



## Bachelor Thesis

# Agree to Disagree:

## A Qualitative Study About Shifting from Political Debate to Dialogue in Moldova

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## Abstract

In a country like the Republic of Moldova where communality is valued, political disagreements among friends and family members can have a negative impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships if not handled properly. This study used the communication accommodation theory (CAT), relational turbulence theory (RTT), and the notions of dialogue, debate, and intimate distance, aiming to better understand how Moldovans deal with political disputes in close relationships. In the first phase of the study, 22 Moldovans were interviewed to assess the dynamics of their political conversations and their strategies for making these conversations more constructive, and in the second phase, 5 of them were gathered in a focus group to share ideas and potential solutions for fostering better political discussions. The results of the current research reveal the complexity of managing political disagreements within close relationships. Participants seem to be aware of this issue and acknowledge that certain behaviours, which do not facilitate constructive discussions, can negatively impact their relationships and cause suffering. However, some of them primarily employ non-constructive strategies that merely pause conflicts rather than resolve them. This study explores ways to reduce such controversial differences through communicative actions and constructive solutions, highlighting the importance of family bonds and the diverse ways individuals navigate political disagreements to maintain close relationships. Since family is where participants prefer to avoid the negative effects of political differences, it is important that people learn strategies for managing these discrepancies. Participants appear to be ready to initiate this change by adopting more constructive approaches, aiming to enhance the quality and level of constructivism in their discussions.

*Keywords:* dialogue, debate, political difference, Moldova, relational turbulence theory, communication accommodation theory, intimate distance

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## Preface

The current paper is the result of the research that I performed for my bachelor thesis. I cannot believe that three years have already passed, and that I am about to graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Communication Science. It has honestly been one of the most difficult things I have done so far in my life, a rollercoaster of ups and downs, joy, sadness, happy memories, and struggles. It was a journey that contributed greatly to the adult I am today, and I cannot put into words how much my life changed in this period. And to think that three years ago, I felt so unstoppable, thinking I already knew everything about life... Sometimes I wonder how things could have turned out differently if I had chosen to pursue another study in a different setting with other people. But I now believe that I was lucky to be in the right place, at the right time, with the right people around me.

I could not have won this battle with the twists of incipient adulthood without my partner, Lourenço, who has supported me unconditionally, offering me his shoulder to cry on in my toughest times and cheering on my accomplishments as if they were his own, when I thrived. In addition to being a couple, for the past three years we have also become housemates, best friends, and partners for life. My dear Laur, you know how much I love you and how grateful I am to have you by my side. I will never stop believing that you are one of life's greatest gifts to me. Saying thank you for everything is simply not enough. I am immensely proud of both of us, and I know the best is yet to come!

I am also deeply grateful for my family's support. Thank you for always believing in me and telling Laur and I that we are the best and that we will succeed no matter what! We literally could not have gotten where we are now without your love, encouragement, and support. Sorry for not calling you more often, for being so far away and missing out on some important moments in your life. I hope we can make up for it shortly. I love you all to the moon and beyond, Mămica, țaca, Vlăduț, Tudor, bunica, bunelu, badea, Lenuța, doamna Aliona, domnul Nicolae, Mika!

I would also like to thank my girls, my two dearest friends, who have shown me what a true friendship is for several years in a row. Vilorina and Ruxanda, you were my salvation and will always be my sweethearts and go-to people. Thank you for listening to me, providing advice and support, and believing in me even when I did not. I aim to be as good a friend to you as you have always been to me!

I hope you enjoy reading my thesis!

Andreea-Ceslava Glavan

Enschede, June 2024

## 1. Introduction

Politics is seen as a dirty venture by many, especially those discussing it with contrary-minded people. According to Warner, Colaner, and Park (2020), political disagreements with people in one's close surroundings, such as friends or family members, can have a severe impact on the quality of human relationships and even lead to their destruction. Such clashes can become personal and disrespectful, and that puts the close bonds to a great risk. And because lengthy friendships or family ties have become solid with years and mutual effort, they can hardly be evaded (Warner, Colaner, & Park, 2020), thus people must learn how to preserve their close relationships, by finding a successful way to navigate political differences. However, some people side with their political views so much, that they decide to cut ties with those they disagree with (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018; Warner et al., 2020), and sometimes that does not exclude friends or family members. Therefore, having political conversations with people who hold differing opinions is a delicate matter, one that requires careful handling because it might impact the overall future of the relationship.

Many studies investigating the shift from debate to dialogue focus primarily on Western societies and developed countries, leaving a gap in research on communication dynamics in poorer, developing countries with complex historical and cultural backgrounds, such as Moldova. To bridge this gap and underscore the interconnectedness of the East and West of Europe, some scholars call for more studies on Eastern European countries (Stenning, 2005), highlighting the importance of understanding these regions within the broader context of global dynamics. As a former Soviet republic with a history of enforced cultural and linguistic division, Moldova faces unique challenges in navigating political disagreements within personal relationships. Although some reports exist on the psychological and cultural characteristics of Moldovan society and the country's history that

has immensely impacted today's political, cultural, and conversational situation (Fedor, 1995; Popov et al., 2020; Sofransky, 2002), it remains unclear how Moldovans communicate on sensitive and controversial matters such as politics. This includes understanding how they deal with potential conflicts in this context and whether strategies employed by Western societies are applicable or applied in Moldova. To appreciate the complexity of Moldovan communication dynamics, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural background of the country.

Moldova was historically part of Greater Romania until the Russian Empire annexed a Romanian region that was named then Bessarabia, which largely comprises the territory of present-day Moldova. During Moldova's time under Soviet control, significant efforts were made to persuade the population that they were not Romanians, but a distinct nation called "Moldovans", with a unique culture and a fabricated artificial language known as "Moldovan" (Sofransky, 2002), created by the Soviet Union to divide the nation. Stalin even enforced the Cyrillic alphabet on the new language, making it look more Russian and less Romanian, while also prohibiting Romanian-language schooling and the Romanian press, in an effort of forced Russification of the society (Fedor, 1995). For decades, these efforts shaped the societal identity. Tensions rose after years, as Moldovans gradually adopted a pro-European position and attempted to move beyond their Soviet, pro-Russian past. While a portion of society currently call for European integration, there is still a segment that holds onto the Soviet past. The latter advocate the idea of Russian as a second national language and sustain that Moldovans speak Moldovan rather than Romanian. This persistent cultural and linguistic gap has a huge influence on the political landscape as well as interpersonal relationships within the country.

Furthermore, because in Moldova communality is highly valued, not conforming to the norm or holding different viewpoints is frequently considered unacceptable. This is

evident in the findings of a study by Popov et al. (2020), which assessed psychological and cultural characteristics of Moldovan society using the theoretical model of Geert Hofstede. The results indicate that people generally have less freedom to make their own decisions and are more reliant on the opinion of their family members. Moreover, Moldovans consider that harmony is essential in the family, and disagreements should be avoided. Unfortunately, this often results in individuals using manipulation, passive-aggressive communication, or emotional intimidation (Popov et al., 2020), rather than maintaining a healthy and constructive communication.

With Moldova's history in mind, as well as the extant literature in this area done in Western countries, this study aims to fill the existing gap and explore how Moldovans handle disagreements with those in their close environment and what coping mechanisms they adopt to shift their political discussions from debates to dialogues.

In the following sections, this paper will address the key concepts of the study within the theoretical framework, supported by existing literature. Following that, the methods section will explain the design and procedure of the study, along with detailed information about the participants. Next, the results section will report the findings in alignment with the research questions and key theories. And finally, the discussion section will interpret the study's findings and integrate them with existing research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Dialogue**

Multiple definitions exist for the concept of 'dialogue', and most scholars view it as more than an exchange of information between two or more participants. According to Doornbosch-Akse and Van Vuuren (2019), dialogue is an essential human need for social interaction and belonging. It requires openness to ideas that are new to one's knowledge and is also a non-polarised discourse, with collaboration amongst participants (Hyde & Bineham,



2000). Moreover, dialogue implies that people stop trying to make themselves understood and instead start attempting to understand the other parties involved, or, as Hyde and Bineham (2000) discuss, “a commitment to something larger than one’s identity” (p. 216). Also, according to Isaacs (2008), dialogue is “something you do *with* people” (A Book on Dialogue, para. 1) and presumes that people who have pieces of the answer come together and unite to create a collective solution (Escobar, 2011). Hence, dialogue is mostly seen as a potential mechanism that will unite the efforts of many to create an output beneficial not only for one, but for them all.

However, when it comes to more sensitive topics, such as politics, some scholars argue that dialogue as a solution to disagreements seems unrealistic. According to Rose-Redwood and Smith (2016), an attempt to have a dialogue with others who hold different political views is tricky, because when two parties disagree, dialogue will not inherently solve the disagreement. They believe that, in this situation, dialogue is perceived as only highlighting the divergent ideas rather than serving as a solution, since many arguments are very complex and arise from clashing personal values and deeply held beliefs. To be able to relate with people who hold opposing ideas, one must be able to empathise and put themselves into the other's shoes, even if it contradicts their own beliefs.

### **2.1.1. Empathy**

Appealing to empathy is thought to make people stop relying solely on their personal opinions and engage in deeper contemplation and consideration of the opposing viewpoint (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2021). Additionally, in the context of political disputes, empathy can help people be less opposing when thinking about adopting views that contradict their own (Tuller, Bryan, Heyman, & Christenfeld, 2015). Taking someone else’s perspective might lead to discovering shared similarities between the individual and another who holds

an opposing view (Erle & Topolinski, 2017), making them feel more understanding of the other's viewpoints.

Therefore, this study will further define dialogue as a constructive discourse in which participants, despite their differences of opinion, exhibit openness, mutual respect and empathy for each other and the ideas others share, and collaborate with one another, aiming to find common ground. While dialogue seeks harmony and mutual understanding, debate often takes a different approach.

## **2.2. Debate**

In a society praising diversity and setting it at the top of the goals list, many people try to avoid exposing themselves to difference (Mutz, 2006), and many of those who cannot deal with differences try to take them down. The concept of debate is considered to originate from French, with the main meaning of “fight”, from *de-* “down, completely”, and *batre* “to beat” (*Etymonline*, n.d.), or, as mentioned in Isaacs (2008), to solve “by beating down” (Discussion, para. 4). According to Escobar (2011), a debate is a divergent process of advocacy, not intended for decision-making but to winning and proving the interlocutor wrong. It is believed that unlike dialogue, which is open-ended, debate is polarised and assumes that one of the parties involved has the right answer (Escobar, 2011).

