

## COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE PANDEMIC: ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**Olena Sorokivska**

Ternopil Ivan Puluj National Technical University, Ukraine

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8549-2910>

**Olena Panukhnyk**

Ternopil Ivan Puluj National Technical University, Ukraine

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7381-6885>

**Yana Fedotova**

Military Institute of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6995-4174>

**Nazariy Popadynets**

Scientific-Educational Institute of Entrepreneurship and Perspective Technologies  
of Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7556-6135>

**Sorokivska, O., Panukhnyk, O., Fedotova, Ya., & Popadynets, N. (2022). Communicative interaction between the public and the government authorities in the conditions of the pandemic: analysis of challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Innovations and Sustainability*, 6(3), 07. <https://doi.org/10.51599/is.2022.06.03.07>.**

**Purpose.** The purpose of the study is to identify the main trends of communication changes at the level of public organizations that have arisen as a result of the pandemic, as well as to identify their impact on democratization in Ukraine.

**Results.** The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in communication processes around the world. Quarantine restrictions have acted as additional unfavorable factors, exacerbating the already unstable political dialogue between countries. The pandemic has raised many questions concerning the restriction of citizens' rights and freedoms due to the quarantine measures. But at the same time, it is the substandard situation, the solution that the world had not found before, that has united the society, focused attention on vulnerable groups of the population, intensified volunteering, cross-sectoral support and interaction, united civil society institutions, and developed distance communication. The article focuses on the study of regional public organizations, namely their experience in communicative interaction in the conditions of the pandemic. This made it possible to define and characterize the main functions of public organizations in the region under modern challenges. The main areas that are subject to changes in the communication processes of public organizations are outlined. The ways to improve cooperation between authorities and public organizations are defined.

**Scientific novelty.** The necessity of using digital tools by members of public organizations in the region to communicate with each other and outside the organization was proved.

**Practical value.** Based on the conducted research, the main advantages and disadvantages of communication between the public and the authorities were established, as well as new opportunities

for organizing work during the COVID-19 pandemic were proposed.

**Key words:** COVID-19, communication, public organizations, digital tools, quarantine restrictions.

**Introduction.** The impact of the pandemic on the economic and political development of each country of the world is unique, but communicative interaction remains a priority in establishing cooperation between key participants in democratic processes. In recent years, Ukraine has made a significant progress in the process of forming a democratic society. So, COVID-19 should in no way slow down the progressive trends of pro-European transformations in the country. It is from this standpoint that we propose to consider the changes in communication caused by COVID-19 as a new step in the development of civic consciousness, an opportunity to understand the value of human communication and the importance of being heard, regardless of distance and social status of a particular member of the society.

**Review of literature.** The researches of many scientists around the world are devoted to the observance of democratic norms in the period of COVID-19. In particular, S. Repucci and A. Slipowitz [1], analyzing the latest report “Freedom in the World” of “Freedom House” [2], state that 2020 was marked as the fifteenth consecutive year of the global freedom fall. Authoritarian governments have used the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen their power and combat the dissent, while the international democratic norms have continued to dilapidate, contributing to armed conflicts and impunity for human rights abuses. In their study scientists G. Karabulut, K. F. Zimmermann, A. C. Cansin Dokerf [3] come to the conclusion that just democratic states have suffered more from the infection of COVID-19 because of the higher level of loyalty of their government structures and insufficiently rigid approach to solving pressing problems. According to the Global overview of COVID-19 [4], on account of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease, elections were postponed in many countries around the world, which made it impossible for citizens of these countries to exercise their legal right to vote. The team of authors, led by S. Engler et al. [5], emphasizes that in the fight against the spread of COVID-19, the measures taken by governments around the world demonstrate a compromise between public health and fundamental democratic principles. At the same time, the stronger the democratic principles of governance in individual countries are, the more difficult it is for their governments to implement restrictive policies.

