

BUILDING THE COMMUNICATIVE CULTURE OF MP'S TEAMS AND THE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract. *The article studies the issue of establishment of efficient and sustainable communication between a community and an MP and his/her team. Based on the results of focus group discussions, the authors determine and describe the main problems and gaps that exist in parliamentary education of the general public as well as MPs and their teams and outlines the competences and tools necessary for making this communication efficient and mutually beneficial. The aim of the research is to determine the content and methods of the communicative component of parliamentary education for communities and MP's teams. The methods used include focus group research (to collect the data regarding the mood, views and attitudes of the public and the MPs and their teams); information analysis and synthesis (to structure the collected data and draw conclusions from it). The study showed a considerable lack on behalf of the public to participate in building the communication, a high level of incompetence on both sides that derives from the lack of systemic parliamentary education and the need to systemically use the same communication channels in order to ensure effective and sustainable interaction of the public with the elected officials.*

Keywords: *communication, community, community participation, MP's team, parliamentary education, sustainable interaction.*

Introduction

Life-long learning is a unique tool that makes it possible to change and develop certain values and attitudes in a society. This becomes especially

relevant when we speak about civil society development and community capacity building. A separate part of both are the operational principles of a representative democracy, namely, the role of an MP in the community that elected him/her as well as the communication model that was built by the stated communities, the people's deputies (MPs) and their teams.

During the pre-electoral period, candidates running for the office campaign rigorously in order to gain popular support. But after the new parliament is formed, the level of popular trust to the highest representative body decreases rapidly. Even the current Verkhovna Rada of the 8th convocation, which had an unprecedented credit of trust at the time it was elected, has rapidly lost citizen support. According to the surveys conducted by the Razumkov Centre, which is one of the most powerful and trusted centre of sociological studies, on September 17, 2019, the total of 25.1% of respondents "absolutely do not trust" and "do not really trust" the Verkhovna Rada. A similar survey conducted in February 2020 showed a 65% level of distrust to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and according to the survey conducted in October-November 2020 this figure reached a total of 76.1%. As for the parliament of the previous convocation, the level of citizen distrust was 81.6% (Razumkov Centr) at the end of the term of service (data published on March 27, 2019).

After the parliamentary elections, the link between the deputy and the community is becoming weaker. As a result, the population does not perceive a people's deputy as a representative of their interests, a person you can and should work with, but rather starts perceiving him/her as a "stranger" who cannot be trusted. In fact, the first reason for the loss of trust is the lack of effective communication between a deputy and his/her team and the community (voters). Thus, the necessity arises to review and determine the content of parliamentary education both for the public and for the deputies and their teams.

The aim of our research is to determine the content and methods of the communicative component of parliamentary education for communities and MP's teams.

To achieve the declared aim, we used such methods as focus group research (to collect the data regarding the mood, views and attitudes of the public and the MPs and their teams); analysis and synthesis of information (to structure the collected data and draw conclusions from it).

Literature Review

The interaction of members of parliament with the communities is reviewed and analysed in studies on political PR and electoral techniques. The book of Darren G. Lilleker (Lilleker, 2006) may be considered the

encyclopaedia of political PR concepts as it contains a systemic description of key concepts, theories and types of activities related to political communication. The development and functioning of political PR in Ukraine was studied by Larysa Kochubey (Kochubej, 2013).

Parliamentary education has not been studied as a separate scientific problem. It is most often linked with civic education and political education and the greatest focus is made on the academic (primarily school and university) audience (Tereshchuk, 2020; Iskhakova, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2013). Thus, the fact that the establishment of sustainable communication between the community and the MPs' teams requires, firstly, the involvement of citizens of various age groups (even those who are not open to the idea of life-long learning or mastering new knowledge about parliamentarianism and civil society functioning) and secondly, a clear correlation of the content of parliamentary education for communities and of the training curricula for MP's team members, is primarily left out.

Methodology

The materials of the "Sustainable Interaction of Communities with the Teams of People's Deputies of Ukraine" project formed the basis for this article. The project was implemented during January-May 2020 by the "Vinnychchyna Euroclub Association" NGO within the framework of the USAID Programme "RADA: Responsible Accountable Democratic Assembly", implemented by the East Europe Foundation. The authors of this research were involved in the implementation of the project as team members and experts.

The research was conducted on the territory of the Vinnytsia oblast (Ukraine) and covered eight parliamentary majoritarian single-mandate constituencies. The teams of all MPs elected from the Vinnytsia oblast in majoritarian single-mandate constituencies and of two deputies elected through party lists were involved in the project. By the results of the project, a practical handbook was published. It provides a toolkit for cooperation of communities with the teams of people's deputies of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, and is aimed to help the deputies make informed and effective decisions based on constant interaction with the voters (Neprytskyi et al., 2020).

