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# The communicative potential of multinational communities to counter destructive ethno-rumors in modern Ukrainian society: a socio- political analysis

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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to provide a sociopolitical analysis of approaches and means to engage members of multicultural communities in active participation to counteract the effects of destructive ethnic rumors and build their own spaces for coexistence. The need for sociological research on the effects of rumors is highlighted by the importance of finding means to counteract their manipulative use for destructive purposes. The empirical research method used was a questionnaire survey with the aim of creating new opportunities for interaction between people of different backgrounds, for the sake of harmony and exchange of experiences and thus being able to establish partnerships between the cities participating in the Intercultural Cities Network of Ukraine (ICC-Ukraine). It is concluded that the research allows us to affirm the effectiveness of using the method of counteracting ethnic rumors “Antitumor” proposed by the program “Intercultural Cities” of the Council of Europe in Ukraine, as a systemic means of solving the problems of communicative interactions in multicultural communities.

**Keywords:** ethno-cultural communities; destructive rumors; intercultural dialogue; sociological research; socio-political analysis.

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## El potencial comunicativo de las comunidades multinacionales para contrarrestar los etno-rumores destructivos en la sociedad ucraniana moderna: un análisis sociopolítico

### Resumen

El objetivo del estudio fue proporcionar un análisis sociopolítico de los enfoques y medios para involucrar a los miembros de las comunidades multiculturales en la participación activa para contrarrestar los efectos de los rumores étnicos destructivos y construir sus propios espacios para la convivencia. La necesidad de investigar sociológicamente los efectos de los rumores se pone de manifiesto por la importancia de encontrar medios para contrarrestar su uso manipulador con fines destructivos. El método de investigación empírica usado fue una encuesta por cuestionario con el objetivo de crear nuevas oportunidades de interacción entre personas de diferentes orígenes, en aras de la armonía y el intercambio de experiencias y, de este modo, poder establecer asociaciones entre las ciudades que participan en la Red de Ciudades Interculturales de Ucrania (ICC-Ucrania). Se concluye que la investigación nos permite afirmar la eficacia de la utilización del método para contrarrestar los rumores étnicos «Antitumor» propuesto por el programa «Ciudades Interculturales» del Consejo de Europa en Ucrania, como medio sistémico para resolver los problemas de las interacciones comunicativas en las comunidades multiculturales.

**Palabras clave:** comunidades etnoculturales; rumores destructivos; diálogo intercultural; investigación sociológica; análisis sociopolítico.

### Introduction

The modern Ukrainian community is characterized by deep social transformations, accompanied by a significant intensification of intercultural relations, a constant complication of forms, principles and mechanisms of social interaction. (Afanasieva et al., 2021; Oleksenko et al., 2020) Migration processes within the country, in particular, the forced resettlement of many residents from the occupied territories, the increase in the number of labor migrants from Ukraine, etc., lead to the appearance in the information space of these social groups of various biased characteristics (Potapchuk, 2015).

It is important that a significant part of rumors is based on ethnic factors and is actualized thanks to widespread archetypes and stereotypes, forming the image of an outsider by voicing the negative characteristics of a certain

socio-cultural group, thus acquiring the characteristics of a “hate speech”. The analysis of research materials proves that in the domestic information space there is a tendency to consider this phenomenon in scientific works only in a cursory, “applied” way - in the course of discussing certain problems of social consciousness (Yurkova, 2021, pp. 121–131).

The researchers leave unsolved the question of the role of communities as subjects of social life, in particular, the subject potential of their members in countering this phenomenon.

Therefore, the need for a sociological study of the effects of rumors is actualized by the importance of the problem of finding means of neutralizing countermeasures against the manipulative use of rumors as a manifestation of a hate speech.

A number of state acts and international documents testify to the social significance of the problem and the urgency of finding forms and means of countering destructive rumors as a form of spreading, provoking, stimulating or justifying various types of discrimination against minorities, migrants and people with emigrant roots (National strategy for promoting the development of civil society in Ukraine for 2021 - 2026; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1994); Recommendation N R (97) 20 to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, to participating states on “incitement of enmity”).