Scientists around the world are trying to research and generalize knowledge of COVID-19 in terms of many sciences: epidemiology, virology and diagnostics [6]. They also make predictions aimed at the search for a universal way to overcome the pandemic. Scientists assign an important role in this process to effective communication between the government authorities and the public. In particular Ph. Harris and D. Moss [7] in their study prove that each of the democratic governments during the pandemic is faced with the choice between the economic stability in the country and the introduction of restrictive measures. These are the latter ones that have a very negative impact on the communication between the government authorities and the public, but at the same time they are effective in reducing the spread

of the virus. The change of communication processes in the field of education is featured by the team of authors, led by E. Zarzycka et al. [8]. Their research analyzes the growing role of distance learning and educational media during the quarantine, the peculiarities of the transition of the majority of communications to an online format. Important aspects of communication during the pandemic are being studied by the European scientists [9; 10], who publish the results of the large-scale survey of the population of seven European countries. These studies have proved the importance of feedback from the authorities and the public, have shown that most of the European population trusts the WHO information and is willing to cooperate.

J. Zarocostas [11] in his work emphasizes the need and means of combating misinformation in the communication channels between the public and the government authorities, and gives it the term of “infodemia”. The scientist considers that one of such tools is the launch of targeted information platforms of government structures. The topic of changes in society's behavior under the influence of the pandemic is developed in the articles by a number of British scientists [12] who studied the impact of the communication environment on people's compliance with the rules of distancing during the pandemic. In April 2020, an international team of researchers conducted a large-scale survey of 58 countries and more than 100,000 respondents, to examine the attitudes of citizens and governments to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study showed significant public dissatisfaction with the actions of governments in different countries during the pandemic and similar problems of communication in different areas.

The issue of communication between the government authorities and the public in Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Norway and Lebanon was studied by teams of scientists from different countries [13–16].

The above mentioned scientific interests allow concluding about the relevance of the subject for scientific investigations. The fact that public organizations are important participants in communication processes during the pandemic is evidenced by the work of the teams of scientists, led by E. Maserat et al. [17], M. Alizadeh et al. [18], A. H. Abd Samat et al. [19] and A. U. Md Shah et al. [20], which tell about the positive experience of Iran and Malaysia in involving medical non-governmental organizations into overcoming the consequences of the pandemic.

Thus, the results of the review of the researches of leading scientists made it possible to summarize the main trends in research in the field of communication between the government authorities and the public, as well as the role of non-governmental organizations in these processes.

Among the domestic studies today there are only a few attempts of practical research in this area. Such investigations in Ukraine were conducted by I. Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation from April 15 to May 1, 2020 [21]. However, at present, we can state the lack of thorough studies of this issue in the context of the whole country. It is the discovery of real changes in the interaction between the government authorities and the public during the pandemic that will make it possible

to understand the complexity and systemic nature of these transformations, because once having passed through the pandemic, many communication processes will never be the same.

**Materials and methods.** The purpose of the study is to identify the main trends of communication changes at the level of public organizations that have arisen as a result of the pandemic, as well as to identify their impact on democratization in Ukraine.

To study the object and subject of the research the following scientific methods were applied: epistemological analysis – to study scientific approaches in order to determine the communication processes and changes associated with the pandemic; economic-statistical and comparative analysis – to study the development of communication relations between the public and the government authorities; questionnaire – in the process of investigating the quantitative and qualitative parameters of communication processes; graphic – to visualize the results of the study; abstract-logical – to form generalizations and conclusions based on the results of the study.

**Results and discussion.** The “State Strategy for Regional Development for 2021–2027”, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, is focused on the implementation of democratic changes and cohesion of the Ukrainian society in the conditions of the pandemic [22]. The priority goals of the document are, in particular, the formation of a cohesive state in social, humanitarian, economic, environmental, security and spatial aspects, as well as the development of effective multilevel governance.