Based on existing definitions of the concept, this study will further define debate as a confrontational form of communication that involves behaviours like interrupting and overlooking the contributions of others, where participants aim to dominate the conversation and eventually win.

## **2.3. Differences between dialogue and debate**

The difference between dialogue and debate remains rather unclear to this day, given that in today's culture, we are more predisposed to listen to our interlocutor in order to be able to find counterarguments, than to carefully listen for the sake of engaging in a dialogue

(Hyde & Bineham, 2000). According to Doornbosch-Akse and Van Vuuren (2019), people have come to see others with opposing viewpoints as outsiders or threats, reducing the odds of building trust and connections between individuals. To address this issue, they propose educating people about the basic concept of dialogue so that it can eventually become a replacement for present forms of debate. With most people used to debating, developing excellent communication skills is thought to be essential in order to facilitate building relationships (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019).

Regarding the confusion between how a dialogue is distinct from a debate, academic literature provides a clear difference between the two concepts. Escobar (2011) has come up with an extensive table (see Appendix A), in which he outlines the characteristics of each concept and how those make them differ. On a general note, dialogue is characterised here by a collaboration between participants, a safe atmosphere, mutual listening that helps better understand each other's views and a mind open to change. In contrast, debate is marked by participant rivalry, a threatening atmosphere, listening with the primary goal of refuting, and a closed-minded mentality (Escobar, 2011).

The concepts of dialogue and debate can be better understood through the communication accommodation theory (CAT), which can serve as an insightful framework to describe how people adapt their behaviour and communication to their conversation partner. The communication accommodation theory is based on two processes that occur when interpersonal divergencies are significant: accommodative communication, in which people reduce social differences by adapting to the other's communication style, and nonaccommodative communication, in which people emphasise the characteristics that distinguish them.

## 2.4. Accommodative communication

According to Warner et al. (2020), accommodative communication is distinguished by several behaviours, such as selecting proper conversation subjects, reducing interruptions, adapting to the interlocutor, and more. In their study, they focus on two types of accommodation behaviours: supportive communication, which describes people fostering a supportive environment for members who develop ideas that differ from those of the family, and respecting divergent values, which allows people to securely disagree, knowing the respect others have for them will not be affected by their political affiliation. The accommodative branch of CAT can be aligned with the dialogue concept, explained by Escobar (2011).

Supportive communication in a political discussion where participants disagree with each other's points of view, rather than attempting to persuade the interlocutor to one's own convictions, demonstrates respect for the interlocutor, even if their philosophies diverge significantly (Warner et al., 2020). This accommodation behaviour is considered crucial in demonstrating that one is accepted by their family regardless of any political disputes they may have with other family members.

The second accommodative communication behaviour noted by Warner et al. (2020) in their study, respecting divergent values, is associated with adjusting communication to avoid insulting, depreciating, or dismissing other people's perspectives. Besides showing the interlocutor that they are highly respected, an individual's choice to change their attitude in order to amiably disagree about politics allows divergent viewpoints to exist, prioritising one's personal characteristics over their political convictions (Warner et al., 2020).

Thus, accommodative communication, much like dialogue, incorporates behaviours that foster understanding, break down interpersonal barriers, and provide a supportive conversational environment. This includes active listening, empathy, and an openness to

change one's attitude in response to other people's opinions. Therefore, dialogue can be considered a practical example of accommodation communication, with the overall goal of reaching common ground and understanding.

## **2.5. Nonaccommodative communication**

Unlike accommodative communication, which tolerates the interlocutor's ideas and aims to ensure that they feel comfortable, nonaccommodative communication neglects the discussion partner's needs and emphasises the disagreement that differentiate them. Here, Warner et al. (2020) distinguish two behaviours characteristic of in-family political discussions: inappropriate self-disclosure, in which conversation partners polarise the discussion and offer excessive information about their own political attitudes, and emphasising divergent values, in which participants intentionally highlight their political differences, in order to stimulate controversy. The nonaccommodative behaviour of CAT can be equated to the concept of debate, outlined by Escobar (2011).

According to Warner et al. (2020), inappropriate self-disclosure is defined by a lack of interest in fulfilling the interlocutor's needs, and the inappropriateness is decided by the effort to highlight the differences between discussion partners as well as a lack of respect and appreciation for the interlocutor. In this situation, if one of the participants monopolises the conversation and does not provide a supportive platform for the other to voice their thoughts, their interlocutor may feel uncomfortable and lose interest in further discussing politics.

The second nonaccommodative communication behaviour, emphasising divergent values, seeks to spark debate between those involved, either by critiquing the interlocutor's beliefs, or by emphasising how significantly their perspectives differ (Warner et al., 2020). Focusing on what separates the two rather than attempting to find common ground is known to result in hostile and disrespectful interactions.

As shown above, nonaccommodative communication has essential similarities with the concept of debate. This style of communication is distinguished by assertiveness, strict commitment to one's own point of view, and by attempts to dominate the conversation. Interrupting, dismissing others' input, and prioritising one's agenda over collaborative outcomes are all examples of nonaccommodative behaviour. As a result, debate reflects nonaccommodative communication by accentuating opposition and defending one's arguments over embracing different points of view. Understanding how these nonaccommodative behaviours impact relationships requires further exploration of relational dynamics, even more so with closer friends and family.

## **2.6. Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT)**

The relational turbulence theory (RTT; Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016) is a theory that discerns how certain factors influence one's emotional and cognitive experiences in a relationship and determine the overall quality of the relationship's future, with the most influential factor being relational uncertainty (Ledbetter, Lavin, & Bostwick, 2024). According to Jones and Theiss (2021), relational turbulence eventually leads to decreased relational well-being. Generally, a person might experience three types of relational uncertainty: a) self-uncertainty, which refers to one's own uncertainty about their contribution to the relationship, b) partner uncertainty, which concerns uncertainty about the other party's investment in the relationship, and c) relationship uncertainty, which involves uncertainty about the future of the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Considering RTT's claims, one can assume that relationships shaped by political disagreements would feel turbulent (Ledbetter et al., 2024). In addition to relational turbulence, the concept of intimate distance provides further insight into how people navigate political divergencies within family relationships.

## **2.7. Intimate distance**

The notion of intimate distance, developed by Lai (2024), regards the way in which people handle political divergencies with family members in three interdependent aspects: everyday family life, cognitive, and emotional aspects. To manage conflicts and avoid dangerous consequences, people use a variety of strategies such as setting boundaries and exercising emotional control. In everyday family life, being close to family members who may not share one's political beliefs may either restore emotional connection or exacerbate differences if emotions are not managed well. Regarding the cognitive aspect, it refers to one's feeling of political congruence with family members, while the emotional aspect focuses on the sense of emotional closeness and affective connection.

## **2.8. Research objectives**

To summarise, dialogue, like accommodative communication, promotes understanding and empathy, and fosters supportive and respectful interactions, whereas debate, similar to nonaccommodative communication, emphasises opposition and dominance, highlights disagreements, and can lead to relational turbulence. Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) explains how relational uncertainty can affect emotional and cognitive experiences in relationships, particularly when political disagreements are involved. Additionally, the concept of intimate distance examines how political differences are managed within family life through cognitive and emotional strategies.

The aim of the current study is to explore the techniques employed by Moldovans to foster constructive dialogues about sensitive topics such as politics. The primary research question guiding this study is: "How do Moldovan individuals navigate and cope with politically charged discussions within close relationships?". To address this question, the study is structured around three sub-questions:

- 1) What coping strategies do Moldovans use, and how do these strategies align with the principles of the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)?
- 2) How do Moldovans engage in political discussions with friends and family, and how does this engagement align with the Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) in terms of influencing relational uncertainty or instability?
- 3) What are the consequences of politically charged discussions for experiences of intimate distance?

Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the communicative behaviours and relational dynamics that Moldovans employ when discussing sensitive political issues with people close to them.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Design**

The current paper aims to investigate what coping mechanisms are adopted by Moldovan people in the process of shifting in-family political talks from debates to dialogues. To do so, a qualitative study was performed. The study consisted of two phases: a series of individual interviews in the first phase, and a focus group in the second, both conducted in Romanian (the official state language of the Republic of Moldova), to ensure the authenticity of the opinions, experiences, and sentiments shared. Individual interviews were performed with the aim to capture personal narratives, and gain insights into the emotional and relational impacts of political disagreements, which might be too personal or sensitive to be openly discussed in a group setting. Alternatively, the focus group activity was organised to use the synergy of group discussions to generate ideas and solutions that might not emerge in individual interviews, facilitating a collaborative problem-solving environment. A semi-structured interview script consisting of twelve questions was utilised in the individual



interviews (see Appendix B). The interview questions aimed to investigate participants' listening behaviour, strategies to mitigate conflicts, relational closeness, persuasion tactics, and the perceived emotional impact of political disagreements, aligning with the key theoretical concepts and theories of the current study. The semi-structured nature allowed for flexibility during the interviews; while the twelve core questions served as a guideline, the interviewer did not adhere strictly to the order or wording. Instead, the interviewer adapted to the flow of the conversation, posing questions as they seemed appropriate. This approach ensured that all twelve questions were ultimately addressed by the end of each interview, while also allowing for the exploration of relevant topics as they naturally arose during the dialogue. For the focus group, an outline of the prepared activities was developed to ensure adherence to the established plan (see Appendix C). Referred to in Appendix C as the 'conflict style test' is the *What is your conflict style?* quiz, developed by Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2021).

### **3.2. Participants**

A total of 22 Moldovans aged between 18 and 69 and have personal experience with political disagreements in their immediate circle of people participated in this research project. This study utilised a snowballing sample, so that the first participants would refer the author to other people willing to partake in this research. Participants exchanged contacts with the researcher prior to the interview and were textually invited to participate in the individual interviews. The first twelve interviews happened in Moldova, while the researcher travelled there, and the following ten took place in the Netherlands, with Moldovan students currently residing here. For the focus group, five random people were chosen from the ten participants residing in the Netherlands, due to reasons of location convenience. All participants were asked during the interview if they agreed to participate in the next phase of the study, and the ones chosen for the focus group were invited once more by text. They were

notified beforehand that their participation required active cooperation, open-mindedness, and willingness to reflect on their behaviour. Additionally, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study in the invitation, so that they could make a conscious decision regarding their participation. An overview of the demographics data can be found in Table 1.

