

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

COMMUNICATION WITH RESIDENTS OF NON-GOVERNMENT- CONTROLLED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

Kyiv, 2021



INTRO

Recommendations for communication with residents of territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine were developed by a group of experts engaged by CivilM+ platform with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The content of the recommendations is the sole responsibility of the team of experts and does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.

These recommendations are designed primarily for representatives of the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine – the central executive body authorized to develop and implement the national policy in the realm of temporarily occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as adjacent territories. However, these recommendations can be of use for a wide range of individuals and institutions – namely, representatives of public authorities, Members of Parliament of Ukraine, local governments, members of the Trilateral Contact Group, as well as civil society organizations, media seeking to make communication with residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine more effective.

Context and challenges of communication with residents of Non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine

As a result of Russia's ongoing armed conflict with Ukraine, part of Ukraine's territory remains out of the Ukrainian Government's control.¹ Therefore, Ukrainian public authorities, local self-government bodies, Ukrainian media, etc. do not work in these territories. In fact, residents of these territories remain outside the legal, educational, information field of Ukraine.

The fact that the armed conflict has been ongoing for more than 7 years and the opportunities for live communication are decreasing (especially amid the quarantine restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19) has significantly weakened ties between people living in non-Government-controlled territories and organizations, institutions, enterprises and in general residents of the rest of Ukraine.

Economic relations between the non-Government-controlled territories and territories under Ukraine Government's control were completely stopped in 2017. Earlier, in 2015, a contact line was established as a conditional boundary between non-Government-controlled territories and territories under Ukraine Government's control. Currently, seven checkpoints are set up on the contact line in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, most of which are blocked by de facto "authorities" on the non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

Currently, only two checkpoints (Stanytsia Luhanska in Luhansk oblast and Novotroitske in Donetsk oblast) are partially operational.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the territories not controlled by Ukrainian Government found themselves in even greater isolation from the rest of Ukraine – due to blocked checkpoints and additional quarantine restrictions, the number of contact line crossings decreased significantly: from more than 14 million in 2019 to 527,000 in 9 months of 2021.

A serious obstacle to crossing the contact line is the residents of non-Government-controlled territories not having Ukrainian ID documents, in particular, passports of Ukrainian citizens. Since they received "local"/Russian passports, diplomas of "local" educational institutions, they are afraid of persecution by the Ukrainian authorities.

¹ "Non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine" mean the temporarily occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts determined in accordance with the Law of Ukraine "On Peculiarities of National Policy to Ensure the State Sovereignty of Ukraine in the Temporarily Occupied Territories in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts."

² <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjojOTU4ODVjYTkxNjk3ZC00N2E5LTkNTQyZk3ZTYzNzliYjk4IiwidCI6IjdhNTE3MzMDMzLTIzYGYtNDQ1MC04ZjMyLWWE5ODJmZTBhYTEyNSIsImMiOjIh9>

However, the crossing of contact line can be considered the main channel for the residents of non-Government-controlled territories to obtain information about the situation in the rest of Ukraine, including the updates on new government decisions on additional services, assistance and access to social services, education, healthcare and more.

There are virtually no free media or freelance journalists in the non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine. Bloggers, including admins of Telegram channels who are relatively free platforms for exchanging information, are at significant risk of repression.³ At the same time, anti-Ukrainian messages are widely spread by various media channels – from television to numerous public pages on social networks controlled or loyal to the local nominal “government”. In this way, propaganda messages somehow reach all those who live in territories not controlled by the Ukrainian Government.

At the same time, people often have a bad experience (personal or experience of relatives, friends) of finding housing or job in other parts of Ukraine, faced discrimination and/or insults on the grounds of territory of origin, regional affiliation. Careless insulting or discriminatory statements by Ukrainian officials and politicians about the residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine catch buzz on local information platforms and are used in anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

Common fears are associated with the operation of “Peacemaker” website. Although this website does not have the status of a source of official information, residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine have fears that the entities involved in Operation of United Forces are unofficially using this resource to persecute individuals living in territories not controlled by the Ukrainian Government and their family members.⁴

Although there are no reliable ways to conduct relevant quantitative public opinion polls in non-Government-controlled territories, numerous qualitative surveys (focus groups, in-depth interviews) suggest that residents of non-Government-controlled territories have a “demand for normality.” According to them, for most residents of these territories, fatigue from the conflict is combined with a general feeling of abandonment. Their desire to return to a certain form of normality – both in terms of restoring peace and of clarifying their political status – means that stability is their highest priority.