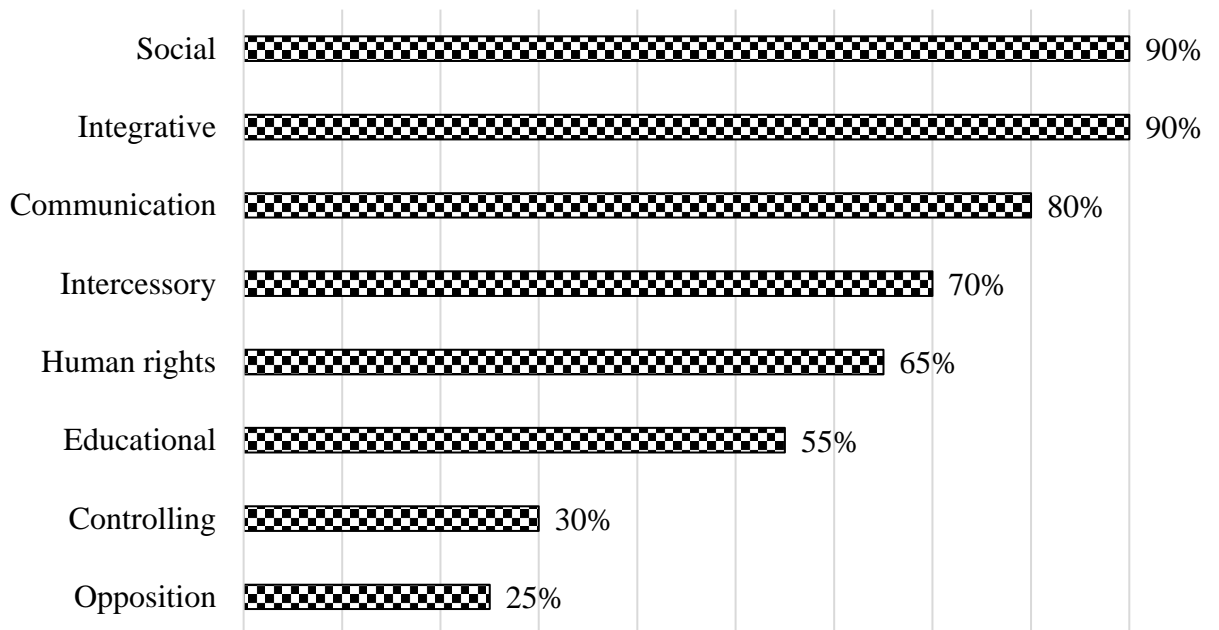
The processes of communication between the government and the public are the basis of the project “National Strategy for Civil Society Development for 2021–2026” [23]. This basic document defines first of all “...ensuring effective procedures of public participation in the formation and implementation of the state and regional policy, solving the issues of local importance and stimulating participation of civil society institutions in the socio-economic development of Ukraine” as the main directions of democratic development.

In order to identify the real state of interaction processes at the level of “public-government”, the authors of this publication within the framework of the project “Public for Democratization” [24] conducted a survey. The key target audiences of the study were regional public organizations of Ternopil region. These are the subjects of the civil society who have the experience of communication in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic at the level of the region, city, united territorial community. Therefore, on the one hand, they acted as experts-practitioners, and, on the other hand, as the object of research, because it is an objective view “from the side” that allowed qualitative assessing the significance of changes in communication processes at the level of a particular region.

The survey of the project participants was conducted by means of the questionnaire in a Google form. The questionnaire for members of public organizations

included 23 questions. It was sent to a number of representatives of various public organizations in the city of Ternopil and Ternopil region. More than 20 public organizations took part in the survey. The questions were answered mostly by chairmen and managers, as well as their deputies.

According to the survey the dominant functions of the activities of the members of the public organizations in 2021 were social and integrative (Figure 1).



■ The percentage of respondents who chose a definite version of answer

**Figure 1. The main functions of public organizations of Ternopil region**

Source: developed by the authors based on their research.