According to researchers, destructive rumors that always have a certain social orientation and are clearly or covertly based on the division of social groups into “us” and “them” are considered conflict-creating (Potapchuk, 2015; Khristenko, 2012, pp. 143–150; Yurkova, 2021, pp. 121–131). When the negative reflection of a migrant of foreign origin is not presented separately, but in connection with some significant problem of the country, then certain difficulties in the issue of migration that can be completely solved acquire the status of a threat to the development of communities.

The analysis of the works of foreign authors proves that rumors, as a specific form of social communication, contain contradictory, and at the same time, inextricably interconnected objective and subjective factors that form the phenomenon of a “hate speech” in a multicultural society. They characterize the dynamics of interaction of these phenomena, show both new opportunities and the need for certain limitations in the nature of interaction (Orban-Lembyk, 2004, pp. 47 – 62; Bondiyelli and Marchelloni, 2019, pp. 8–55; Smola, 2019, pp. 47-62).

Therefore, in the sociological context we distinguish the objective prerequisites for the emergence of danger of the influence of rumors as a denial of the natural existence of the subject to whom they are directed and specific subjective forms of their perception, including active opposition

to the transfer of destructive subjective definitions into the plane of the relationship of subjects of social interaction.

## 1. Methods

The Council of Europe Program “Intercultural Cities” (“Intercultural Cities” Project - Melitopol State University) serves the purpose of developing intercultural policy - prevention of segregation, discrimination, racism, and the spread of rumors, which often lead to conflicts and popularize hate speech. One of the currently important aspects of the implementation of the “Intercultural Cities” Program, which provides support to cities in revising their policies through the prism of intercultural interaction and in the development of comprehensive intercultural strategies and implies understanding and acceptance of the diversity of ethnic, religious and social communities as a resource of social, cultural, rural and economic development of communities is the Anti-Rumors Program (ANTI-RUMORS. Guide to Countering Rumors) (De Torres, 2018), which is aimed at preventing discrimination, improving coexistence and using the potential of diversity by initiating changes in the perception, attitude and behavior of the general population and specific target groups.

A pre-project study of the problem in the cities participating in the Project revealed that, despite the fact that 89% of respondents indicated a “relatively stable sense of community and respect” in their cities, in their opinion, there are problems in communities related to “negative statements in social networks” (37%), “language misunderstanding” (35%), “contemptuous attitude due to other ethnic affiliation” (33%), “religious affiliation” (31%), “disrespect for customs, traditions of other peoples” (25%), which require an urgent solution.

A third of them (30%) expressed the opinion that these problems are directly related to rumors against specific groups of persons (ethnic, religious communities, forcibly resettled persons, etc.). This is confirmed by the respondents’ answers to the question: “Are there rumors about migrants, refugees, ethnic groups, national communities or other groups in your city?”. About 54% of respondents agree that such rumors are spreading. More than 73% of respondents who answered in the affirmative see them as having a negative content load.

This survey and focus group discussions revealed the most widespread rumors about groups of people in the public space: “Roma are thieves” (62%), “Ukrainians are cheap Western European labor force” (53%), “Jews are selfish” (53%), “internally displaced persons do not want to work (live on state aid)” (52.3%), “Muslims are terrorists and should be kept away from them” (57.5%), etc.

## 2. Methodology

In order to identify the impact of the activities of the ICC Program of the Council of Europe “Counterfeiting Rumors” on improving knowledge, skills and abilities in countering rumors, creating new opportunities for interaction between people of different origins for the sake of harmony and consolidation of intercultural urban communities, exchange of experience and establishment of partnership relations between cities participants of the Ukrainian Network of Intercultural Cities (ICC-Ukraine), a post-project questionnaire survey was conducted from November 28 to December 6, 2021 using Google Forms remote technologies: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1uW9a0JgjUqzRcv2FrX2CprG1zsZLn531ScyTBsF-ftA/edit>. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, the content of which corresponded to the purpose and objectives of the research.

*Study sample.* 108 residents of the cities of the Ukrainian Network of Intercultural Cities (ICC-Ukraine) participating in the Project took part in the survey. Age characteristics of respondents: 16-22 years (13.9%), 23-29 years (24.1%), 30-39 years (22.2%), 40-49 years (24.1%), 50- 59 years old (12%), 60 years and older (3.7%). Field of activity: education workers - 24%, civil servants - 21%, students - 14.8%, managers of enterprises/organizations/ structural divisions - 13.9%, representatives of public organizations - 12%, representatives of small businesses - 3.7 %, representatives of religious denominations – 5.6%, forcibly displaced persons – 9.3%, representatives of ethnic communities – 13.9%, medical workers – 2.9%, lecturers/teachers – 25%, civil servants – 7.4%, media representatives - 4.6%, trainers - 1.9%, members of the city team “ANTI-RUMOURS” - 2.8%, library workers - 2.8%.