The feeling of the lack of unity grows significantly on both sides. Residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine feel forgotten and marginalized. It does not help that other Ukrainians consider them “victims of propaganda.”

³ Partially it is confirmed by the survey by Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2021>

⁴ “Peacemaker” website has been repeatedly criticized in public reports of UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. In particular, in the reports *Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Ill-Treatment in the Context of Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine 2014–2021*, p. 82; *Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Conflict-Related Criminal Cases in Ukraine April 2014 – April 2020*, p. 120; as well as in other reports available at OHCHR | OHCHR Reports in Ukraine

⁵ “Does Ukraine need us?” The results of the survey in the non-Government-controlled areas of Donbas, analysis of opinions and conclusions of a conflict researcher. Available at <https://civilplus.org/uk/publications/chi-potribni-mi-ukrayini/>

Many of the interviewed residents of non-Government-controlled territories simply want to “return to normality,” being nostalgic for the life they had before 2014.⁶ For them, today’s war is the most traumatic event in their lives.

At the same time, the level of trust in the Ukrainian media remains low.⁷ The lack of reliable information on reintegration plans and the Ukrainian Government’s vision of transition policy raises numerous fears, which are only exacerbated by the lack of progress in the negotiation process.

In these circumstances, the actions and decisions of the Ukrainian Government aimed at mitigating negative consequences of the armed conflict for the residents of territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine can be commended.

In particular, it concerns:

- providing and expanding opportunities for children to study in Ukrainian schools and universities;
- ensuring the right to social protection of residents (payment of pensions, extension of pension cards, launch of mechanisms for online verification of pension recipients and others);
- construction of infrastructure facilities to meet the needs of people crossing the checkpoints and bringing administrative service providers closer to the checkpoints;
- adoption of the law on the abolition of fines for “illegal border crossing” by residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine who are forced to move to other regions of Ukraine crossing the border with Russia;
- approval by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of the Strategy of Economic Development of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts until 2030.

It is worth noting that in 2018, the Information Reintegration Strategy of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts⁸ was adopted, which was in force until 2020.

It was the result of efforts to develop a coherent approach to reintegration communications, launching effective mechanisms for access of Ukrainian citizens residing in non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine, as well as residents of the conflict area to Ukrainian information space.

Unfortunately, the plan for the implementation of the Strategy has not been approved, and the effectiveness of its implementation remains equivocal. This document needs to have this experience analyzed and considered when developing a strategy for the next period.

⁶ Дослідження “Україні – 30. Від Незалежності до взаємозалежності”. Режим доступу: <http://journlab.online/report-independence>

⁷ “Does Ukraine need us?” The results of the survey in the non-Government-controlled areas of Donbas, analysis of opinions and conclusions of a conflict researcher. Available at <https://civilmplus.org/uk/publications/chi-potribni-mi-ukrayini/>

⁸ Strategy of Information Reintegration of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, approved by the Ordinance of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of July 26, 2018 # 539-r.

Principles of Communication

Humanism

This principle is based on a system of beliefs in which a human life is recognized as the highest social value. Accordingly, communication should be based on respect for human honor and dignity.

Proactivity

Communication with residents should work in advance to not only respond reactively to provocations, but to prevent possible threats. This will take the planned action regardless of the circumstances.

Thoughtfulness and validity

Communication with residents of territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine should be based on the ability to make decisions based on the use of analytical methods and evidence obtained from various specialized studies. This will make it possible to predict the consequences of certain communication strategies.