In this article, we will use the results of seven conducted focus-groups, which aimed to study the existing state of communication between the communities and MP's teams, and to determine what can be done in order to make this communication more efficient. At the first stage, group discussions with the representatives of the public were held, the second stage was the discussion of the stated topic with representatives of MP's teams. And the third

(final) stage was to discuss the received ideas in a mixed group in order to determine realistic ways of improving communication between the communities and MP's teams.

Three focus groups were held with the representatives of the public (in the Kryzhopil, Zhmerynka and Kalynivka rayons of the Vinnytsia oblast). The selected sampling was supposed to maximum reflect the social and age portrait of the communities – 4 pensioners, 1 entrepreneur, 2 hired professionals working for private businesses, 2 hired professionals working in state owned institutions, 1 public servant, 1 student, 1 unemployed. The age distribution of the participants was the following: 3 people aged 18-35, 6 people aged 35-65, 3 people of the 65+ age group. Three focus-groups were held with representatives of MP's teams (assistant-consultants and advisors) and the last (seventh) focus group was mixed. The total of 79 people took part in these seven focus groups (from 10 to 12 people in each). The participants did not receive any payment for participating in the discussion, thus being free to speak their mind. The conducted focus groups were videoed (with the permission of the participants, for the purpose of future analysis) and afterwards a qualitative and quantitative expert analysis of the material was carried out.

Research Results

Table 1 Understanding of the Functions and Obligations of a People's Deputy by Community Representatives

Age of respondents	Functions and obligations (number of times mentioned during focus group discussions)						Total
	Give out financial support	Influence the bodies of executive power	Influence the courts	Create road and transport infrastructure	Control and hold back price growth	Influence the raise of pensions and salaries	
18-35	2	2	5	3	4	2	18
35-65	5	6	3	3	2	5	24
65+	5	5	3	4	7	6	30
Total	12	13	11	10	13	13	72

The study of the state of communication between the communities and teams of people's deputies of Ukraine showed that citizens often have a distorted understanding of the role, functions and obligations of a people's deputy. As a result, they have unreasonable expectations from his/her activity, which absolutely do not correspond with the provisions of the Law of Ukraine

“On the Status of a People’s Deputy of Ukraine” (Zakon Ukrayiny, 1993). We selected functions and obligations of a people’s deputy, which are not foreseen by the legislation, but were most often (more than 10 times) repeated by the participants of focus group discussions with representatives of the public (see Table 1).

As we can see, all the functions and obligations of MPs that were most often mentioned by the participants, do not concern the implementation of the law-making or representative function of a member of parliaments, but are rather limited provision of social needs on the citizens. The people theoretically agree that law-making is the main function of a people’s deputy. But in practice, his/her activity is narrowed down to solving urgent, mostly socioeconomic, problems of the residents of a constituency. In the opinion of participants of focus-groups and training sessions that we had conducted within the framework of the project, a people’s deputy should interfere in all the projects at the local level, has to a “supervisor” of local self-government bodies and an “overseer” of the executive power bodies.

Parliamentary education is of utmost significance for establishing effective communication and sustainable interaction between the communities and people’s deputies. In other case, the electoral professionalism (Lilleker, 2006) in the work of political managers will be limited to pure attempts to manipulate the communities.

During the electoral campaign intense communication takes place, and after the elections, people expect the continuation of communication with the people’s deputy. The most widespread mistake is the stop of constant communication with the residents of the constituency. As a result, the deputy loses the trust of the voters. People trust those who is “one of theirs”, who they constantly contact with, and the lack of trust is one of the factors, that leads to an “apolitical” community (Iskhakova, 2011) and to an even greater gap between an MP and his electorate.

Thus, it is necessary to continue the communication after the elections using the same tools that were used during the electoral campaign. If communication with the help of these tools led to winning the elections, then it is also bound to be effective in the future.

While deliberating on the issue of communication during focus group discussions, we asked the participants of the study (both the representatives of the public and of MPs’ teams) to describe the communication of the community with the people’s deputy in one word. We heard the following descriptions: ‘not established’, ‘occasional’, ‘non-existent’, chaotic’, ‘fragmentary’ etc. 65% of the participants of focus groups with the public gave generally negative assessment of the communication with the team of their MP. A positive evaluation (which

was primarily characterized with such words as “effective”, “constant”, “open”) was given by 19% of the discussion participants. 16% of the discussion participants either could not say anything about the communication with an MP’s team or avoided giving positive or negative characteristics. The voters speak very warmly about those deputies who keep stable ties with the community. What is more, modern communication technologies (digital media, social media) that help the deputies to actively build the communication with the residents of their constituency through digital media and social media, are well-known and kept in high esteem by voters in other constituencies as well. This factor should be taken into consideration during the next electoral campaign, as it will be held according to the new Electoral Code using the system of proportional representation.