### **3.3. Procedure**

After participants were recruited and agreed to participate, they were invited to individual interviews, which were held in settings convenient for both the researcher and each participant, to ensure a private and undisturbed environment (Boeije, 2010). In the invitation, they were already informed about the purpose of the study, to encourage a reflection on their own behaviour in situations of political disagreements with friends or family. Moreover, all participants agreed in advance to be audio recorded during both phases of the study, and their consents were also recorded. The reason behind this decision was to allow the researcher to transcribe the recordings and conduct an in-depth analysis of the participants' responses.

#### **3.3.1. Individual interviews**

In the first phase, twenty-two adults, aged 19 to 69, with an average age of 30, participated in an individual semi-structured interview, in a confidential setting, that was chosen by the researcher in agreement with each participant. Each interview lasted for 24 minutes on average, with a total of 8 hours, 47 minutes and 5 seconds of audio recorded material. The aim was for the author to collect answers from all participants for the same twelve questions and further be able to compare them and see if and how they are similar. During the interview, when reminded about the purpose of the research, participants were also presented with the concepts of *dialogue* and *debate* used in the study, to have a better understanding of the context and to tailor their answers correspondingly. The strategies for managing conflicts during political disagreements that participants shared were compiled into a table, which also displays the frequency of each response (see Appendix D).

**Table 1***General Overview of Participants*

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Political orientation</b>		
Nicole	F		46	Book editor	Pro-European		
David		M	21	Party member			Pro-independence of the country
Amelie	F		21	Arts student		Pro-Russian	
Michael		M	21	IT student		Pro-Russian	
Caroline	F		35	Education specialist	Pro-European		
Natalia	F		57	Medical assistant	Pro-European		
Anastasia	F		53	Administration and logistics specialist	Pro-European		
Cristopher		M	22	Architecture student	Pro-European		
Alice	F		46	Lawyer	Pro-European		
Helena	F		69	Housewife	Pro-European		
Julia	F		49	Education manager	Pro-European		
Victoria	F		22	Medical student	Pro-European		
Dimitri		M	21	IT student	Pro-European		
Cosmin		M	21	Chemistry student	Pro-European		
Nicholas		M	20	IT student	Pro-European		
Maria	F		19	IT student	Pro-European		
Stanislav		M	22	IT student	Pro-European		
Adrian		M	22	IT student			Pro-independence of the country
Theodor		M	21	IT student	Pro-European		
Madeline	F		21	Political science student	Pro-European		
Vlad		M	20	IT student	Pro-European		
Paul		M	20	IT student	Pro-European		
<b>Total interviews</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>			<b>18</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Total focus group</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>			<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>

### 3.3.2. *Focus group*

In the second phase, five participants from the ones established in the Netherlands, aged 19 to 22, were invited to participate in a reflective focus group, in which they contemplated on the dynamics of political conversations in their own immediate surroundings, and shared ideas and potential solutions for more constructive political discussions. The session lasted for about 120 minutes and was facilitated by the researcher herself.

Participants were first introduced to the purpose of the focus group and presented with the structure of the session. Then, in the first activity, they were provided with paper sheets with the descriptions of the six styles of conflict identified by Guerrero et al. (2021) and were asked to choose one or two conflict styles that they think are the most descriptive of them. Next, in a short discussion, participants shared their self-assessments with the group. Then, they were each provided with a paper sheet with the *What is your conflict style?* quiz (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2021), and were asked to complete the test according to the instructions of the researcher. Afterwards, they calculated the answers according to the instructions provided with the quiz and were asked to check if their previous self-assessment corresponded with what the test results showed. Next, a discussion on the similarities and differences between their self-assessment and the test result was facilitated, in which they reflected upon what they thought to be their conflict style versus what the quiz results suggested. They were asked if they were surprised by the results and were invited to reflect on whether they were satisfied with the conflict style that turned out to describe them the most, or if they would want to adopt a new style that seems more efficient in their opinion.

Afterwards, in the next activity, they were encouraged to explore alternatives for constructive conversations, by brainstorming and discussing strategies for facilitating more constructive conversations, in terms of (1) active listening techniques, (2) empathy and

perspective-taking, (3) setting ground rules for discussions, (4) techniques for de-escalating conflicts, and (5) finding common ground and shared values. Their thoughts were recorded both in audio and written format (see Appendix E), and they were further asked which of the strategies shared in the focus group they were personally willing to adopt in their individual experiences. In the last activity, they reflected on what they learned about their own conflict style and how the knowledge gathered could help them improve the level of constructivism of their future political discussions.

By means of the focus group, participants were given a platform to reflect on how political conversations affect their close relationships, understand their main conflict style, consider how it impacts their usual political debates, learn new ways to cope with conflicting political conversations, and explore methods to make such discussions more constructive.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

Given the delicate nature of the political subject, the researcher obtained oral (recorded) informed consent from participants and communicated them ahead of time about the purpose of the study, the procedure to be followed, the risk of emotional discomfort, and the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time without justification. To ensure that the study respects all ethical requirements and that participants' rights and well-being are valued, the author obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences (BMS) of the University of Twente [request number 240503]. To protect private information and anonymity, pseudonyms were utilised, and transcripts were anonymised. Furthermore, none of the views presented in this paper represent the author's views. The author stayed impartial throughout the whole process, and did not display disagreement with participants' opinions, not even when her personal values contradicted theirs significantly.

### 3.5. Data Analysis and Strategy

To identify signs of (non)accommodative behaviours, relational turbulence and intimate distance, a codebook has been established in alignment with established theoretical frameworks. For a summary of the data categorisation, see Table 2. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, where each participant was asked the same 12 questions (see Appendix A), the coding of responses was simplified and facilitated comparison across participants.

Initially, the coding was guided by the Relational Turbulence Theory, the Communication Accommodation Theory, and the concepts of intimate distance, dialogue, and debate. Relational Turbulence Theory provided a lens through which to understand participants' relational dynamics. Communication Accommodation Theory helped categorise communicative behaviours into accommodative and nonaccommodative communication. The notion of intimate distance facilitated a better understanding of participants' behaviour by highlighting how physical and emotional proximity influenced their comfort, conflict resolution, emotional expression, interpersonal dynamics, and the impact of political conversations on their relationships. The concepts of dialogue and debate were integrated with these theoretical frameworks. Dialogue was equated to accommodative communication, characterised by collaborative and understanding-focused interactions, while debate was equated to nonaccommodative communication, marked by competitive and oppositional interactions.

First of all, the researcher labelled answers by identifying parts of the transcripts that provided similar answers or particular responses that stood out. Next, with the theoretical concepts in mind, thematic categories were developed to organise participants' responses. The goal was to create meaningful categories that reflect the theoretical constructs. Lastly, some of the categories were overlapped to allow for a more manageable and coherent set of themes

**Table 2***Data Categorisation Summary*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Subcodes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Accommodative communication</b>	<i>Family over politics</i>	Family bonds should not be affected by political divergences.	“I agreed with a family member to never again discuss a specific political topic, after finding out how different and opposed our views on the matter were.”
	<i>Strong ties break slower</i>	Relationships with close people break slower.	“When my relationship with a person is valuable and close, if we disagree about politics, I will have the patience to try and convince them; if they refuse to accept my opinion, I might change the topic and start it again some other time.”
	<i>Likes facts and arguments</i>	Likes it when people use arguments and facts in adversarial political discussions.	“One should have very reliable information sources and use facts and data to defend a point, but a lot of people speak about politics without any backup.”
	<i>Food for thought</i>	If you can’t convince the interlocutor, provide new perspectives as food for thought.	“People who get manipulated by one information almost never doubt it, so it is helpful that they talk to others they disagree with in order to hear other opinions and maybe see the other side of the coin and learn that what they believe in so far is not so correct. By being exposed to multiple conversations with people they disagree with, these people might combine one day all the information they collected and conclude that their thinking was not so right after all.”
<b>Nonaccommodative communication</b>	<i>Yielding strategy</i>	Yields as a strategy to reduce conflict.	“I am not very conflictual, so I am usually the one who yields in a discussion that is becoming a conflict.”
	<i>Politics over family</i>	Would let family bonds be affected by political divergences.	“If one of my parents would tell me one day that they support Russia, maybe that will affect the affection.”
	<i>Selective circle</i>	Carefully selects the people around.	“I carefully choose what people I talk politics with. I will never discuss about politics with a person I see for the first time in my life.”

	<i>Mental health over being right</i>	Avoids negative people in order to preserve mental health.	“I never speak more than three minutes with a negative person.”
	<i>Dislikes drama</i>	Dislikes emotionally charged discussions.	“I think that Moldovan people are too sensitive and if other people do not share their views, they take it personally.”
	<i>Safe with alike</i>	Feels safe to talk politics with like-minded interlocutors.	“I feel safe to talk politics with my parents, because we have the same views.”
	<i>‘The others’ are misinformed</i>	Classifies certain groups as misled and misinformed.	“A lot of people in the rural areas are victims of fake news that are showed on internet, and because old people are less informed about filtering informational sources, they often become victims.”
	<i>Dislikes poor arguers</i>	Dislikes people who cannot argue properly.	“I think that, in case people have different opinions, they should listen to each other and show respect, without getting angry or saying that the opinion is wrong.”
	<i>Always right</i>	Always insists on being right.	“If I know I am right, I never yield. And it does not matter if we are the closest or not. I will tell you in your face that I think you are wrong.”
<b>Relational turbulence</b>	<i>Mental health over being right</i>	Avoids negative people in order to preserve mental health.	“I prioritise my mental health way more than trying to be right, so if the interlocutor does not seem to be open to listen to me, I do not insist.”
	<i>Family consensus</i>	Political views are shared in the family.	“I think that people who live together should share the same political views.”
	<i>Strong ties break slower</i>	Relationships with close people break slower.	“Given that these discussions happen with close people, if I think they talk nonsense, I keeps repeating to myself 'I love this person, we are family; I should not get angry now, we are friends, not enemies, and we should preserve our relationship'.”
	<i>Avoiding strategy</i>	Avoids political clashes as a strategy to evade conflict.	“A lot of old people can find it disrespectful from a youngster to doubt their opinion and ask questions, because it could affect their public image and make them look stupid, so to avoid it, I simply don’t challenge the older ones to such discussions.”
	<i>Safe with alike</i>	Feels safe to talk politics with like-minded interlocutors.	“I feel more comfortable and safer to have these talks with friends than with family members, especially old people. Because they always tell me I am young, and my opinions do not matter as much as the ones of the older ones.”