Targeting

but at the same time taking into account the all-national context. Target audiences and stakeholders need to be identified and segmented based on detailed analysis. The content of communications may not differ significantly at the regional and national levels. At the same time, communication with the national audience on the conflict and its resolution cannot be provided in a way that it by default repels the residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

Returning

non-Government-controlled territories under the control of Ukraine is the only option. National communications should be based on the vision that the fact that part of the territory of Ukraine is out of the Government's control is temporary. The return of the territory is the only possible way out. Therefore, communication should demonstrate the benefits of the scenario of building a common future in a united country and restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine within internationally recognized borders. It is also worth explaining why such a scenario is in the interests of residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

Empathy

Communication should be based on the ability to see the world from the standpoint of another person and respond to their experiences, and therefore find necessary ways of mutual understanding.

Communication

The government's communication should not differ from its actions. It is important that the decisions taken by public authorities and local self-government bodies do not differ from the values declared at the political level. Communication should be built according to these decisions.

Recognition

Residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine need their life situations to be accurately reflected in the social and information space of Ukraine. Communication should also show that the activities of the authorities are aimed at alleviating human suffering, protecting human life and health and ensuring their right to respect.

Inclusiveness

Discussion of the reintegration process without the participation of representatives of different views (including contradictory) negatively affects the process itself. Participants in interaction or reintegration strategies with residents of territories not under the control of Ukrainian Government face obvious risks – therefore, dialogue initiatives are important as they provide an opportunity to at least get feedback from those who cannot speak in public.

Presumption of innocence

instead of presumption of guilt. The principle of the presumption of innocence states that the accused is presumed innocent until proven guilty by a court verdict that has entered into force. This principle is the foundation for ensuring a fair trial and exercising the right to protection of a person who is being prosecuted. The presumption of innocence should become the basis for interaction of the Ukrainian state with the citizens of the territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine.

Recommendations

1

Logical and ongoing explanations of plans and initiatives of the state on overcoming negative consequences of the armed conflict. In the information space, the Ukrainian Government should act proactively and preventively. Regular and clear explanations of the Government's actions are needed to communicate the Government's position to the residents of the territories not under its control. This also applies to the initiatives that do not directly concern this group of Ukrainian citizens, but are politically sensitive (for example, regulating the use of Ukrainian language in the service sector).

This will limit the impact of anti-Ukrainian propaganda that the residents of non-Government-controlled territories are facing, and will help prevent the spread of absurd, aggressive information attacks against Ukraine. Conversely, any inconsistency or evasion to report about potentially sensitive topics can be used for manipulation. And cover-up, or even any inaccurate or incomplete messages from Ukraine can ultimately undermine trust and do great damage to the reintegration process. It is critical to have 'messages' as such. Today, they are often insufficiently specific or reasoned.

Broad coverage of real positive results of the Government's activities on the conflict is also needed. The provision of information should go beyond press conferences and official announcements, government officials should be open to other media formats, and cooperate with journalists.

2

Communication of the Government with the residents of non-Government-controlled territories Ukraine cannot be limited only to unilateral messaging. Communication should entail feedback from the residents of non-Government-controlled territories. In addition, it is necessary to assess the quality of communication and its effectiveness.

The results of assessment and feedback analysis should form communication approaches and serve to increase the effectiveness of decisions concerning residents of territories not under control of the Government of Ukraine.

It is advisable to create permanent communication platforms, to launch regular open formats of communication between the Government and civil society (including with the participation of the residents of non-Government-controlled territories) to discuss overcoming the negative consequences of the conflict.

Goal and objectives of communication

The principal goal of communication is to establish a permanent connection between the Ukrainian authorities and the residents of the territories not under the control of Ukrainian Government, to overcome isolation and to integrate the population into a single social, humanitarian and information space.

The objectives of communication are:

- restoration of trust of the residents of non-Government-controlled territories to Ukraine;
- explanation of the measures taken by the state of Ukraine to overcome negative consequences of the armed conflict, to improve the situation of people living in the non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine;
- promotion through proactive communication tools of the national strategy of reintegration, explanation and discussion of the strategy; forming and conveying a vision of a common future in a single country;
- promoting the inclusion of residents of territories not controlled by the Government of Ukraine in the information space of Ukraine;
- consultations on legislative initiatives and receiving feedback on actions/ legislative initiatives that are already being implemented;
- facilitating that public authorities, local self-government bodies receive feedback from residents of territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine regarding the consequences of the adopted decisions;
- return of interest of the residents of the territories not under the control of the Government of Ukraine to Ukrainian agenda;
- removal of social tension.