After winning the elections, communication should be transferred into a calmer and more stable mode in comparison with its pace and intensity during the electoral campaign. But it is very important to make this transition gradual, so that the people do not get the feeling that “the deputy vanished”. There were complaints that the people’s deputy had reached his goal of winning the elections and that the community would see him or her next time before the next elections.

The information about a people’s deputy activity, his rights and obligation, the law-making function and the ability of a community to take part in it has to become an important part of forming communicative competences of community representatives.

Talks with community representatives during focus-groups have clearly shown that people want to receive much more information about a people’s deputy and much more often, and they want it so much that they are even ready to give up a part of their rights and freedoms (both theirs as well as the rights and freedoms of a people’s deputy) to ensure maximum transparency in the work of people’s deputies as this, in their opinion, can lead to stability and security. The participants of the conducted studies see future communication in the following way: with the help of their smartphones citizens follow the MP’s working day, who wears a bracelet with a GPS-tracker and goes “live” a few times a day, reporting on his/her activity (Gavrylov et al., 2020). The citizens are ready to invade the personal space of a people’s deputy with the help of various digital tools and, in turn, they are also ready to be more open to cooperation with his/her team.

Indeed, if we try to correlate the assessing comments about a people’s deputy (including the ones coming not from his/her constituency) with the number of posts on social media, we will see that the participants of the studies

give most positive evaluation of those people's deputies who had regularly informed the communities of their activities.

The experts of the project calculated the number of posts on the official Facebook page of the people's deputy who was most often mentioned in the course of focus-group discussions. The received result was 1-3 posts during politically quiet times and 5-7 posts in turbulent times such as the coronavirus pandemic or opening the land market. As for the people's deputies, whose names focus-group participants from their constituency could hardly remember or gave negative characteristics of their activity, the number of posts in social media ranged from once a week to once every few months.

During the discussion of the volume, topics and frequency of posts on social media members of 6 out of 8 teams (which makes up 75%) of MPs representing majoritarian constituencies of the Vinnytsia oblast believed that 1 informational post on social media and congratulations on state and religious holidays are more than enough. In their opinion, 2 and more posts on an MP's page "is an overload that makes people tired".

If the information flow that comes from the people's deputy is filled with the information of the same type that covers a small number of topics, this drastically narrows the audience interested in this MP. At the same time, a wide spectrum of an MP's activity attracts various stakeholders from the community and creates a wide communication field. The citizens want to know what the deputy does in the Verkhovna Rada, which decisions are being approved by the Parliament, what is the position of the MP on the given draft law, why he or she votes in this particular way, what the MP does during his/her visits to the region, how he reacts to cases of law violation etc.

The community wants to hear the report from a people's deputy. In the vision of communities that took part in the study, there is an understanding that a people's deputy must truly "serve" and constantly report about everything he is doing at the moments, what he has already done, how he did that, why he does or does not do something etc.

There are complaints from focus-group participants regarding the communication with an MP concerned the fact that the participation of a people's deputy in various events always follows the same algorithm: if this is an important event that gathers many people together, then the people's deputy arrives, "cuts the ribbon" and makes a speech. The community does not want a speech; the community wants a conversation. So the team that want to establish effective communication of the MP with the community have to take this MP off the stage and make him start a conversation with the community. During the focus group studies we saw a clear differentiation between such concepts as "spoke to us" (made a speech, a report, congratulated on some holiday) and

“talked with us”. 60% of the participants of focus groups with the public stated, that they see this as a problem; 25% of the participants mentioned that they are satisfied with any mode of communication and they are not interested in the work of the deputy as such; 15% don't see the fact that the deputy “spoke to them” and not “talked to them” as a problem. At the same time, at focus groups with representatives of MP's teams it turned out that only 40% of the participants were ready to recognize that such a problem really exists and only 10% of the participants agreed that they have such a problem in their team, the rest of the participants (60%) described this issue as “made-up” and “non-relevant”.

All voters should have equal opportunities for communication with an MP, but the question remains as to how this can be achieved. It is universally acknowledged that a senior citizen that lives in a small village and does not own a smartphone will have fewer opportunities for conveying his thoughts and views to the MP as well as for receiving information from him than a middle-aged clerk of the rayon council who owns a smartphone and has access to good Internet coverage. The study participants noted that not all representatives of all social and gender groups have equal access to communication with a people's deputy, but they did not see that as a problem. The MP and the community should provide a possibility for communication, but in the opinion of the study participants, they should not make extra effort to stimulate “communication outsiders” to use this right. They emphasized that the citizens have the right “not to communicate with a people's deputy”. And this right is as important as the rights to do so.

