

COMMUNICATION SUPPORT OF THE REFORM OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN UKRAINE



The Swiss-Ukrainian Decentralization Support Project DESPRO is an international assistance project working in the reform of local self-governance (or “decentralization”) in Ukraine. DESPRO is funded by the Swiss Confederation via the Swiss Cooperation Office and implemented by Skat, and has been active since 2007.

1 Introduction

The reform of local self-government (LSG) has been in the works in Ukraine since the country gained independence in 1991. Between the DESPRO project’s launch in 2007 and the start of the Revolution of Dignity in late 2013, lack of political will delayed the implementation of the reform. The main reasons for the lack of popularity of the decentralization reform were (i) the political elite’s lack of interest in changing the status quo, including the existing electoral system and constituencies; (ii) vested interests in relation to land management, resources and asset management, particularly the inventorying of communities’ assets planned during the reform (iii) opposition to any changes that would lead to cuts in the number of administrative staff¹.

This was exacerbated by the fact that the media did not support the reform due to the following reasons: (i) National media lacked

understanding of the reform benefits (ii) Regional media were financially dependent on Rayon State Administrations, and were forbidden to cover the reform and (iii) Independent media mostly belonged to oligarch circles who opposed the reform².

Consequently, the lack of communication efforts and poor understanding of the reform principles led to a lack of support for decentralization and LSG reform by Ukrainians.

After the Revolution of Dignity, the revived political will pushed the implementation of the reform, and the DESPRO project took the opportunity to support the Government’s communication of decentralization and the reform of local self-government. Thanks to broad communication support, the LSG reform is considered to be an example for other countries of the region to learn from³.

2 Achievements (2014–2020)

DESPRO’s support to the communication reform led to the following achievements:

1. Ukrainians’ attitude towards the reform became positive, and decentralization is widely discussed at all levels^{4,5}.
2. Starting from 2015, communities started to amalgamate on a voluntary basis, thanks to the government’s information and communication (with the support of DESPRO among other international assistance projects). In 2020, in the sixth

¹ Based on the research of the Civil Society Institute NGO (UKR): <https://www.csi.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/atu-vchora-sogodni-zavtra.pdf>

² Based on the research by the National Institute of Strategic Research (UKR): <https://bit.ly/3bTas7s>

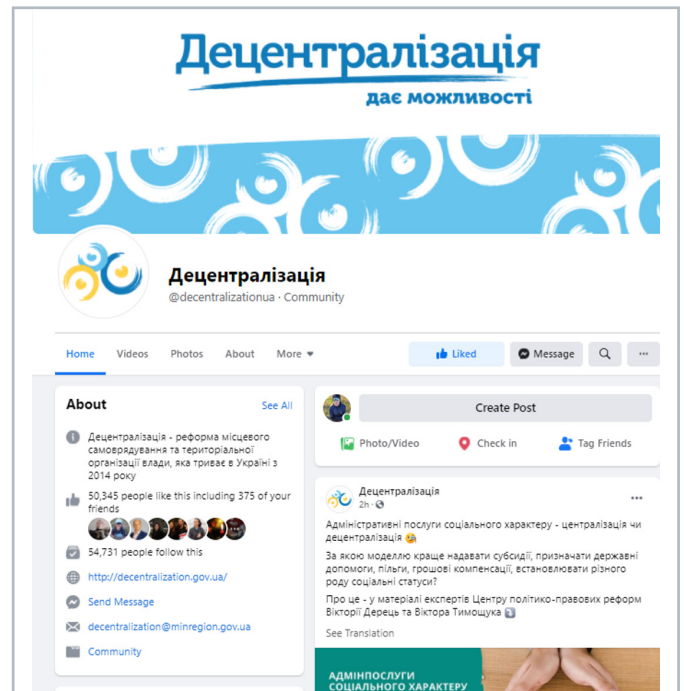
³ Based on the report on the Second national opinion poll on decentralization and local self-government reform, conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology and the Council of Europe (UKR): https://decentralization.gov.ua/uploads/library/file/387/2019_03_otg_ukr.pdf

⁴ Based on the results of the focus group research, conducted by DESPRO (UKR): <https://bit.ly/2PwEk20>

⁵ Based on the report on the Fourth national opinion poll on decentralization and local self-government reform, conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology and the Council of Europe (UKR): http://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20191103_decentralisation/decentr_ukr.pdf

year of decentralization, partly thanks to the intensive communication support, a new administrative-territorial system was finally adopted in Ukraine. The government designated new administrative centers and approved the territories of 1,469 communities (instead of the previous 12,000). At the same time, the Parliament liquidated 450 old rayons (second-tier local government) and formed 136 new ones. Thus, Ukraine has created a territorial basis for effective territorial management.