Joint messages, differentiated but consistent presentation for different target audiences. The most effective propaganda echoes with the basic worldview and personal experience of the audience. Accordingly, those who seek to resist propaganda and win the fight for the “hearts and minds” of the people also need to know the audience. It is advisable to develop targeted (yet consistent, neutral) messages for different audiences, regularly exploring their features.

During the communication, it is necessary to understand the requests and needs of people and be more useful than propagandists. Communication should meet the needs of audiences, take into account their fears and mitigate them, demonstrate examples of effective solutions to their problems. Communication on education issues (including on certificates, diplomas, on studies of young people from temporarily non-controlled territories), passports, birth and death certificates issued in non-Government-controlled territories, etc. is especially in demand today.

To look for the form to respond to the request for “normality” that the residents of non-Government-controlled territories share. Communicators need to demonstrate that the reintegration and the desired “normality” are real. Ukraine can offer normality to younger residents of territories not under control of Ukrainian Government through the European future, including opportunities in education, professional development and travel.

Considering the non-Government-controlled territories, the media, politicians and business should disseminate the message that Ukraine is capable of ensuring “normality” and, most importantly, that people from non-Government-controlled territories can be part of this “normality”.

There is great potential for promoting a new image of Ukraine as a space of tolerance, where everyone can fulfil themselves and earn decent money (since financial independence has been repeatedly mentioned by focus group participants as their priority). Also, Ukraine has the resources to position itself as a strong state – even despite the difficulties the country faces, it continues to resist the armed aggression in a difficult geopolitical situation.

For all Ukrainians to feel connected to each other, it is necessary to promote more sincere stories in the information space about the life in non-Government-controlled territories, about the circumstances that force people to stay, and about difficult decisions that people are forced to make in these conditions. First of all, it is necessary for the residents of non-Government-controlled territories see stories about themselves. Normality also implies the need for non-political, entertaining content in Russian in the Ukrainian media.

F Words matter. According to research, the current vocabulary used by representatives of Ukrainian authorities is poorly perceived in the territories not controlled by the Government of Ukraine.

Therefore, it is worth trying to use concepts that do not dehumanize or de-subjectify the residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine. It is worth paying attention to the very names of territories that are temporarily not under the control of the Government of Ukraine (currently, different names are used, including "occupied districts of Donbas," "certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (ORDLO)," "non-Government-controlled territories," "temporarily occupied territories," etc.).

To avoid misunderstandings or painful perception of Government decisions, focus should be made on current vocabulary of government officials. A number of Ukrainian civil society organizations that organize and facilitate dialogue processes with residents of territories not under the control of Ukrainian Government can offer dictionaries that they developed to denote sensitive concepts.

Extensive coverage of the principles of transitional justice, best practices/motivating cases as well as discussion of the national model of transitional justice. It concerns basic principles of transitional justice, including the responsibility, protection and restoration of the rights of victims of armed conflict, the right to justice, and the reforms that have to be implemented to prevent future armed conflict.

One of key needs of the residents of non-Government-controlled territories is the demand for security. Therefore, those who fear repression by the Ukrainian authorities and have not committed serious war crimes need proof that no violence will be used against them and their rights will be protected in Ukraine. Systematic awareness-raising is needed to respond to fears of possible consequences for the population of non-Government-controlled territories after reintegration.

For example, it should provide account on what local de facto officials, employees of budget-funded organizations, holders of local and Russian passports and diplomas, participants in property transactions, etc. can expect.

Efforts should be made to commemorate the events leading up to the armed conflict and to honor the memory of the first civilian victims of the riots in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (such as Volodymyr Rybak). Compiling and disseminating a chronology of the armed conflict through the media should feature international experts and take into account possible consequences of hasty erroneous decisions in the future. In the context of the conflict, the conversation about the past was politicized, but we can also talk constructively about the contradictory attitudes to the past, even about the events of 2014, which Ukrainians on different sides of the contact line often remember, perceive and interpret differently.