<b>Intimate distance</b>	<i>Politics over family</i>	Would let family bonds be affected by political divergences.	“I consider myself lucky that in my family, all my closest people share the same political views. [...] But if my son or daughter-in-law ever came to me and said that they support the pro-Russian side, I would cut ties with them immediately and it won't matter they are family. This is how hard I believe I am right to support my political views.”
	<i>Family over politics</i>	Family bonds should not be affected by political divergences.	“I hate it when family relationships or friendships are affected by political debates.”
	<i>Family over politics</i>	Family bonds should not be affected by political divergences.	“I hate it when family relationships or friendships are affected by political debates.”
	<i>Strong ties break slower</i>	Relationships with close people break slower.	“When my relationship with a person is valuable and close, if we disagree about politics, I will have the patience to try and convince them; if they refuse to accept my opinion, I might change the topic and start it again some other time.”
	<i>Politics over family</i>	Would let family bonds be affected by political divergences.	“If one of my parents would tell me one day that they support Russia, maybe that will affect the affection.”
	<i>Likes facts and arguments</i>	Likes it when people use arguments and facts in adversarial political discussions.	“Even if this person has a totally opposed view to mine, if they are capable to defend their viewpoint, I will accept it.”
	<i>Selective circle</i>	Carefully selects the people around.	“I carefully choose what people I talk politics with. I will never discuss about politics with a person I see for the first time in my life.”
	<i>‘The others’ are misinformed</i>	Classifies certain groups as misled and misinformed.	“A lot of the pro-Russians I contradict with see a lot of fake news on Facebook or TikTok, which are specifically made to manipulate people's opinions, and they trust those sources.”
	<i>Family consensus</i>	Political views are shared in the family.	“I think that people who live together should share the same political views.”
	<i>Avoiding strategy</i>	Avoids political clashes as a strategy to evade conflict.	“If a conflict arises between me and someone else because of political disagreements, I can even leave the table and avoid further talking to them.”

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for analysis. Considering that a researcher might be biased when coding qualitative data, to ensure more reliability, a second coder was asked to code around 10% of the collected data, using the codebook created by the main researcher. Then, the results of the two coders were compared, with an obtained Cohen's Kappa of 0.64, showing an 82% agreement – a substantial consensus between the two coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Key findings were drawn by examining the participants' responses, providing insights into the interplay between accommodative and nonaccommodative communication within the context of relational turbulence. By following this systematic approach, the coding process ensured that the analysis was both theoretically grounded and reflective of the participants' perspectives, and reliable, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the study's findings.

Considering the researcher's personal political views, data interpretation might have been influenced. However, during the interviews, the researcher stayed impartial, and a natural conversation was balanced with getting the questions answered. She did not show disagreements of any kind with the opinions stated by the participants, but on the contrary, facilitated a friendly and supportive setting for all of them, regardless of their political views.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Accommodative communication**

The majority of participants ( $n = 12$ ) believe that family bonds should not be affected by political divergences, and in their reasons, they mention the fact that they cannot contain the idea that a relationship created over time, such as a friendship or family ties, could get affected by politics or religion. Younger participants also claim that older people expect them to show respect to the elders. When asked about whether his relationship with family could ever be affected by political disagreements, Paul, who comes from a Christian-Orthodox family and describes himself as pro-European said "My love for my family will never be

affected, because political discussions are based on opinions, whereas our relationship is based on family bonds, which go beyond anything.” (Paul, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

Additionally, the idea that valuable relationships with close people break slower was often highlighted by some participants, showcasing accommodative behaviours. As Maria, a pro-European IT student aged 19, put it:

Given that these discussions happen with close people, if I think they talk nonsense, I keep repeating to myself ‘I love this person, we are family; I should not get angry now, we are friends, not enemies, and we should preserve our relationship’. (Maria, personal communication, May 13, 2024).

Thus, when disagreements arise, some individuals keep reminding themselves of the underlying love and connection they share with their family or friends, highlighting their effort to maintain relationships despite political disagreements.

Moreover, participants claimed their appreciation for interlocutors using facts and arguments to ground political discussions in reliable information and logical reasoning. They find value in well-supported debates, even if the opposing views differ significantly from their own. Also here, Maria noted that “Even if this person has a totally opposed view to mine, if they are capable to defend their viewpoint, I will accept it.” (Maria, personal communication, May 13, 2024).

Another accommodative strategy discovered was the initiative of participants to provide their interlocutors with food for thought. In fact, the majority of participants ( $n = 14$ ) mentioned the importance of this idea, and within their reasons were the fact that with such discussions, people might start questioning their beliefs and ask themselves critical questions; that people who get manipulated by one information almost never doubt it, so it is helpful that they talk to others they disagree with in order to hear other opinions and maybe see the

other side of the coin; that having these conversations gives one the chance to see how the other side thinks, and given that the person is a close one, it should not necessarily be transformed into a debate, but have the chance to hear something different than what one believes in, and more. Alice, a lawyer aged over 45, who identifies as pro-European, explained:

Even if you might get emotionally affected, although you cannot always change their opinion, you can at least give them some food for thought, so that they could maybe find better sources of information that eventually shape their political views. [...] I never aim to convince my interlocutor that he or she is wrong, but I try to make them understand on their own that they should reconsider their opinion. Because this is the human nature, and people do not like being told they are wrong or stupid. But when you tactically manage to give food for thought to someone, the chance that they will alone contemplate and change their opinion is bigger. (Alice, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Thus, even if immediate agreement cannot be reached, some participants opt to introduce new perspectives that can eventually encourage interlocutors to reconsider their views over time.

Lastly, yielding as a strategy to reduce conflict is also prevalent among those who prioritise a calm, respectful communication about such delicate topics as politics. This involves capitulating in discussions and pretending to agree with ideas one does not necessarily resonate with, to maintain peace and avoid conflict. Adrian, an IT student pro-independence of Moldova aged 22, described his approach, stating “I am not very conflictual, so I am usually the one who yields in a discussion that is becoming a conflict.” (Adrian, personal communication, May 14, 2024). Another participant, Amelia, a pro-Russian art student in her early twenties also applies the yielding strategy:

I have a strategy: if I think my interlocutor is inadequate and gets angry or insults me, I yield and tell them they are right. I think pride is not that important in these situations, so it's not a problem for me to yield. (Amelia, personal communication, April 25, 2024).

#### **4.2. Nonaccommodative communication**

In contrast with participants who displayed accommodative behaviours and claimed their family bonds could never be affected, others foresee the possibility that divergent political views could significantly affect their family relationships. For instance, Anastasia is a logistics specialist, aged over 50, who describes herself as pro-European. When asked about the political dynamics in her family, she said:

I consider myself lucky that in my family, all my closest people share the same political views. [...] But if my son or daughter-in-law ever came to me and said that they support the pro-Russian side, I would cut ties with them immediately and it won't matter they are family. This is how hard I believe I am right to support my political views. (Anastasia, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Thus, some people place sometimes such a high value on their own political beliefs, that they are willing to sacrifice their close relationships.

Another important finding related to nonaccommodative communication implies that some people pay special attention to carefully choosing the people they allow themselves to become close with. Cosmin, a pro-European chemistry student in his early twenties, mentioned:

I am very careful with the people I permit to get close to me and with filtering all the people around me, including by their political views. So, I am rarely challenged in political discussions because none of my closest people have opposed political views. (Cosmin, personal communication, May 13, 2024).

This way, having a selective behaviour helps some people avoid potential disagreements and maintain a stress-free environment.

Prioritising mental health over being right was another behaviour of participants that stood out. So, to preserve their well-being, some people prefer to avoid engaging in political discussions with those who do not share the same views. Natalia, a pro-European medical assistant aged 57, noted “I prioritise my mental health way more than trying to be right, so if the interlocutor does not seem to be open to listen to me, I do not insist.” (Natalia, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Additionally, disliking emotionally charged discussions was another common facet pertaining to nonaccommodative communication. Victoria, a pro-European medical student aged 22, expressed this sentiment by saying “Political conversations in contradiction are too emotionally charged in my opinion, and I would like them to be more peaceful, more respectful, with a more pleasant atmosphere.” (Victoria, personal communication, April 28, 2024). Thus, it appears that some people find political discussions in contradiction too hot and wish for a more tranquil and gentler climate.

Another interesting observation lies with some participants’ declarations that they feel safe to talk politics with like-minded individuals, which sometimes refer to people of the same age. Also here, Adrian highlighted this by stating:

I feel more comfortable and safer to have these talks with friends than with family members, especially old people. Because they always tell me I am young, and my opinions do not matter as much as the ones of the older ones. (Adrian, personal communication, May 14, 2024).

Classifying certain groups, such as ‘the other camp’, as more susceptible to misinformation is also a common practice. Pro-European Alice, for whom ‘the others’ are

pro-Russians, but also old people or people living in rural areas, shared her views on the matter:

In my experience, people who support the west, pro-Europeans, are usually more prepared, with better arguments and facts prepared, whereas those who support the east are more melancholic, and usually do not have strong arguments, but keep saying that in the past, when the Soviet Union existed, people lived better, and everything was more prosperous and cheaper. I think this is because they are very poorly informed and do not know what market economics are and what it is based on. Also, according to my observations, those who support the east have less education, maybe only middle school sometimes. (Alice, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Additionally, some participants emphasised disliking poor arguers. Thus, people who value well-reasoned arguments find it frustrating to engage with those who lack proper argumentative skills and cannot backup their claims. Nicole, a pro-European book editor in her mid-forties expressed her frustration, saying “I dislike people who cannot have a proper conversation because they lack arguments and critical thinking.” (Nicole, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

Finally, assuming that one is always right could encourage persistent attempts to persuade others of their political views. Anastasia shared her views about insisting that she is always right, stating “I think the views of pro-Russians are very selfish and, historically speaking, incorrect, so I always try to convince them they are wrong.” (Anastasia, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Similarly, Helena, a housewife in her late sixties, a self-identified pro-European, is very sure about the importance of having political discussions with people who share opposed views, and she mentioned:

I have a neighbour who has supported pro-Russian parties her whole life, and each discussion of ours, no matter the initial topic, always ended up being about politics. I

never stopped giving her arguments and trying to prove her wrong, because I hoped that even if I cannot convince her on spot, I will give her some food for thought. And only recently, after tens of years in which we were both stubborn and never gave up on our views, I had a discussion with this neighbour in which she said that at this point, with the war at the border, she doesn't care anymore if the government is pro-European or pro-Russian, as long as we live in peace. And I felt that it was a small victory for me. (Helena, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Thus, this approach reflects a strong conviction in one's beliefs, a low tolerance for opposing viewpoints, and a never-ending effort to prove the interlocutor wrong.