3. DESPRO supported the production of hundreds of communication materials over the last 5 years (videos, articles, infographics, leaflets etc.). These were used as the necessary communication tools and generated wide outreach and engagement from Ukrainian citizens, which is proved by the shift in public opinion on decentralization.
4. The decentralization.gov.ua web portal is the primary official source on decentralization, created in 2016 thanks to the initiative of DESPRO. It aggregates news and data on decentralization and the LSG



Facebook page of the Decentralization portal

reform, information and updates on the sectoral reforms relevant to LSG, a database of communities, a library, expert columns and more. In 2020, the Decentralization portal attracted 2,802,718 users and generated 12,420,673 page views.

3 Process/Methodology

DESPRO was among the first international assistance projects (later joined by the "U-LEAD with Europe" project, and the DOBRE project (USAID) among others) to start the communication of the LSG reform under the leadership of the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development⁶ and the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers, with other development partners. This included the following steps:

- Establishing the Communication Task Force, with the initiative of the Cabinet of Ministers (and, specifically, the Vice Prime-Minister) and in cooperation with the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development;
- Developing, implementing and monitoring

a communication strategy for LSG reform: identifying target groups, carrying out polls and focus groups, developing communication messages, selecting tools and channels of communication;

- Implementing key activities and objectives as determined under the leadership of the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development;
- Forming a pool of experts who act as spokespeople for the LSG reform

From the very beginning of the LSG reform, it became clear which communication tasks had to be fulfilled in order to build trust in decentralization:

⁶ The Ministry was founded in 2010 and underwent a series of name changes, including the Ministry for Regional Development, Construction, Housing and Communal Services.

- Timely communication of the reform's key messages by the relevant Ministry of Development of Regions and Territories to the target audiences;
- Advancement of dialogue between local self-government and the executive branch of power;
- Communication of legislative innovations in context of the reform;
- During the stage of voluntary amalgamation, the delivery of information on the reform's advantages and opportunities, to communities which have not yet amalgamated, had to be provided;
- Guidance on opportunities and development of the reform, for the already amalgamated communities;
- Coordination of communication and actions by the actors of the reform: relevant ministries, state bodies, representatives of international technical support projects and non-governmental organizations.

Since 2015, the Communication Task Force consisting of 7 full-time equivalent staff members within the Central Office of Reforms, directly worked on the LSG reform promotion. The Communication Task Force also includes the DESPRO project communication experts.

To intensify the reform implementation, the activities of the Communication Task Force focused on building acceptance of the proposed reform by the general public and specific target groups (e.g. representatives of local self-government, non-governmental and civil society organizations) by developing and implementing the LSG reform communication strategy.

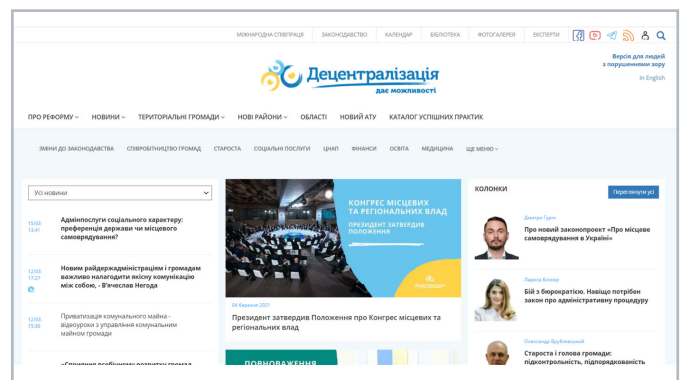
The strategic outline for the communication of the LSG reform is continuously provided by the relevant donor coordination-working group. The working group 6.1, set up as part of the Donor Board on decentralization reform, is co-chaired by DESPRO and the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development.

The working group involves representatives of the Ministry, international assistance projects working on local self-governance reform in Ukraine, as well as associations of local self-governance bodies, NGOs and experts. The working group meetings are organized regularly to discuss current issues of communicating the reform and determining the steps of the reform. Such cooperation provides proper coordination of activities by the parties involved and expands the overall effect of the reform communication.