## 3. Results

The purpose of the conducted research was to identify the effectiveness of the measures proposed by the Regional Council for implementation at the previous stage of the Anti-Rumor Project in terms of:

1. the activity of involving respondents in the activities and events of the Program (social activity as a necessary condition for effective countermeasures);
2. the quality of knowledge, skills and abilities of the respondents acquired during the Program (social competence as a factor in countering rumors);
3. expectations and suggestions of respondents regarding the effectiveness of the Program (prospects of social communication as a means of countering rumors).

Below we present the most significant survey results for the specified positions:

- **Activities / events**

Communication campaigns against rumors were held in every city participating in the Project, which reached 80.5% of respondents. The project caused a wide resonance of these activities/events among representatives of ethno-cultural communities, public organizations, religious denominations, civil servants, forcibly displaced persons, teachers, domestic and foreign students and pupils. Respondents from all cities participating in the Project believe that the communication campaigns had an effective impact on their communities, namely: “established/improved relations with people of different origins/cultures” (94.4%) and “encouraged positive changes in residents’ views of other cultures and expanded the boundaries of their worldview” (94.4%); helped to “better understand the differences of cultures” (93.5%) and “contributed to the development of the ability to listen and understand another culture” (93.5%); “taught to appreciate cultural diversity as a resource for the development of an intercultural community” (92.6%) and “increased the level of civic solidarity and social trust in an intercultural community” (92.6%), as well as “contributed to increasing the responsibility of residents for their actions and deeds” (90.7%).

Therefore, the use of the innovative ANTI-RUMOURS methodology in combating rumors, which combines the promotion of civil politics with the process of social participation, with the aim of involving a wide range of civil society actors and participation in trainings and communication campaigns, allowed the majority (84.3%) of participants to confirm their expected results.

- **Knowledge / abilities / skills**

During the implementation of the Project, the participants noted that they acquired a set of knowledge, skills and abilities to counter rumors, namely: “to perceive without judgment another culture, character, behavior, or appearance of other people” (95.4%); “to be open to the perception of the values of other cultures” (94.4%); “to form unbiased judgments about other cultures and to try to understand them” (92.6%); “to analyze similarities and differences between participants of intercultural communication” (91.6%); “to conduct a dialogue, listen to others with understanding” (91.6%); “to get rid of superstitions and stereotypes” (87.0%); “to resolve intercultural conflicts and contradictions” (83.3%). The survey participants also expressed the opinion that the Project’s activities “promoted the development of critical thinking”, which is a necessary ability for countering rumors.

The acquired skills and abilities helped the participants to counter rumors in their cities. In particular: “to use analytical skills and critical thinking” (95.4%); “to use various verbal and non-verbal means to achieve mutual understanding between representatives of different cultures” (94.4%); “to make carefully considered and prejudice-free decisions” (94.4%); “to be empathetic, to put oneself in another’s place in order to understand his feelings and needs” (94.4%), “to prevent conflicts” (93.5%); “to cooperate more effectively with representatives of other cultures” (93.5%). The participants also expressed the opinion that the Project inspired them to “implement innovative measures, promotions”.

The respondents noted that they would use the acquired knowledge, skills and abilities in various spheres of life. 94.4% of the respondents indicated that they will apply the knowledge and skills in combating rumors acquired during the implementation of this Project in the professional sphere (among civil servants and participants of the Project “Implementation and Involvement of Cultural Diversity at the International Level”; the indicator is 100%). No differences in respondents’ answers between cities were found.

Respondents, regardless of the field of employment, will most often apply the acquired knowledge, skills and abilities in “everyday life” (95.4%), in “relationships with people of different origins/cultures” (95.4%), in “social networks” (91.6%), “with friends” (86.1%), with “neighbors” (85.2%).

This is confirmed by the post-project answers, where 91.6% of respondents indicated the effectiveness of the acquired knowledge and the intention to use it both in everyday life and when communicating in social networks.