Any analysis of the past should be made from the perspective of what future Ukrainians want for themselves.

7 Institutional support for the implementation of information policy regarding the non-Government-controlled territories, in particular regarding communication with the residents of these territories. Availability of the position of the Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine – Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine is critical for this. The status of Vice Prime Minister makes reintegration a priority and mainstream it across various areas of the governance.

And thus, it helps coordinate communication processes in other ministries and agencies, as well as monitor and evaluate communications. The line ministry may also provide technical and advisory support to other ministries on establishing communication with residents of non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

8 Implement projects that would promote involvement of residents of territories not controlled by the Government of Ukraine in Ukrainian information and cultural space. Examples of such projects are major sports events (such as football), movies or TV series, which would find an emotional response in the east and in other parts of the country. To develop such initiatives, it is recommended to hold open competitions featuring the NGOs/civic initiatives and to conduct an external expert assessment of the feasibility of ideas (do no harm approach). The Government should pay special attention to working with children and adolescents from non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine, support projects and initiatives aimed directly at these target groups, support and encourage individuals who proved effective in communicating with children and adolescents.

Ways/Channels of Communication

The older generation continues to be a consumer of traditional media. The Government should support the development of television and radio broadcasting targeting non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine. It concerns state broadcasting (such as Dom TV channel) and the public broadcaster, but also about private and non-commercial media that broadcast to territories not controlled by Ukrainian Government.

This includes financial support by the state for those popular media (through grant mechanisms and competitions) that will broadcast in non-Government-controlled territories. For example, FM radio stations, local TV channels and radio. It is worth considering to grant preferential access for them to retransmit the signal to the non-Government-controlled territories that are commercially unprofitable to them.

It should be borne in mind that younger generations consume most of the news and entertainment content via the Internet and social media (rather than television). Quality media outlets and public authorities should learn to compete on the platforms of social networks Telegram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. Telegram currently has the greatest potential as a platform for disseminating information.

The fact that young people (especially in non-Government-controlled territories) consume Russian channels on healthy living (channels that, in fact, demonstrate a very "western" lifestyle) paradoxically indicates that the youth is generally looking for a sense of "normality" and have open worldview, which are lacking in non-Government-controlled territories of Ukraine. Therefore, it is not only the political content that the communications should focus on. Currently, this demand of the youth is met by Russian rather than Ukrainian media. Ukrainian content on social networks (TikTok, YouTube) for children and teenagers is close to non-existent.

It is also important to consider the role of the language of information consumption. Therefore, it is critical to create Ukrainian Russian-language or bilingual content that will allow residents of non-Government-controlled territories to be included in the information space of Ukraine. According to available research (including focus groups), residents of these territories mostly consume content in Russian.

Given actual isolation of the residents of non-Government-controlled territories, the only possible physical way of communication with them is when they cross the checkpoints in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and – in the pandemic context – when they cross the checkpoints along the state border of Ukraine (in Milove, Hoptivka, Bachivsk, etc.).

It is necessary to involve and encourage as many Ukrainian citizens residing on non-Government-controlled areas of Ukraine as possible to travel to Government-controlled territories of Ukraine and do not display any aggression towards them. When the residents of non-Government-controlled territories cross the checkpoints along the contact line or the state border of Ukraine, it is advisable to provide them with information (in the form of booklets, QR-codes) about their rights, freedoms, additional benefits and guarantees they can enjoy in the Government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

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About CivilMPlus:

The international platform CivilMPlus is aimed at strengthening the role of civil society in restoring peace, supremacy of international law and human rights protection in eastern Ukraine. Since 2017, CivilMPlus has united over 25 independent European NGOs and experts which implement joint project within the platform.

In addition to creating a solid foundation for peacebuilding and dialogue, the platform uses and promotes the knowledge and the expertise about the developments in the conflict zone to anchor the situation in Ukraine on the European agenda. Through our partnerships and the continues expansion of the network, the platform strengthens the influence of civil society at the local, national and international levels. We are convinced that restoring Ukraine's sovereignty and supporting its democratic development are prerequisites for sustainable peace, security and prosperity in Europe.