And this was the only topic, on which the views of the representatives of the public and the MP's teams coincided. The focus group participants believe that the perfect situation is when the deputy and the community create a really effective system of communication, but work actively with those community leaders, who have the desire and possibility of using the possibilities of such a communication system. As the participants of one of the focus-groups said – work with the leaders, the others will catch up.

In the focus groups, which consisted of community members, such an opinion was shared by 76% of the participants; among the representatives of MP's teams, this number was 85%. Only 6% of focus group participants representing the public and less than 3% (1 participant) of focus group participants representing MP's teams believed that they needed to specially strengthen communication channels between MP's teams and the people who have limited possibilities for communicating with an MP. At the mixed focus group, 33% of MP's teams' representatives recognized that their teams might have a problem of insufficient communicative activity, and 66% started

accusing community representatives, saying that they are not active enough in contacting MP's teams thus forming a distorted vision of a weak communicative activity of an MP and his/her team.

Similarly, MPs' teams often have a distorted and biased vision of a community. The key problem is that after proper communication fails deceived expectations come; this happens within the first few months after a candidate is elected and becomes a deputy of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. The participants of the research believe that the situation may be improved through constant bilateral communication between the communities and MPs' teams. At the mixed focus group 10 (6 representatives of MP's teams and 4 representatives of the public) of 12 participants, which makes 83%, expressed an opinion that sustainable bilateral communication and increase of the amount of information received by the public about the work of the MP and by the MP about the needs and life of the community will considerably improve cooperation and mutual understanding. The rest (17%) were rather skeptical about this idea, referring to the existing negative tradition, the desire of MPs to self-enrichment, lack of unity in the goals of communities and MPs.

To ensure co-participation of the community and the team of a people's deputy is a dream of every elected official, of every political party, every deputy's team. It is no easy to implement the idea of co-participation in practice. Strong paternalistic expectations from the authorities (including the deputy) are an obstacle in this field.

In the course of the research we came across a paradox situation. The community wants to communicate with the deputy in order to organize the activity aimed at solving problems and reaching results. However, the community says that they are ready to do something together, but when it comes to business, they say that "he's the deputy, he must do this for us". That is why one should not count on the high level of community participation.

The information and reflections collected during focus group discussions as well workshops and training sessions has shown that the majority of citizens of our country are not ready to get personally involved in the formation of a communication system even when they fully understand all the benefits of the mechanisms of a representative democracy for civil society development. Thus, the participants of focus groups with representatives of the public said the level of their involvement is limited to making a repost in social media, reading or listening to the reports on an MP's work or visit a Verkhovna Rada session if the MP organizes such a trip and covers all the expenses. All this leads us to a conclusion that the people's deputy and his/her team will continue to be the locomotives in building communication between them and their respective communities.

Conclusions

To conclude, we may state that the conducted research has proven the hypothesis that the communities lack the understanding of essence of MPs work and that the MPs' teams have a distorted understanding of the community's needs. The situation may be changed through a wide and in-depth parliamentary education as well as through the formation of communicative competences of community leaders and members of MPs' teams. It is important to continue active communication with the community after winning the elections, however, the goals and content of this communication should be changed whereas the channels of communication that were used during the campaign should be preserved.

Despite the growth of the number of possible communication channels, especially digital ones, people constantly feel the lack of continuous effective communication with the elected representatives. Non-systemic attempts of informing the citizens fail as the information is lost in the massive information flows. So, the deputies and their teams should give more information to their communities and they should continuously use the same communication channels, preferably those used during the electoral campaign.

A typical mistake, which derives from the lack of communicative competences, is the wrong perception of each other by the parties involved. That is why, comprehensive parliamentary education should also equip the communities with the communication tools necessary for effective communication with the MPs and the MPs' teams should learn about the tools for community analysis that would help them build effective bilateral communication and interaction.

In the course of the research we also arrived to a rather controversial and alarming conclusion: people who live in a country with a rather weak and still developing democracy are ready to accept the limitation of their rights and freedoms. They do not see anything wrong in a total cyber control. This may be viewed as one of the markers of the fact that the society is ready to curtail the democratic reforms.

Most of the work on building communication with the community must be taken on by the MPs' teams as the communities will be mostly passive. As for the fact of whether people's deputies are ready to spend resources on forming effective bilateral communication between the community and MP's teams can be the topic of the next study on the topic of parliamentary education in Ukraine.

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