### **4.3. Relational turbulence**

To avoid negative impacts on their well-being, some participants declared that they choose to disengage from contentious political discussions. For instance, Nicole, the book editor, mentioned “With aging, I prioritise my mental health over convincing someone that their opinion is wrong, and thus I try not to get involved in controversial discussions, if they could potentially affect my mood and negatively impact my day.” (Nicole, personal communication, April 24, 2024). This approach reflects a strategic effort to manage and minimise potential conflicts and emotional disturbances in relationships by not joining controversial conversations.

Moreover, an interesting observation in participants' answers was that a considerable amount of them ( $n = 9$ ) value family consensus in terms of political views, and either believe that political views are built in the family, or that family members *should* share the same political views, or that it simply is a normality that family members have the same political preferences. Natalia, the medical assistant, expressed this idea, saying:

I see the family not as a place where people could ever fight about politics, but as a place where people share the same views, confirm to each other that what they believe



in is true, and support each other unconditionally. (Natalia, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Another important finding is that participants declare that close relationships can endure political disagreements better due to the emotional investment in these bonds.

Concerning this, Nicole, the book editor, noted:

When my relationship with a person is valuable and close, if we disagree about politics, I will have the patience to try and convince them; if they refuse to accept my opinion, I might change the topic and start it again some other time. (Nicole, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

This patience seems to help with preserving the relationship despite differing political views.

Additionally, it looks like some participants prefer to avoid contentious political discussions at any cost, in order to maintain peace. Here, Nicole mentioned “If a conflict arises between me and someone else because of political disagreements, I can even leave the table and avoid further talking to them.” (Nicole, personal communication, April 24, 2024). Moreover, some say that, if they cannot completely avoid their interlocutor, and their respect for the other has been compromised, they may not show it, but may feel some aversion towards them.

Furthermore, some participants mentioned that they feel safe to talk politics with people who share their views, such as family members. For example, Madeline, a pro-European political science student aged 21 said “I feel safe to talk politics with my parents, because we have the same views.” (Madeline, personal communication, May 14, 2024).

Conversely, it seems that some participants believe that their political views are so right, that they admit potentially cutting ties with people who do not share their views, despite their closeness to the other person. For instance, Theodor, a pro-European IT student in his early twenties, declared “If one of my parents would tell me one day that they support

Russia, maybe that will affect the affection.” (Theodor, personal communication, May 14, 2024). This illustrates how political beliefs can take precedence over familial relationships, potentially leading to relational turbulence.

Alternatively, other participants emphasise that setting limits on discussions with family members helps them continue their close relationships despite political differences. To exemplify, Maria revealed “I agreed with a family member to never again discuss a specific political topic, after finding out how different and opposed our views on the matter were.” (Maria, personal communication, May 13, 2024). Thus, it appears that people like Maria who value their family bonds believe these should be preserved regardless of political divergences.

#### **4.4. Intimate distance**

Many participants claimed it is a priority for them to preserve their family bonds. While some mentioned they would make great sacrifices to accept an opinion different than their own, David, who is a party member in his early twenties, and declares himself as pro-independence of the country, said that political disparities helped him get emotionally closer to a dear family member. He said:

I have a very close relative who I started to love and respect even more after hearing that he has opposed political views to my own, because I saw that we both can control our opinions and not let these differences destroy our bond. (David, personal communication, April 24, 2024).

David is thus showcasing the capacity to control opinions and emotions, having his relationship flourish, despite political differences.

Additionally, the current study found that close relationships tend to withstand political disagreements better due to the emotional investment and effort to preserve the bond. Nicholas, a pro-European IT student aged 20, explained “My affection for my family

members could never be affected by political differences. My love for the family is unconditional, and no matter what views my family members would have, I will still always love them.” (Nicholas, personal communication, May 13, 2024). This thinking demonstrates an unwavering emotional bond and unconditional love for the family that transcends and remains unaffected by political differences.

While many participants claimed nothing could ever affect their family bonds, not even great political disagreements, others did not share this perspective. Here Julia, an education manager in her late forties who declares herself pro-European, mentioned:

I do not permit political divergences destroy my relationships, so I will not break ties with people. [...] Even though my father taught me that I should always keep my relationships with others, regardless of their social status, financial prospects, or disputable ideas, I still make my own conclusions, and even if I don't show it off, my respect for a family member was severely impacted, after hearing that they praised Putin for starting the war in Ukraine. (Julia, personal communication, April 28, 2024).

This might show that, even if some people have the tendency to preserve their close relationships, exceptions might happen, due to substantial disagreements on a sensitive topic like politics.

Moreover, a preference for facts and arguments in political discussions was observed in participants' answers. In line with this Natalia, the medical assistant, noted “One should have very reliable information sources and use facts and data to defend a point.” (Natalia, personal communication, April 26, 2024). This reveals a preference for meaningful and fact-based conversations, especially on sensitive topics like politics, and might show that people who value evidence-based arguments are more open to engaging in political debates if the conversation is grounded in reliable information.

Another important finding is that, to avoid potential conflicts, some participants choose to maintain a selective circle of friends. By engaging only with like-minded individuals, they declare minimising the risk of contentious political debates. As Vlad, a pro-European IT student in his early twenties, stated “I carefully choose what people I talk politics with. I will never discuss about politics with a person I see for the first time in my life.” (Vlad, personal communication, May 16, 2024).

Furthermore, some participants classified certain groups as misinformed or misled, due to their political orientation. Julia, the education manager, mentioned “A lot of the pro-Russians I contradict with see a lot of fake news on Facebook or TikTok, which are specifically made to manipulate people's opinions, and they trust those sources.” (Julia, personal communication, April 28, 2024). This belief emphasises how important it is for people who are interested in politics to have informed interlocutors.

Additionally, a curious observation was that many people either confirmed or encouraged the existence of family consensus on political matters. For example, Stanislav, a pro-European IT student aged 22, stated “People build their political views in the family [...] and because in the family, opinions are either the same or just differing a tiny bit, the chances that a conflict will emerge are very low.” (Stanislav, personal communication, May 14, 2024). Thus, in the opinion of Stanislav and others, family consensus can foster a sense of unity and shared understanding, thereby reinforcing emotional bonds and reducing potential conflicts that could arise from divergent political views.

Moreover, another finding shows that participants prefer to use the strategy of avoiding, to evade any political clashes. Natalia, the medical assistant noted:

A lot of people who like discussing politics love the adrenaline they feel when they disagree with their discussion partner, but I am not like that. I think of myself as very

peaceful and calm, so I avoid these conversations, by either leaving the room or changing the topic. (Natalia, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

This highlights that sometimes, the strategy of avoiding helps some people maintain emotional closeness within the family and escape divergences, ensuring that political disagreements do not disrupt bonds between family members.

Finally, during the focus group session, participants brainstormed and generated a comprehensive table of strategies for managing delicate conversations, which are categorised into five main areas: active listening, empathy and perspective taking, setting ground rules for discussions, techniques for de-escalating, and finding common ground and shared values. For an extensive overview of the strategies shared, see Appendix E.

An interesting observation was that in the focus group, when brainstorming potential solutions for techniques to de-escalate conflicts, Theodor suggested the idea that “If you feel fear that your interlocutor might get physically aggressive, give them the feeling that they are superior so that they will let you be.” (Theodor, personal communication, May 24, 2024). Also, when asked about techniques for avoiding conflict during political discussions, he mentioned avoiding or limiting alcohol consumption.

Additionally, it seemed curious that only one pro-Russian participant and one pro-independence participant, both holding political views differing from the majority in the country, specifically emphasised the importance of mutual respect in political conversations and asserted that politics should not be taken personally. For instance, David, the young party member, mentioned “I get angry when people do not show respect based on political differences and when they mix political views with personal attitudes.” (David, personal communication, April 24, 2024). Similarly, Amelia, the pro-Russian arts student noted “In case people have different opinions, they should listen to each other and show respect,

without getting angry or saying that the other's opinion is wrong." (Amelia, personal communication, April 25, 2024).

The following section will explore the findings reported above, interpreting and integrating them with previous research.

## **5. Discussion**

The research question for this study was formulated as follows: "How do Moldovan individuals navigate and cope with politically charged discussions within close relationships?". It aims to explore how Moldovan people can transform delicate conversations about sensitive topics, which could easily escalate into conflict and debate, into constructive dialogues. The findings from the interviews and focus group will be discussed and interpreted in the following section, organised under four main themes from the theoretical framework: accommodative communication, nonaccommodative communication, relational turbulence, and intimate distance. Grounded in existing literature, this study was structured around three research sub-questions. Firstly, it examined the coping strategies people use and whether these strategies align with the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which suggests that accommodating practices can foster relational harmony during political disagreements. Secondly, it evaluated how individuals engage in political discussions with close relations, drawing on the Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) to understand how political differences impact relational uncertainty and instability. Lastly, it explored the effects of these politically charged discussions on participants' intimate distance. The findings from the interviews and focus group provide support for both the main research question and the three sub-questions.

### **5.1. Accommodative communication**

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, accommodative communication was equated to dialogic practices. Participants who displayed accommodative behaviours

demonstrated a preference for dialogue, highlighting their inclination towards respectful and constructive communication. This preference underscores the value they place on maintaining harmonious and open interactions, even in the face of differing opinions.