To ensure better visibility of the reform, DESPRO supervised the development of the logo, identity, and brand book of the reform related materials. Most materials covering the reform feature the Decentralization logo. Thanks to this clear visual identity, the informational materials on the reform are well recognized and accepted. The brand book Decentralization was uploaded to the Decentralization web portal for use by implementers and partners of the reform⁷.

In 2015, the Government's informational web portal <https://decentralization.gov.ua/> was developed and launched with the support of DESPRO. It has since become the main source of information on the reform for target audiences and general public all around Ukraine. The core of the audience is representatives of local self-government, state bodies and non-governmental organizations.

The Decentralization portal evolves in accordance with the intensity of the reform



Main page of the Decentralization portal

⁷ The brand book of Decentralization in Ukraine <https://decentralization.gov.ua/en/brandbook>

and its stages. At the start of decentralization, the focus was made on the reform itself and the voluntary amalgamation process. As the reform progressed, the web portal broadened its scope to sectoral reforms: education, healthcare, finances, public and social services etc. More sections are available now: expert columns, best practices, info and updates on sub-regional level, and Ukrainian local self-governments' response to COVID-19 pandemic.

The portal's outreach is further strengthened by its Facebook page with over 54'000 followers. The choice of this platform is supported by yearly statistics showing that Facebook is the most popular social network in Ukraine, and the third most visited website⁸.

In cooperation with national partners and other international assistance projects, DESPRO organized national events on decentralization reform. DESPRO was the initiator and key co-organizer of the main event in local self-government in Ukraine – the Local Self-Government Forum, with the key goal of supporting the national dialogue on decentralization.

3 LSG Forums have been organized since 2016, with around 1000 participants each time. The Forums featured addresses by the President, the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Parliament, and representatives of international partners of Ukraine. Each year, the most important topics of LSG are discussed, and priorities for the following year are determined.



Forum of Amalgamated Communities in 2018

To reach beneficiaries of the reform regionally and locally, DESPRO organizes regional public events aimed at discussing the most important and sensitive aspects of the LSG reform:

1. Debates on communities' amalgamation
2. Panel discussions
3. Study visits/experience exchanges for the communities
4. Press tours for media representatives to the successful communities to demonstrate the benefits of the reform

Since the beginning of the project, DESPRO organized up to 200 public discussions on the reform implementation, in all regions of Ukraine. About 20 000 representatives of local self-government have participated in such events.

Depending on the situation in the country and/or the regions, different formats of dialogue were used. The most effective format proved to be the series of public debates "Why communities should amalgamate", organized in 6 regions of Ukraine. During the debates, the advantages of decentralization were demonstrated by representatives of LSG bodies and experts.

Producing videos that show successful examples and practices of the reform implementation and keeping a steady stream of such videos in the media has been one of the key tasks of the project communication team. DESPRO produced more than a 100



Public debate "Why communities should amalgamate" in Ivano-Frankivsk

⁸ Based on the Opinion Software Media research by Factum Group https://inau.ua/sites/default/files/file/2001/presentation_osm_december_2019.pdf



Public debate “Why communities should amalgamate” in Yampil, Vinnytsia reg.

information and educational videos, covering various reform-related topics, which have been viewed by millions of Ukrainians.

To inform the public on the details of the decentralization reform, a series of visual materials were produced and disseminated by the DESPRO team. Posters and info-educational leaflets were disseminated among village councils and public spaces of local self-government.

A weekly newsletter was created to disseminate news on the reform, and it currently has over 4'500 subscribers.

To provide reliable content for numerous communication mediums, DESPRO formed a pool of key national experts who were spokespeople on the reform and clarified all its nuances to the public and professional audiences. As of today, more than 40 specialists in different areas of expertise of local self-governance are trained speakers on decentralization for Ukrainian media. These include both independent experts, and representatives of government and LSG bodies.

DESPRO acts as the liaison between this expert community and the media.

In 2020, to assist the Government in overcoming the effects of COVID-19 and to support the smooth implementation of the reform during lockdown, DESPRO supported over 50 online meetings of the Government, the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development, the Parliament, representatives of the regional and local authorities.