- **Expectations / proposals**

The effectiveness of the Project is evidenced by the fact that a significant majority (84.3%) of the participants in the post-project survey claim that the Project was useful and that their expectations were fully or partially met. In their opinion, this gave “*an impetus to their own initiatives*”, “*helped expand the circle of like-minded people*” and “*enriched experience*”, etc.

12% of respondents for whom participation in the Project did not live up to expectations and 3.7% respondents who were uncertain, indicated that they faced such obstacles and difficulties as “indifference or lack of understanding of the importance of this problem on the part of the population”; “distrust of residents”, “due to quarantine restrictions, the online format did not allow to fully communicate with people and understand feedback from partners”, “the project is not fully adapted to Ukrainian realities, but is aimed only at working with migrants.

In general, for 96.8% of active participants who were introduced to the method of “Anti-rumour”, took part in trainings and communication campaigns, regardless of the city of residence, this Project fully met their expectations. 100% of coaches and members of the Anti-rumor city team think so. According to the respondents, participation in the Project events helped them: “to change their views on another culture” (97.2%); “to have a more positive attitude towards speakers of another culture” (96.3%); “to live harmoniously in the world of different people” (95.4%); “to understand better a representative of another culture” (95.4%); “to broaden the outlook” (93.5%).

Choosing possible and desirable partners for the further implementation of ideas, the Project participants emphasize the need for partnership and close cooperation with “representatives of local self-government bodies, ethnic communities and national-cultural societies”; “media representatives with local self-government bodies”; “representatives of religious denominations with forcibly displaced persons”; “volunteers and educational youth”; “scientists of higher education institutions, teachers and educational youth”.

98.2% of active participants point to the expediency of further implementation of the Project and suggest the following steps for its implementation: “to continue information activities”; “to hold thematic meetings and trainings”; “to continue to spread positive narratives”; “from time to time to launch informative posts about combating rumors”; “to attract representatives of different cultures to cooperation”; “to pay attention to closer cooperation with young people”; “to cooperate with local self-government bodies”; “to hold more projects and joint activities”; “to involve active members of the community”; “to hold festivals and forums”.

For more effective further implementation of the Project, they suggest: “to organize more often joint thematic social and artistic events with the participation of the city community”; “to cooperate with authorities and public organizations, ethno-cultural communities, religious denominations”; “to organize more often communication campaigns against rumors”; “to carry out such projects in secondary schools and higher educational institutions”; “to popularize positive narratives about representatives of different cultures and communities in social networks”; “the mass media and social networks should more widely popularize the rapprochement of ethnic cultures and respect for citizens’ religions”, “to implement anti-rumor campaigns through social networks and to inform residents by placing information on boards, city light information posters, etc.”

## Conclusion

The results of a sociological study aimed at identifying the impact of the ICC Program of the Council of Europe “Countering Rumors” allow us to state that the cooperation of intercultural cities within the framework of the Anti-Rumor Program is a confirmation of its effectiveness in cities where ethno-cultural diversity is the norm, promotes awareness of the potential of community members in creating positive examples of neighborly existence.

The implementation of the Project contributed not only to the improvement of knowledge, skills and abilities to counter rumors, but also helped to “develop an adequate response to problematic situations”, “attitude to cultural diversity as a resource for community development”. The majority of Project participants noted positive changes in residents’ views on the culture of the “other”, expanding the boundaries of their own worldview, increasing the level of civic solidarity and social trust in the community, “intercultural competence in the process of direct participation in countering rumors from different layers of communities”.

The innovative methodology of “ANTI-RUMORS” (De Torres, 2018) in combating rumors effectively combines the promotion of public policy with the process of social participation in order to attract the widest possible range of participants. The key factor of effectiveness is the involvement of a number of social partners and citizens dedicated to the fight against superstitions and breaking the chain of false rumors that humiliate residents and threaten their basic rights.

Participation in the Network also creates a sense of solidarity between participants and organizations involved in its work, and participation in joint efforts gives network members legitimacy and relevance.

Therefore, the implementation of the project in the studied communities is a positive example for its implementation in other communities of Ukraine, and has a significant potential for dissemination, taking into account both the nature of local problems and circumstances, as well as the latest challenges of Ukrainian realities.

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