In the interviews, participants were asked if their love for family members or felt respect was ever affected by political divergences. Most participants declared that family is too important and close for them to allow it to ever be affected, and that no matter how controversial their close ones' views, they would always love and respect their family unconditionally. This is consistent with Lai's (2024) claim that tolerance for divergent values, which is a type of accommodation communication, may reduce disagreements over politics and retain a shared sense of family even in a highly divisive context (Warner et al., 2020). This way, participants showed their emotional attachment and closeness to their family. In cases like Maria's, where she often needs to remind herself during controversial political discussions of how dear a person is, in an effort to preserve the relationship, it appears that valuable relationships break harder due to the perceived proximity and the unceasing efforts to maintain them.

Moreover, participants seemed to appreciate interlocutors who are able to back up their opinions with facts and strong arguments, and some of them even stressed that this ability of an interlocutor to defend their views with sources and arguments is so important for them, that the simple fact of using reliable sources might influence them to agree with the statements of the other, or at least start questioning the validity of their own beliefs.

Another accommodative practice discovered, which was highly popular within participants' answers, was giving the interlocutor some food for thought. For instance, Alice believes that people generally dislike being told they are wrong, so she figured out that giving her interlocutor food for thought might be more efficient. This strategy shows people's willingness to encourage open dialogue, seeking to integrate new perspectives in a respectful

and open manner. It avoids direct confrontations, is less likely to cause defensiveness and anger, involving a subtle guidance of the conversation, promoting an open-minded environment, and showing the desire to preserve a relationship. This aligns with the belief of some scholars that offering people various perspectives fosters a reflective atmosphere which could strengthen the legitimacy of their political decisions (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Colombo, 2017).

Finally, an accommodative strategy employed by participants was the strategy of yielding. Amelia, for example, highlighted that she usually uses this strategy to escape potential negative outcomes of political conversations. This instance of behaviour displays people's willingness to yield to maintain unity and the absence of insisting on being right, demonstrating an accommodative style of communication.

## **5.2. Nonaccommodative communication**

In the theoretical framework, nonaccommodative communication was equated with debate. This was common in participants who declared their preference to engage in discussions that emphasised argumentation and the defence of their viewpoints, as well as aiming to dominate the interlocutor and eventually win. These people displayed a tendency towards confrontational communication styles and a closed-minded mentality, prioritising the presentation and reinforcement of their own beliefs over fostering mutual understanding and respectful conversation.

Despite some participants' claims that their family relationships could never suffer from political disagreements, academic studies seem to confirm that political discrepancies can in fact affect the quality of interpersonal relationships (Johnson, Bostwick, & Cionea, 2019; Ledbetter et al., 2024). When presented with a fictitious scenario in which their closest family members would hold political views totally opposed to theirs, some of the participants in this study said they would definitely break contact with any family member, if they



declared their support for another political group, displaying a nonaccommodative behaviour and complete intimate distancing, and confirming Lai's (2024) idea that political divisions negatively affect family lives. Moreover, similar to the study of Warner et al. (2020), those participants who reported having more political differences with their family members additionally mentioned both receiving and offering less supportive communication and a greater focus on divergent values.

Furthermore, some participants declared that they tend to build close relationships only with those who share their political views and moral values, proving that the extent to which people find some political views unfavourable has also influenced non-political social interactions (Warner et al., 2020). It truly seems that people like to surround themselves with others who share their opinions and evade interacting with those who think differently (Rose-Redwood & Smith, 2016), and the practice of carefully selecting people around is not that uncommon. In fact, some studies show that people nowadays are less open to hire others who do not share their political beliefs (Gift & Gift, 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015) and often choose romantic partners whose political views align with their own (Huber & Malhotra, 2017). Therefore, these examples reflect a nonaccommodative behaviour, displaying what is opposed to a flexible attitude towards perspectives that differ from one's own.

Another sign of nonaccommodative behaviour in some participants was discernible in their declarations that they tend to prioritise their mental health over trying to show that they are right and that they avoid political discussions in contradiction with people they know will negatively affect their mood, as was the case of Nicole, the book editor. Here, it seems that, rather than adapting her communication style to address and potentially reconcile differing opinions, Nicole does not accommodate her behaviour and prefers to evade difficult discussions.

Additionally, participants who showed a lack of accommodation expressed a dislike for emotionally charged discussions, which they said are common in political conversations. They also mentioned preferring to have such talks with like-minded individuals, which, in Adrian's case, means people of the same age. For this, participants recounted the idea of a safe space, an environment where people are free to express themselves, without fear of harm of any kind, where they are treated and treat others with respect, even when disagreeing with their ideas, and where they interact with like-minded individuals. Academic studies highlight that creating safe spaces is crucial for promoting the development of mutual confidence and connections between people from different backgrounds (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019). The same perspective is shared by Oliver-Blackburn and Chatham-Carpenter (2022), mentioning that when people partake in contradictory discussions, they need to feel safe in the setting they find themselves, in order to successfully engage in a dialogue.

Moreover, some participants seemed to make a clear difference between the two main camps in Moldova, pro-Russians and pro-Europeans. Pro-European Alice, for instance, classified pro-Russians as less schooled, misinformed, and more prone to being misled. Interestingly, other interviewees mentioned that the same characteristics should be applied to people of old age or those living in rural areas, saying that these particular groups often become victims of misinformation and possess lower capacities to debunk it, and some participants claimed this could be related to being less familiar with tech-safety due to their advanced age. Academic studies suggest that another cause could be that, as children in rural areas are more likely to have missed out on their schooling in order to take on family responsibilities (Bejenari, 2020), these people can now hardly differentiate reliable sources from manipulative ones.

Finally, some participants declared they persistently attempt to persuade others of their political views. For instance, Helena, the housewife in her late sixties, mentioned that

for tens of years, she tried to convince her pro-Russian neighbour to change her political views, and ultimately succeeded. This practice of participants who go to great lengths to justify their political views in order to persuade their interlocutor is, of course, consistent with nonaccommodative communication. Such a behaviour demonstrates a competitive conflict style, characterised by assertiveness and a preference for defending one's point of view over engaging in collaborative discussions. Overall, participants in this study who said they approach these heated conversations with a will to win reported that they took every chance to tell the other about their political beliefs and reasons for supporting them, putting a lot of energy into their attempts, and caring more about winning than the way it made them feel.

### **5.3. Relational turbulence**

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the relational turbulence theory (RTT) highlights how relational uncertainty influences the quality and future of relationships. This theoretical perspective helps in understanding the turbulence experienced in relationships shaped by political disagreements. Specifically, RTT identifies three types of relational uncertainty—self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty—which can significantly impact relational well-being (Ledbetter et al., 2024; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Some participants stated that they prefer to avoid controversial political talks, sometimes due to protecting their well-being. For example, Nicole's declaration that due to her not being so young anymore, she learned to prioritise her well-being over winning arguments, is an example of relationship turbulence, more specifically self-uncertainty. She seems unsure about her own ability to handle controversial discussions without negatively impacting her mental health and mood, so she prioritises self-care over engaging in potential conflicts, indicating uncertainty about her own contribution and stability in such interactions. Additionally, Nicole displayed partner uncertainty when she said that if she cannot succeed in

convincing her interlocutor that they are wrong, she might change the topic on spot, and try another time to bring back the conversation and attempt to convincing them once more. This shows that she is unsure that her close relationships will be able to withstand political disagreements, indicating uncertainty about her partner's receptiveness and investment in the relationship.

Another curious observation in participants answers reflected (1) normalising family consensus on political matter, (2) the fact that they declared generally feeling safer to discuss politics in the family, because their family shares the same political views, and (3) that they believe close relationships break slower due to the emotional investment in these ties. Literature confirms that family relationships are hard, but still possible, to break (Warner et al., 2020), thus when disagreements emerge, members are faced with the difficulty of balancing their unconditional bond with their freedom of choice in order to keep the relationship unbroken. Participants in this study who highlighted the importance of shared political views within families reflected the tendency for cognitive alignment. As Stanislav mentioned, because one's political views are usually built in the family, it is almost impossible to have their opinions changed once they age and the political convictions become more rooted. Additionally, participants claimed that, due to the congruence of political views in a family, there is a minimal chance for conflicts to arise. This is consistent with studies indicating that families typically share political views (Zuckerman, Dasovic, & Fitzgerald, 2007), and that political beliefs are frequently passed down from parents to their children through political socialisation, in which children establish their political identity (Dinas, 2014; Ledbetter et al., 2024; McDevitt & Ostrowski, 2009), and thus in-family political discussions can be nurtured into future political participation (Lai, 2024; Muxel, 2014).

Interestingly, this trend towards in-family political congruence is not exclusive to Moldovans. According to Oliphant (2018), 64% of Americans believe that the vast majority

of their relatives share their political beliefs. This perspective aligns with the notion of safe space – an environment where people do not fear being harmed or prejudiced because they expressed their thoughts freely (Anderson, 2021; Arao & Clemens, 2023). Therefore, sharing political views with their family and not experiencing challenging political discussions gives them a sense of safety and comfort, while dealing with divisive topics might make them feel threatened (Rothers & Cohrs, 2023; Simons & Green, 2018), creating what is opposed to a safe space. This is, however, criticised by scholars who claim that a safe space is not one in which people feel safe because they never face contradiction, but one where mutual respect persists, even in cases where people disagree with others' ideas.

Moreover, an observation that stood out was that some participants are so sure their views are correct, that they would cut ties with anyone who disproves their belief, even a very close family member, like in the case of Anastasia, the logistics specialist who said she would break ties with her son and daughter-in-law if they declared support for Russia, or the case of Theodor, who said his affection for his parents could potentially be influenced, if they ever claimed to support Russia. This approach aligns with RTT, which assumes that the difficulties presented by uncertainty motivate people to withdraw from or avoid interactions that could aggravate tension between relationship partners, showing that some people who disagree on political terms with family members will experience conflicting situations and have their relationship affected (Johnson et al., 2019; Ledbetter et al., 2024; Scruggs & Schrodt, 2021).

Lastly, some participants mentioned that they can continue their close relationships with close people they disagree with on political terms, due to limiting discussions on the topic. The case of Maria, where she mentioned that she agreed with a family member to never discuss a specific political topic, due to the lack of congruence in their views, is an example of self-uncertainty specific to relational turbulence. It indicates a recognition of the potential

for conflict and an effort to maintain stability and harmony in the relationship despite differing views.