ГЕННАДІЙ ЗУБКОВО
ВІЦЕ-ПРЕМ'ЄР-МІНІСТР УКРАЇНИ

Minister of Communities and Territories Development Hennadiy Zubko on Espresso TV channel

4 Lessons learnt throughout the communication support of the reform of local self-government

1. The opposition of people to the reform and new approaches in governance mostly exists due to lack of reliable information and quality communication between national

and regional level. Improving communication processes and giving clarifications helped to overcome this opposition.



The panel discussion “Starosta [village leader]: the role, its purpose and tasks” broadcasted online in 2021



The Prime Minister Volodymyr Groisman during the press conference on decentralization, organized specifically for regional media, 2017

2. The effectiveness of communication support of the reform is directly dependent on co-participation and cooperation of all relevant state bodies (the Ministries, The Administration of the President, the Parliament of Ukraine, representatives of regional and local levels, as well as communities, and also – international assistance projects, media, civil society, and experts)
3. Communication support to a reform as complex as the reform of local self-government, is required at each stage:
 1. Preparation and development of the legislative basis of the reform, 2. Implementation of the reform, 3. Anchoring and disseminating successes of the reform. The lack of communication support at any of these stages may result in the reform’s uncontrollable retreat.
4. The effective dissemination of communication messages on complex topics such as the full-scale LSG reform requires a wide range of tools and channels of communication, both traditional (TV, radio, printed media) and non-traditional (bloggers, public cultural events). Visualization of complex data requires the skills of a full-scale production studio which can produce videos, infographics, games, and other interactive media. The experience of organizing local events, such as debates and public discussions, showed that there is still a need for coordination from Kyiv
5. because of the lack of communications specialists in the regions.
5. It’s worth noting that for LSG representatives, personal meetings, working groups and local events proved to be the most effective. But when it comes to citizens, online and traditional media were the best communication tools to inform them about the reform.
6. During the implementation of the reform, permanent monitoring and analysis of the informational field gives an opportunity for timely reaction to factors preventing the reform. In particular, the public debates “Why communities should amalgamate” were held in specific regions of Ukraine that showed negative tendencies in relation to decentralization. Also, following the public discourse helped refute speculations by some politicians on ethnicity factors allegedly obstructing the amalgamation of communities. The relevant research was timely disseminated. On the contrary, once an amalgamated community’s success story was published in regional media, a decentralization.gov.ua journalist would visit the community and write extended material on how the success story actually became reality. The dissemination of positive experience enabled other communities to use it in their practice.
7. Since 2007, the political environment in Ukraine has changed dramatically several times. Each time, the communication

- support to the reform had to be coordinated with the representatives of each new political establishment. Considering the successes of each stage of the reform and the communication team's willingness to build common ground with different political movements, it became possible to include decentralization into the ruling parties' agendas, thus avoiding stagnation or retreat.
8. Until recently, regional media in Ukraine were predominantly dependent on regional/local oligarchs and regional state administrations, both of which were mostly opposed to the reform. Therefore, these media were damaging the image of the reform. For effective communication between Kyiv and every local community, the reform relied on new independent media, including regional TV and radio, newspapers, informational websites, and blogs by opinion leaders.
 9. Some communication experience gained by the joint efforts of the donor community and the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development will remain in the use of the Ministry's staff to further support the implementation of the local self-government reform. The information portal www.decentralization.gov.ua, the most well-known source on the LSG reform, will also remain among the assets of the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development. The Decentralization portal, with its constantly growing audience, will allow to continue the implementation of changes by the Ministry, with continuous efficiency.

Resources

1. Booklet "Decentralization: how is public opinion changing?" (2015) <https://bit.ly/3e6kF31>
2. Booklet "Decentralization: how is public opinion changing?" (2016) https://despro.org.ua/despro/DESPRO/Decentralization-2016_ENG.pdf
3. Booklet "Decentralization: what do people say?" (2018) <https://despro.org.ua/Decentralization-booklet-eng-to-print.pdf>
4. Video of the 3rd Local Self-Government Forum (2018) (UKR) <https://youtu.be/OUKekNv9jil>
5. Local news segment on the debate "Why communities should amalgamate" in Ivano-Frankivsk (2018) (UKR) <https://youtu.be/gk8xKEQ2Ewg>
6. Video "A model of a sustainable community" (UKR) <https://www.facebook.com/decentralizationua/videos/549156868974243/>