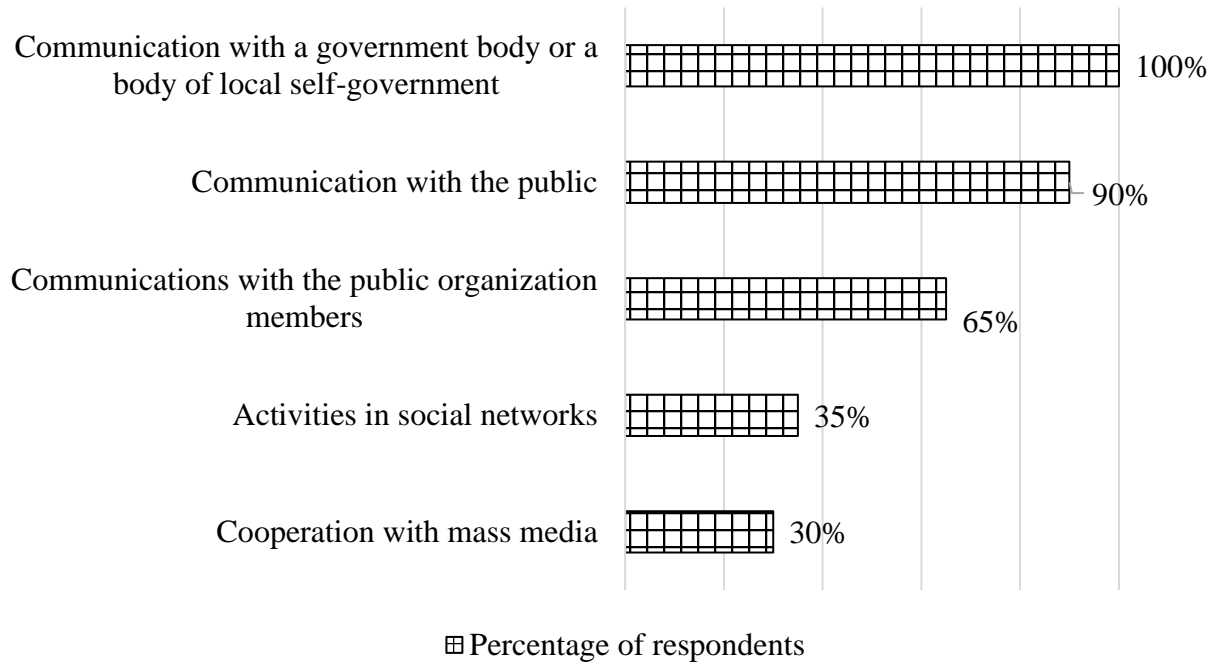
By the social function we mean providing assistance and support to various categories of the population independently or in partnership with other institutions and organizations. The integrative function involves unification and consolidation of members of the organization and citizens around a common goal. The respondents also mentioned the implementation of the communication function (establishing the atmosphere of trusting communication between the members of the organization, increasing the role of public opinion, information support of the society), as well as the intercessory (establishing relations between members of public organizations, various governmental and non-governmental institutions, social organizations) and the human rights (protection of rights and interests of members of the organization, other citizens) functions. More than half of the respondents singled out the availability of an educational function in their work. A relatively small proportion of the respondents (30 and 25 %, respectively) mentioned the opposition and control functions.

This state of affairs indicates the focus of the public sector of Ternopil region on the taking place consolidation and integration processes in which different methods and means of communication integration are used. At the same time, it should be noted that very few public organizations exercise the function of control and participate in



opposition processes at the regional or national level.

All 100 % of respondents state that they experienced changes in communication processes during the pandemic. Regarding the areas of these changes, they primarily concerned communication with the government or local self-government bodies, communication with the public, as well as communication between the participants within public organizations (Figure 2). The changes in the activities of social networks and in cooperation with the media were also mentioned.



**Figure 2. Spheres covered by changes in the communication processes of public organizations**

*Source:* developed by the authors based on their research.

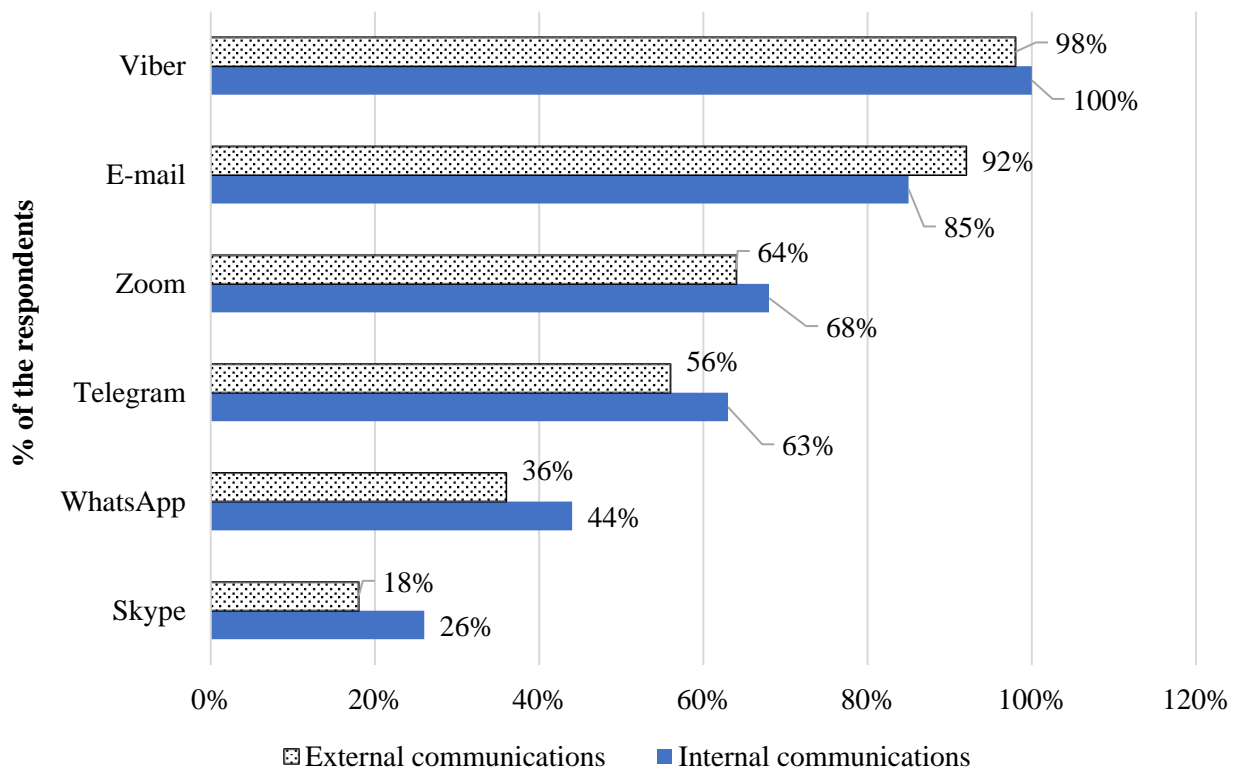
The majority of respondents (95 %) point to the complexity of communication processes during the pandemic. However, at the same time, all respondents, without exception, note that the pandemic has given impetus to the increase in the use of digital tools in the process of communication and the search for new ways and means of communication.

