for understanding the causes of the war in Ukraine, but also how it might progress and ultimately terminate. Panelists emphasized the Clausewitzian axiom that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Talks among NATO members over the extent of military aid to Ukraine, negotiations within the international community over economic sanctions, or bargaining between Russia and Ukraine over the terms of an eventual settlement, may be just as important as developments on the battlefield. In this context, Alison McCartney proposed simulations as a particularly effective teaching tool, placing students in the position of diplomats and encouraging them to get inside the heads of leaders and understand their perceptions and interests.

### EMPOWERING STUDENT ACTION

A third theme that emerged during the discussion was the role of instructors in engaging with questions of right and wrong at stake in this conflict. John Ishiyama acknowledged that it is tempting for scholars to position themselves as neutral arbiters of facts and theories, and avoid taking normative positions. Yet Ishiyama argued that in a case like the war in Ukraine, instructors establish credibility with their students not by maintaining an artificial neutrality but by acknowledging that there are clear aggressors and victims in this war. Instructors should not shy away from asserting that wars of aggression are wrong, that democracy is preferable to dictatorship, and that countries have moral obligations to refugees. Nor should they be afraid to engage with the moral controversies surrounding this conflict, such as when and under what conditions humanitarian interventions are justified, or whether Western governments are hypocritical for welcom-



Above: (Left to right) on the top row, speakers for the webinar consisted of Michelle Allendoerfer, Olga Onuch, and John Ishiyama. (Left to right) on the bottom row, speakers for the webinar consisted of Yoshiko M. Herrera, Paul Poast, and Alison R. M. McCartney.

ing Ukrainian refugees even as they restrict the number of refugees from the global South.

Engaging with the normative dimensions of the conflict also presents a valuable opportunity to promote student learning. Many political science students are not only aware of the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, but feel compelled to take action. Alison McCartney argued that instructors can channel this energy among students in directions that promote productive civic engagement. This could encompass a wide range of activities, from participating in protests, organizing events to raise awareness, raising money for victims, or seeking out internships at humanitarian organizations. Instructors can empower students by taking a facilitative role—offering advice and information but allowing students to take the lead.

### CONCLUSION

In sum, political scientists cannot ignore the events in Ukraine in the classroom, nor should they. Students want to know what is happening in Ukraine, and instructors can direct them towards accurate information and help them avoid falling victim to propaganda. More than that, students want to understand what is happening, and instructors can help students apply powerful ideas from political science that explain aspects of the crisis, while also encouraging students to question and critique these ideas. Finally, many students want to do something, and instructors have the power to direct their energy towards productive avenues that not only allow students to take action in the current crisis, but also develop into civically engaged members of society. ■



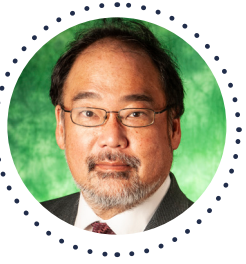
**Olga Onuch** is an associate professor at the University of Manchester.



**Alison R. M. McCartney** is a professor at Towson University.



**Yoshiko M. Herrera** is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



**John Ishiyama** is the President of APSA and a Piper Professor of the University of North Texas.



**Paul Poast** is an associate professor at the University of Chicago.



**Michelle Allendoerfer** is the director of Teaching and Learning at APSA.