#### **5.4. Intimate distance**

As presented in the theoretical framework, intimate distance refers to people employing strategies like setting boundaries and exercising emotional control to manage conflicts and avoid harmful outcomes. Considering participants' responses, in-family everyday closeness with members who hold different political beliefs can either strengthen emotional bonds or worsen differences, depending on how well emotions are managed.

The case of David, the young party member who said that political disparities helped him get emotionally closer to a dear family member, is a practical example of how everyday interactions and emotional management can preserve and enhance family relationships, highlighting the balance between cognitive and emotional aspects within the context of daily life. Similarly, Nicholas mentioned that his love for the family is truly unconditional, and no matter their political views, pro-Russian or pro-European, his love will never be affected, thereby demonstrating that his emotional bond with his family is so strong that it appears unbreakable. This is congruent with other research studies, which confirm the collectivistic tendencies of Moldovan culture (Popov et al., 2020), and that families are generally perceived as a source of unconditional love and support (Lai, 2024). Additionally, the idea that in some families a consensus exists on political topics also stood out. According to Stanislav, this is another reason for minimising the chance of a conflict, emphasising unity and reinforcing the emotional bonds created in the family. This aligns with existing research, revealing that indeed, some families try to maintain consensus on political topics, to avoid conflict (Lai, 2024). Therefore, the current study found that prioritising family over politics is a common approach to maintaining intimate distance.

In contrast, some participants in this study highlighted that even if their love was not affected, they definitely lost their respect for some close people, after finding out about their controversial political opinions. They stated that, due to their political disparities, they now either avoid interacting with those people at all costs, or, even if their attitude towards that person has not changed, they will consider the other person less intelligent, and that they overestimated the other's critical thinking, and even if they do not show off their lack of respect, they may feel some sort of aversion. In line with Julia's saying that even if she tries to always preserve close relationships, her love for a family member was critically affected after she found out of their support for Putin, previous research confirms that in-family divergences caused by differing political beliefs can potentially decrease relational closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2024), enhancing the intimate distance created between the two family members.

Moreover, these aspects of intimate distance, where like-mindedness and political concordance support emotional intimacy, were further emphasised by participants' preference for discussions grounded in arguments, facts, and reliable information sources. In this study, it seemed that for some participants, engaging with individuals who lack proper argumentative skills can be frustrating and unproductive. In fact, recent studies indicate that social media platforms are an ideal environment for the propagation of unverified information, and that fake news transmitted online as truthful information could have a detrimental impact on people's health and welfare (Waddell & Moss, 2023). Participants emphasised that, in their experience, most often those who become victims of fake news and misinformation are people of old age or those living in rural areas. This makes it difficult to have good political discussions with them, thus participants emphasised their constant attempts to inform their elderly family members or those who live in the countryside about fake news. As a matter of fact, Waddell and Moss' (2023) study stresses that families have a

significant perceived influence on the willingness to debunk misinformation among family members who have become victims of fake news, and that they may serve as a potential instrument for combating misinformation. Yet, another popular concern was raised in this context: young adults are perceived as being too young and inexperienced to have strong political opinions or claim to know which information sources are more reliable. In her paper, Lai (2024) claims that young people used intimate distance as an approach for age discrimination, because they were perceived inferior in the family hierarchy.

Furthermore, avoidance strategy is generally one of participants' favourite coping strategies for managing in-family political disputes. Oliphant's (2018) data confirms this tendency, claiming that 40% of American adults try to avoid political conversations with their family members, proving that political differences negatively impact family dialogue and the overall relationships. Thus, considering that political differences can be correlated with negative feelings, relationships where participants differ significantly on political matters may suffer from relational unhappiness and great intimate distance (Warner et al., 2020).

Finally, the focus group activity was organised to harness the synergy of group discussions, aiming to generate ideas and solutions that might not emerge in individual interviews. By facilitating a collaborative problem-solving environment, it successfully fulfilled this aim. The table with strategies for facilitating more constructive conversations generated by participants in the focus group (see Appendix E) offers valuable insights into practical examples of how to navigate delicate conversations. These strategies align with the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier and reflect a combination of accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviours. The following points highlight key observations from the table.

The emphasis on active listening, taking notes, and referring to what the other person said to prove one's active listening indicates a strong preference for dialogic communication,



fostering mutual understanding and showing respect for the interlocutor's perspective. Following that, the idea of setting ground rules before engaging in discussions reflects an anticipatory strategy to prevent conflict. Establishing boundaries regarding personal attacks, swear words, and off-limit topics helps create a safe environment for discussion, minimising risks and potentially creating a safer space for discussion. Next, participants highlighted the importance of emotional regulation and humour in de-escalating potential conflicts. And lastly, the strategies to find common ground and shared values with the interlocutor emphasise the importance of seeking mutual understanding and shared principles. By trying to uncover the other's fundamental values and seeking to find at least one detail to agree upon, participants can identify common ground, which is crucial for maintaining relational harmony despite political differences.

When discussing techniques for de-escalating conflicts, Theodor shared a nuanced approach to managing fear of physical aggression. He suggested that if there is a concern that an interlocutor might become physically aggressive, it is effective to give them the feeling of superiority. By doing so, he believes that the aggressive individual is more likely to feel validated and less inclined to continue the confrontation. Theodor's suggestion to give a potentially aggressive interlocutor the feeling of superiority to avoid physical aggression is a pragmatic, although non-ideal, approach to ensuring personal safety, reinforcing power imbalances. This strategy, while effective in the short term, highlights the need for more constructive conflict resolution methods.

During the individual interview, Theodor also highlighted a proactive strategy for avoiding conflict during political discussions: excluding alcohol consumption. He explained that the presence of alcohol could escalate tensions and potentially lead to violence. His technique reflects a strategic and psychological approach to conflict management, prioritising

safety and de-escalation over direct confrontation, and demonstrating an awareness of how external factors can influence the conversation's tone.

Considering Theodor's strategies to limit alcohol consumption and giving a feeling of superiority to the interlocutor, in case of fear of physical aggression, academic studies confirm that, indeed, the Republic of Moldova is amongst highest alcohol consuming countries in the world (Crismaru, 2019), even if a decreasing in the total alcohol per capita consumption was declared from 21.6 litres in 2005 to 15.1 litres in 2016 (World Health Organisation, 2019). This insight highlights a troubling reality characteristic of some cultures that face issues like high alcohol consumption and prevalence of physical violence, such as Moldova, and underscores the importance of maintaining a clear and controlled environment during sensitive conversations to prevent any unintended escalation.

Moreover, the observation that Amelia and David, two participants from political minority groups, emphasised in their individual interviews the idea of mutual respect in political conversation in contradiction, seemed curious. This situation might point towards a power dynamic where minorities, who are numerically inferior and hold less power, strive to balance it by fighting more genuinely for respect and freedom of speech, while the majority, already comfortable with its privilege, can speak freely, feels less threatened and often more readily engages in censorship or condemns differing opinions. Literature confirms that indeed, getting respect from an opposing outgroup improves the respect for these outsiders (Rothers & Cohrs, 2023), while also decreasing intolerance for them (Reininger, Schaefer, Zitzmann, & Simon, 2020; Simon & Grabow, 2014).

To sum up, it seems that it is quite difficult to have constructive discussions with people with whom one disagrees when one lacks strategies to create a smooth, fruitful discourse, regardless of the sensitivity of the matter at hand. The findings of this study reveal a collection of coping mechanisms and viewpoints employed by participants to navigate

political disagreements within families. Participants emphasised the importance of family bonds, often prioritising relational harmony over political differences, with family representing an entity too important and intimate to ever be affected by any divergencies, political or not. Strategies such as avoiding contentious discussions, yielding to prevent conflicts, and providing food for thought reflect a preference for maintaining emotional well-being and relational stability. Additionally, it seems that people would rather avoid having difficult conversations about politics than risk their mental health and close relationships. The study also highlights the role of political socialisation within families and the impact of misinformation spread through social media on political discourse. Overall, the findings underscore the complex interplay between cognitive alignment, emotional investment, and communication strategies in managing political disagreements within family relationships.

### **5.5. Practical implications**

The findings from this study have several practical implications. First, promoting accommodative communication strategies within families can help mitigate the adverse effects of political differences on familial relationships. In the focus group, participants brainstormed a set of solutions for enhancing empathy and perspective-taking, active listening, setting ground rules for discussions, techniques for de-escalating conflicts, and finding common ground and shared values with interlocutors, thereby improving overall communication. The solutions they generated point toward a mentality shift for the youth of Moldova, expressing a desire for more constructive and intelligent conversations. Participants appear to be ready to initiate this change by adopting the strategies they brainstormed, aiming to enhance the quality and level of constructivism in their discussions.

Moreover, educational programs and workshops that emphasise respect, emotional management, and critical thinking in political discussions could foster more supportive family dynamics. Additionally, initiatives aimed at increasing awareness about the impact of

misinformation and teaching strategies to debunk false information could enhance the quality of political discourse, particularly among vulnerable populations such as older adults and rural residents. Encouraging families to engage in open, yet respectful political dialogues may also strengthen relational bonds and promote a more informed and tolerant society.

### **5.6. Limitations and directions for future research**

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. A limitation of this research is the predominance of pro-European participants, which was not intentional. A personal observation of the researcher that echoes the general impression of Moldovans is that usually, Moldovans who relocate to European countries, such as the Netherlands, often resonate with the EU culture and mindset, making it challenging to find pro-Russian individuals. Similarly, while in Moldova, most pro-Europeans referred the researcher to people on the same political spectrum, and the pro-Europeans' referrals to potential pro-Russian participants ended with the refusal of the latter to partake in the study. Meanwhile, the two pro-Russian respondents in the study did not refer any new like-minded individuals. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. In future research, employing a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between political views and family relationships. Longitudinal studies could also explore how these relationships evolve over time and the long-term effects of accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviours. Furthermore, examining the role of social differences in political discussions and familial interactions could offer valuable insights into how these dynamics vary across different contexts.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study illuminates the intricate dynamics of political discussions within families, revealing the delicate balance required to navigate these conversations. The

findings underscore that political disagreements, while challenging, offer valuable insights into the broader realm of familial relationships. It appears that the strategies people use to manage conflict – such as setting boundaries, exercising emotional control, and fostering open dialogue – are crucial not only for maintaining peace but also for enhancing relational stability and intimacy.