Within the framework of working communication, the members of public organizations most often used Viber and Telegram messengers, quite rarely WhatsApp (Figure 3). As for conferences, they were most often organized in Zoom, and its free version was mostly used. However, there were organizations that used the paid version of Zoom, they organized long webinars and discussed many important issues.

The downside is that public organizations members have made little use of the Google Team to build productive teamwork. As to the process of communication with external participants, the members of public formations mainly used messengers, as well as Zoom to organize and hold conferences.

All surveyed public organizations are active users of the Facebook social network. Some of them use the tools to promote information resources in this network quite

productively. None of the participants of the surveyed public organizations got training to improve the effectiveness of communication processes in the pandemic. However, in the process of personal communication it turned out that some of them had been engaged in self-education or had taken training courses on various educational platforms. All respondents answered in the affirmative to the question: “Do you plan to use the digital tools you have mastered after the end of the pandemic?”



**Figure 3. Digital tools used by members of public organizations of Ternopil region to communicate with each other and outside the organization**

Source: developed by the authors based on their research.

During the quarantine period, meetings of the Board and meetings of members of public organizations were held mainly in the online format (60 % of respondents). However, some of the meetings (about 40 %) took place in the format of “live” communication in compliance with all the quarantine requirements. 95 % of the surveyed members of public organizations agreed that the two forms of communication at future meetings should complement each other. It is interesting that the respondents, alongside with the combination of online and offline communications, chose the option of “live” communication as the one which should be preferred.

Among the advantages of “live” communication, the members of public organizations noted first of all the realization of the natural human need for communication, its important emotional aspect and high efficiency. Among the important issues, constructive dialogue, productive cooperation and sincerity were also pointed out.

Efficiency and flexibility, the possibility to focus on specific aspects of the problem were identified as the main advantages of online communication, because

such meetings are as a rule organized for a specific purpose. It is important that communication is possible at any distance and at any time.

Regarding the difficulties of online communication, most respondents drew attention to technical obstacles, impossibility to influence certain processes remotely, inaccuracy in writing messages, misunderstandings in correspondence on social networks, distraction of the attention of the participants to everyday problems. In the process of online communication there were also difficulties with establishing communication at the beginning of the pandemic and with productive organization by the participants of their own time.

To the question: “Is the public ready to use the means of e-democracy and to turn to digital tools in communication processes?” was answered: “Almost ready, but some points still need to be adapted” (80 %) by the majority of the surveyed members of public organizations and 15 % of them chose an affirmative answer.

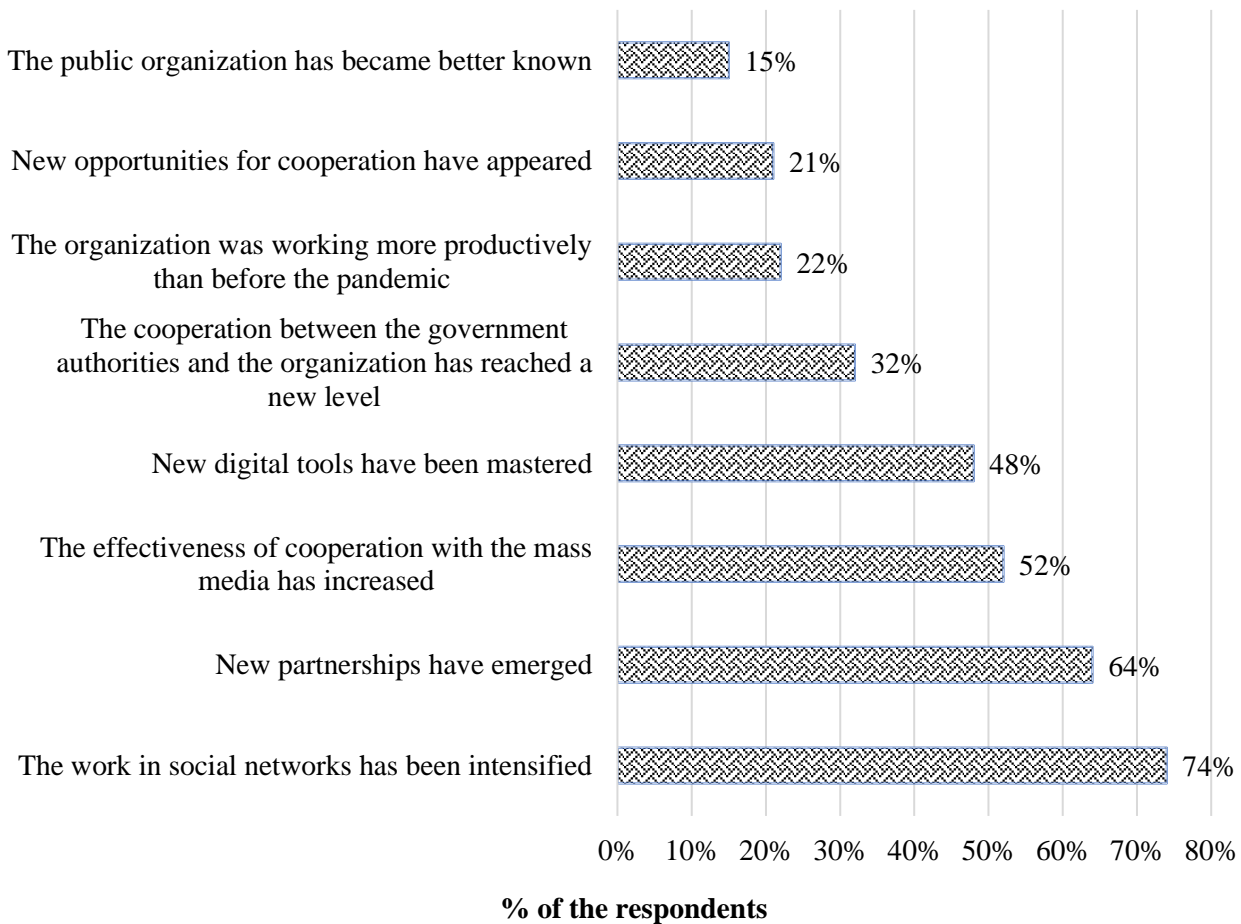
About 75 % of the respondents confirmed the growth of civic activity, especially on the COVID-19 thematics. At the same time, more than 50 % of the surveyed representatives of public organizations supported the thesis of increasing the cohesion of the society in the fight against the pandemic. 87 % of the surveyed public organizations consider informational, explanatory, educational and analytical work to be the most important priorities in their activity in the conditions of COVID-19. Regarding the intensification and use of new opportunities of public organizations during the pandemic, the opinions of the participants were separated (Figure 4).

Most of them have intensified their work in social networks, created new partnerships and increased the effectiveness of cooperation with the media. Almost half of the respondents have managed to master new digital tools, a third part of them believe that cooperation with the government authorities has reached a new level. At the same time, only one in five of the surveyed organizations saw new opportunities for cooperation and worked more productively. This state of affairs suggests that the pandemic has affected the activity of the public sector much more than its representatives had expected. Restrictions of “live” communication with the target groups of each of the public organizations proved to be a significant obstacle to effective implementation of their activities.