This research highlights the importance of both cognitive and emotional congruence in fostering a sense of unity within families. The ability to discuss divergent political views constructively can lead to stronger, more emotionally connected family bonds. Conversely, unmanaged emotional responses can exacerbate differences and create rifts. These findings suggest that cultivating skills in accommodative communication is essential for nurturing healthier family relationships.

The implications of this study extend beyond the family unit. They offer a framework for understanding how individuals can engage in respectful, constructive communication across various relational contexts, including friendships, workplaces, and broader social interactions. Therefore, the principles of accommodative communication and relational turbulence explored here can be applied to enhance relational well-being in multiple domains.

In a world where political polarisation is increasingly prevalent, understanding how to foster constructive dialogues within families is more important than ever. By continuing to explore these themes, the academic world can develop deeper insights into the art of maintaining relational harmony when it comes to divisive themes like politics, by embracing the challenge and opportunity to create a more connected, understanding, and resilient society.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

**Table A1**

*Dialogue versus Debate* (Escobar, 2011)

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Dialogue is collaborative: participants work together towards shared understanding of issues and perspectives	Debate is oppositional: various sides oppose each other and try to prove each other wrong
Participants speak to each other	Participants speak to their own constituencies and the undecided middle
The atmosphere is one of safety: facilitators implement ground rules agreed by the participants in order to enhance safe and respectful exchange	The atmosphere is threatening: attacks and interruptions are expected and usually permitted
The goal is exploring common ground and differences	The goal is winning by beating down
Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. They try to find strengths, rather than only weaknesses	Participants listen in order to refute, to find flaws, and to counter arguments
Questions are asked from a position of genuine curiosity that serves the purpose of shared inquiry	Questions are asked from a position of certainty. They are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements
Participants reveal and investigate their own and others' underlying assumptions	Participants defend their own assumptions as truth
Participants aim to learn through inquiry and disclosure	Participants aim to convince through advocacy and persuasion
Dialogue fosters an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change	Debate fosters a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right

Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs	Participants express unwavering commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea
Differences amongst participants on the same 'side' are revealed, as individual and personal beliefs and values are explored	Differences within 'sides' are denied or minimised
Participants share their ideas knowing that other people's reflections will help improve them rather than destroy them	Participants share their ideas and defend them against challenges in order to show that they are right
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to avoid alienating or offending	Debate ignores feelings or relationships, and often allows belittling or deprecating
Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, to express needs that may not often be reflected in that discourse, and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in public debate	Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. That discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood
Participants strive to overcome ritualised exchanges, allowing new information to surface	Participants' statements are predictable and offer little new information
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view	Debate entrenches a participant's own point of view
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can make them into a workable solution	Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it
Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue	Success requires simple impassioned statements
Dialogue remains open-ended	Debate seeks a conclusion

## Appendix B

Semi-structured interview for individual participants:

1. What do your conversations on political topics typically look like?
2. Are you satisfied with the current dynamics of your political conversations, or would you like to change anything if you could?
3. What is the importance of having political conversations with your close people, in your opinion?
4. How do you manage the conflict of being close to a person and having differing opinions?
5. How often did you witness a political debate in your close surroundings over the past 3 months? (daily/ weekly/ monthly/ rarer than on a monthly basis)
6. How often do you try to change your close people's perspectives in such conversations, if they do not correspond to your own?
7. Which characteristics do you think have the most influence on the way people treat you in such political debates (status, age, gender, other)?
8. What are usual consequences of disagreement?
9. Would you say you have ever felt less love for one friend or family member, or less respect, after realising that you have a different political view than they do?
10. Do you listen carefully to what the others have to say? Or do you think about alternative arguments which could potentially win the argument, while the others talk?
11. What made you change your mind on an important topic when talking politics with someone with a different viewpoint than yours? / What should they do to change your mind?
12. How do you (and other conversation partners) try to avoid negative consequences of such discussions?

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Activity Outline

#### Preparation

1. **Invite participants:** Select 5 random participants.
2. **Inform participants:** Share the purpose of the focus group, and the behavioural expectations.
3. **Materials Preparation:**
  - Conflict styles descriptions (5 copies x 6 conflict styles)
  - Conflict style test (5 copies)
  - Paper sheets and pens for participants

#### Focus Group Structure

**Duration:** Approximately 2 hours

##### 1. Introduction (20 minutes)

- Welcome participants and introduce myself and the purpose of my study.
- Explain the purpose of the focus group and outline the structure of the session.
- Emphasise the importance of mutual respect and cooperation.
- Briefly introduce the 6 conflict styles (Yielding, Avoiding, Collaborating, Competitive fighting, Compromising, and Indirect fighting)

##### 2. Self-Assessment and Reflection on Conflict Styles (15 minutes)

- Provide participants with the descriptions of the 6 conflict styles on paper.
- Allow 10 minutes for participants to reflect on their own conflict style and note any important ideas.
- Facilitate a short discussion where participants share their self-assessments.

##### 3. Conflict Style Test (15 minutes)

- Distribute the conflict style test and explain the instructions.
- Allow participants 10 minutes to complete the test.
- Provide 5 minutes for participants to calculate their results.

##### 4. Comparison and Reflection (15 minutes)

- Ask participants to compare their test results with their initial self-assessments.

- Facilitate a discussion on the similarities and differences between their self-assessment and the test results.

*Q: Were you surprised by the test results? Why or why not?*

*Q: Why do you think your self-assessment differs from the test results?*

- Encourage reflections on what might have caused any discrepancies.

## **5. Exploring Alternatives for Constructive Conversations (30 minutes)**

- Discuss current challenges participants face in political discussions.

*Q: What strategies have you found effective in keeping political discussions respectful and constructive?*

- Brainstorm and discuss strategies for facilitating more constructive conversations, such as:
  - Active listening techniques
  - Empathy and perspective-taking
  - Setting ground rules for discussions
  - Techniques for de-escalating conflicts
  - Finding common ground and shared values

*Q: What new techniques or approaches are you willing to try to facilitate more constructive conversations?*

## **6. Reflection on Learning and Behaviour (15 minutes)**

- Ask participants to reflect on what they have learned about themselves as participants in political discussions.
- Discuss how understanding their conflict style can help in managing political discussions.

## **7. Closing (10 minutes)**

- Summarise the key takeaways from the session.
- Thank participants for their contributions.
- Remind participants to contact me for any follow-up questions.



## Appendix D

**Table D1**

*Strategies for managing conflict during political disagreements employed by participants*

Strategy	Frequency of responses
End the conversation	13
Avoid taking part in these discussions	6
Change the topic	16
Leave the table/ room	3
Further avoid these people	2
Yield to preserve the relationship	3
Yield to simply avoid fighting further	8
Cut ties	2
Use strategic phrases like “I respect your opinion, but I still think that...”	2
Careful listening	3
Prepare strong, reliable arguments	3
Employ emotional self-control (calming down)	4
Let the interlocutor cool down by themselves	1
Aim to find common ground	5
Do not take things personally and discuss politics without emotions	4
Make the other feel important and partially right	1
Establish discussion rules (mutual respect)	2
Behave nicely and friendly	2
Tell jokes	2
Agree with the interlocutor that they have different opinions and so should be it	6
Avoid alcohol consumption	1
Know when to stop the discussion	2

## Appendix E

**Table E1**

*Strategies for facilitating more constructive conversations*

Category	Strategies
<b>Active listening</b>	<p>Take notes if the conversation is important.</p> <p>Make use of gesticulations and facial mimic.</p> <p>Interrupt exactly when you have something to say.</p> <p>Make reference to what the other said, to show you listened to them, so they should listen to you too.</p>
<b>Empathy and perspective taking</b>	<p>Control your tone of voice (an aggressive tone makes the interlocutor get aggressive too).</p> <p>Active listening</p> <p>Making analogies (give an example that makes the issue personal to the interlocutor).</p> <p>Prepare for the exchange of opinions by building rapport with the interlocutor</p>
<b>Setting ground rules for discussions</b>	<p>Decide with the interlocutor that, in case they:</p> <p>Attack personally, or</p> <p>Use swear words (addressed to you) that make the situation more tense, or</p> <p>Get back to address a topic that you already agreed upon, or</p> <p>Change the topic (whataboutism), or</p> <p>Refer to your past experiences, traumas, secrets,</p>

**Techniques for de-escalating conflicts**

then you will end the conversation.

Take your time to formulate your thoughts and make up your mind to avoid saying the first aggressive things that pops into your mind.

Make a joke to lessen the tension.

If you feel fear that your interlocutor might get physically aggressive, give them the feeling that they are superior so that they will let you be.

Tell the other that, if you cannot find common ground, you better end the discussion.

Have a third person as a mediator.

**Finding common ground and shared values**

Ask “why?” until you get to a joint guiding principle for both of you.

Establish the fundamentals of the perspectives of both of you to see if and how the two are similar.

Find at least one detail which you both agree upon.

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## Appendix F

**Table F1**

*Systematic Literature Study Log*

Date	Database	Search String	Amount of results	Relevant sources
02.04.2024	Google Scholar	“empathy experiment on people with conflicting views”	150,000	1
08.04.2024	Google Scholar	dialogue AND intergroup dialogue	127,000	1
08.04.2024	Google Scholar	(“safe space”) AND (“brave space”) AND (“intergroup dialogue” OR dialogue) AND (disagree\$ OR conflict*) AND (family* OR relative* OR parent*) AND (politic* OR debate*)	287	0
02.06.2024	Scopus	constructive AND (dialogue OR discussion) AND political	14	1
22.06.2024	Google Scholar	intercoder AND reliability	108,000	1
25.06.2024	Google Scholar	alcohol AND consumption AND Moldova	15,100	1
30.06.2024	Google Scholar	“food for thought” AND conversation AND political difference	39,200	2

### Other Methods of Finding Sources:

Snowballing technique: many sources were found in the reference lists of other research articles.

E.g.: Supervisor's recommendations:

- PhD student paper: My supervisor shared a paper from a PhD student exploring a similar topic. From this paper, I found 5 articles useful for my study.
- Warner et al. (2020): My supervisor suggested reading this article, which led me to 7 additional useful articles.

## **Appendix G**

### Use of AI tools:

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT to refine and clarify sentences to improve their coherence and readability; to ask for suggestions for alternative titles; to get assistance in adhering to APA 7 style guidelines; and to enhance the practical implications section. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.