More than half of the surveyed public organizations (63 %) believe that their influence on social processes has increased during the pandemic. They also note an increase in the motivation of citizens in the region to unite at the level of public formations. The motivating factor in this case is a growing number of similar problems for certain segments of the population that have arisen as a result of the pandemic (for example, lockdown for entrepreneurs, isolation for the elderly, etc.).

The main mechanisms of public influence on the government, according to the respondents, are the spread of information in social networks, Internet publications, public media, creation of public associations to convey public opinion to the government authorities and local self-government bodies. However, it is cooperation that is important here, not criticism and the opposition role.





**Figure 4. Intensification and use of new opportunities of public organizations during the pandemic**

*Source:* developed by the authors based on their research.

Among the problems of cooperation with the government authorities during the pandemic, representatives of public organizations noted the existing complex bureaucratic mechanism, which makes rapid implementation of progressive initiatives impossible; lack of common information platforms; often diagonally opposite interests of the government authorities and the public in the development of some processes; insufficient number of civil servants who would be willing to cooperate effectively with public activists.

**Conclusions.** The results of the study indicate the importance and relevance of identifying challenges and opportunities that have occurred in the processes of communication between the public and the government authorities in the conditions of COVID-19. At the same time, the study shows that the functioning of the public sector is very important for the formation of comprehensive democratic changes at the level of social development of the region. And these are adequate means of communication that make its impact really tangible.

The cooperation of the public and the government authorities envisages the ability of public organizations: to organize their activities even in the conditions of quarantine restrictions; to master new digital tools of cooperation and turn to the online format,

without reducing the number of participants in trainings, seminars and meetings; to change flexibly thematic of information, educational activities and analytical research, taking into account the needs of the present day; to encourage the representatives of the society for realization of important missions, for implementation of progressive projects; to create new partnerships and to reach new levels of cooperation, taking into account the current needs of the society.

Nowadays democratic mechanisms of public influence on the government authorities are already well developed in Ukraine. Therefore, the main priority of public organizations during the pandemic was to preserve and develop the social foundations which had been formed during the years of independence. The results of the study show that most of the representatives of the public sector saw new opportunities for their activities: they increased the volume of activities in social networks, used messengers and online tools more actively, filled in comprehensively the sites of their public organizations, focused on integrative and communication functions, found new channels and ways of communication with the government authorities and local self-government bodies. Unfortunately, the phrase “democracy in quarantine” has remained at the level of a pessimistic forecast and has not come true in real life in our country as well as in the states throughout the world.

The negative impact of the pandemic on the development of the society should not be underestimated. But, at the same time we can note the growth of public activity during COVID-19. Democratic societies have become more active in the face of common problems and challenges, while uniting around new opportunities and strategic goals. And the role of the public sector, in our opinion, is primarily in the effective use of communication tools and turning the efforts of active members of the society in the direction of overcoming obstacles, solving problems and complex tasks posed by the pandemic. After all, only by joining the efforts will we be able to overcome it.

### References

1. Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2020). The freedom house survey for 2020: Democracy in a Year of Crisis. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(2), 45–60.
2. Freedom House Survey (2020). Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/democracies-decline>.
3. Karabulut, G., Zimmermann, K. F., & Cansin Dokerf, A. C. (2021). Democracy and COVID-19 outcomes. *Economics Letters*, 203, 109840. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2021.109840>.
4. International IDEA (2021). Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>.
5. Engler, S., Brunner, P., Loviat, R., Abou-Chadi, T., Leemann, L., Glaser, A., & Kübler, D. (2021). Democracy in times of the pandemic: explaining the variation of COVID-19 policies across European democracies. *West European Politics* 44(5-6), 1077–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1900669>.

6. Wang, C., Wang, Z., & Wang, G., Yiu-Nam Lau, Y., Zhang, K., & Li, W. (2021). COVID-19 in early 2021: current status and looking forward. *Signal Transduction and Targeted Therapy*, 6, 114. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41392-021-00527-1>
7. Harris, Ph., & Moss, D (2020). Covid, pandemics, plague and public affairs: lessons from history. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(4), e2548. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2548>.
8. Zarzycka, E., Krasodomska, J., Mazurczak-Mąka, A., Turek-Radwan, M., & Jin, H. (2021) Distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: students' communication and collaboration and the role of social media. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 8(1), 1953228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2021.1953228>.
9. Varghese, N. E., Sabat, I., Neumann-Böhme, S., Schreyögg, J., Stargardt, T., Torbica, A., van Exel, J., ... & Brouwer, W. (2021). Risk communication during COVID-19: a descriptive study on familiarity with, adherence to and trust in the WHO preventive measures. *PLoS ONE*, 16(4), e0250872. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250872>.
10. Ratzan, S. C., Sommariva, S., & Rauh, L. (2020). Enhancing global health communication during a crisis: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Public Health Research and Practice*, 30(2), e3022010. <https://doi.org/10.17061/phrp3022010>.
11. Zarocostas, J. (2020). How to fight an infodemic. *The Lancet*, 395(10225), 676. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30461-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30461-X).
12. Tunçgenç, B., El Zein, M., Sulik, J., Newson, M., Zhao, Y., Dezechache, G., & Deroy, O. (2021). Social influence matters: we follow pandemic guidelines most when our close circle does. *British Journal of Psychology*, 112(3), 763–780. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12491>.
13. Fetzer, T. R., Witte, M., Hensel, L., Jachimowicz, J., Haushofer, J., Ivchenko, A., Caria, S., ... & Yoeli, E. (2020). Global behaviors and perceptions at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. NBER Working Paper No. 27082. Available at: [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w27082/w27082.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27082/w27082.pdf).
14. Sjölander-Lindqvist, A., Simon Larsson, S., Fava, N., Gillberg, N., Marcianò, C., & Cinque, S. (2020). Communicating About COVID-19 in Four European Countries: Similarities and Differences in National Discourses in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. *Frontiers in Communication*, 5, 593325. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.593325>.
15. Sjölander-Lindqvist, A., Risvoll, C., Kaarhus, R., Lundberg, A. K., & Sandström, C. (2020). Knowledge claims and struggles in decentralized large carnivore governance: insights from Norway and Sweden. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, 8,120. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2020.00120>.
16. Kharroubi, S., & Saleh, F. (2020). Are Lockdown Measures Effective Against COVID-19? *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8, 549692. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.549692>.
17. Maserat, E., Jafari, F., Mohammadzadeh, Z., Alizadeh, M., &

Torkamannia, A. (2020) COVID-19 & an NGO and university developed interactive portal: a perspective from Iran. *Health Technology Assessment*, 10, 1421–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12553-020-00470-1>.

18. Alizadeh, M., Abbasi, M., Bashirivand, N., Mojtahed, A., & Karimi, S. E. (2020). Nongovernmental organizations and social aspects of COVID-19 pandemic: a successful experience in health policy. *Medical Journal of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 34(1), 1180–1183. <https://doi.org/10.47176/mjiri.34.170>.

19. Abd Samat, A. H., Abdul Rashid, A., Mohd Yunus, N. A., Salim, A. M. H., & Musa, H. A. (2021). Malaysian medical non-governmental organization's (NGO) experience in the emergency response for COVID-19, using the whole-of-society collaborative concept. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2021.106>

20. Md Shah, A. U., Safri, S. N. A., Thevadas, R., Noordin, N. K., Rahman, A. A., Sekawi, Z., Ideris, A., & Hameed Sultan, M. T. (2020). COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia: actions taken by the Malaysian government. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 97, 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2020.05.093>.

21. Kucheriv, I. (2020). Civil society during the pandemic: how it affected civic activism. Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/gromadyanske-suspilstvo-v-period-pandemii-yak-vona-vplinula-na-gromadsku-aktivnist>.

22. Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2020). State Strategy of Regional Development for 2021–2027. Available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/695-2020-%D0%BF#Text>.

23. Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2021). Draft “National Strategy for Civil Society Development for 2021–2026”. Available at: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/gromadskosti/gromadyanske-suspilstvo-i-vlada/spriyannya-rozvitku-gromadyanskogo-suspilstva/pidgotovka-proektu-nacionalnoyi-strategiyi-spriyannya-rozvitku-gromadyanskogo-suspilstva-v-ukrayini-na-2021-2025-roki>.

24. The Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting (2020). Information on the results of the project “Public for Democratization”. Available at: <http://www.ier.com.ua/ua/projects?pid=6437>.