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Netherlands' Media *vs.* Ukraine's Communication Efforts: The Case of the Netherlands' Referendum in 2016

**Holenderskie media przeciwko komunikacyjnym wysiłkom Ukrainy:
referendum w Holandii w 2016 roku**

• **Abstrakt** •

Ukraina ponownie zadeklarowała chęć uczestnictwa w integracji europejskiej co oznacza zainicjowanie kampanii informacyjnej kierowanej nie tylko ku Ukraińcom ale także kampanii promocyjnej zaadresowanej do społeczności zagranicznej. Poważnym wyzwaniem komunikacyjnym okazało się referendum doradcze w Holandii na temat ratyfikacji Układu o stowarzyszeniu UE–Ukraina. Ukraina musiała zrównoważyć oddziaływanie dobrze zorganizowanej kampanii medialnej prowadzonej przez holenderskich eurosceptyków. Ukraińskie starania komunikacyjne są poddane analizie w kontekście holenderskiego referendum z 2016 r.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka komunikacyjna, działalność komunikacyjna, relacje w mediach, integracja europejska, Układ o stowarzyszeniu UE–Ukraina, referendum w Holandii

• **Abstract** •

Ukraine has redeclared its way to European integration which means the arrangement of not only the information campaign directed at the Ukrainians but the promotion campaign directed at foreign public. A serious communication challenge was caused by the advisory referendum in the Netherlands concerning the ratification of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. Ukraine had to counteract the well-organized media campaign held by the Dutch Eurosceptics. The Ukraine's communication efforts are analyzed within the context of the Dutch referendum, 2016.

Keywords: communication policy, communication activity, media coverage, European integration, the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, the Dutch referendum

Today European integration has acquired a qualitatively new content in Ukraine, i.e., it is transforming from a declaratory foreign policy direction into a comprehensive internal policy of reforms. At this stage, public opinion in general and on European integration in particular is of utmost importance, because the level of support of a certain integration vector is an essential component of a successful policy of European integration and Europeanization of society.

Having chosen a course on European integration, Ukraine was also obliged to conduct an efficient communication policy in compliance with the European Union communication policy principles, i.e., listening, communicating and connecting with citizens by “going local” (*Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe by the Commission*, 2005). However, in the country this process is very complex, with lots of loudly advertized steps and very little of their practical implementation.

The goal of the present article is to analyze and compare the general mode of the Dutch media and the Ukrainian communication activity in the Netherlands preceding the Dutch referendum on the ratification of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine.

A consultative referendum in the Netherlands in April 2016 on the ratification of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine (further – the AA) appeared to be a major challenge for the communication policy of Ukraine towards its European integration. The decision to hold such a referendum was initiated by political parties of Eurosceptics who lacked the necessary votes to block approval of the AA in the parliament of the Netherlands. To organize a referendum they used civil initiative *Geenpeil* (“Say No”), which began collecting signatures (they collected 427 939 signatures out of 300 000 required for the referendum). The Parliament of the Netherlands completed the ratification procedure of the AA on July 7, 2015, but a group of activists – Committee of the EU citizens – expressed disagreement with the decision and called for a national referendum. The Committee was dissatisfied how the EU responded to Russia’s participation in the conflict in eastern Ukraine; it also called the AA a provocation which threatened the welfare of the Dutch and the Ukrainians. The submitted petition stressed that the Dutch had transferred funds to support Ukraine, but Ukrainian government did not control the situation, as a result, it did not carry out reforms, without which signing the AA was meaningless. The activists expressed such concerns: Europe would be flooded with Ukrainian students, trainees and professionals from different fields; it would increase the flow of migrants, with whom Europe had been having serious problems; Europe and the Netherlands could be drawn into a war of Russia and Ukraine; in the near future Ukraine would join the EU (Silina, 2015).

On 14 October 2015 the Netherlands' electoral commission announced a referendum to be held on 6 April 2016, the organization of which became possible after the adoption of 1 July 2015 law that allowed citizens to demand a referendum. The decisions of a referendum were not binding. Under the Netherlands' law, a referendum will be deemed to have taken place with 30% turnout.

The referendum was initiated by the two parties of eurosceptics, i.e., Freedom Party and the Socialist Party. Later they were joined by Party for the Animals Protection, the parliamentary group VNL and 50PLUS, which initially had supported the association of Ukraine with the EU, but changed its point of view (*Referendum u Niderlandakh*, 2016). It is important that the Eurosceptics of the Netherlands did not act strictly against Ukraine, they opposed to extending the EU and they conducted the internal power struggle. In fact, the upcoming referendum was a part of the electoral program of the opposition parties of the Netherlands. For the Dutch that referendum could be a manifestation of an effective communication policy of the government, which had to show that it heard and took into account the voice of the citizens. The government claimed it would accept any result of the referendum. Otherwise, pro-government forces risked losing their followers.

The referendum organization was arranged by the government of the Netherlands, but active campaigning in favour of ratification was not held. According to government documents, which hit the press, it had been planned to create a positive image of Ukraine in the Netherlands, to focus on the fact that the association of Ukraine with the EU did not involve membership and the Ukrainian market of 40 million customers was important for the Netherlanders (*Referendum u Niderlandakh*, 2016). A bright flyer was developed aimed at debunking fears and indicating the main positive aspects of the Agreement (*What Does the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement*, 2016).

The heads of the EU institutions were trying to encourage the Dutch to support the agreement. Thus, the European Commission President J.-C. Juncker said that the negative referendum would be beneficial to Russia and could lead to the continental crisis. Former President of the European Council H. van Rompuy was confident if the Dutch voted against the agreement, it would make the Netherlands a less reliable partner (*Juncker: Dutch Ukraine vote*, 2016).

Along with the governmental campaign, the Eurosceptic campaign actively explained to the Dutch why they should not support the AA. In particular, in their agitation they focused on the theses that in case of the ratification: 1) the Dutch taxpayers would be forced to “maintain” the Ukrainians, ignoring the fact that the agreement did not provide for Ukraine's accession to the EU; 2) 40 million

poor buyers were not attractive to entrepreneurs as because of the corruption and accountability to oligarchs Ukrainian market would remain closed.

The internal surveys held in the Netherlands showed that people aged over 50 knew about the referendum and its subject. 40% of women and young people aged 18 to 35 did not know what was planned for 6 April (*Referendum u Niderlandakh*, 2016). According to a survey conducted by *the I&O Research*, the number of people willing to vote in favour of the association with Ukraine had decreased. In the study 2.5 thousand Dutch were interviewed. The survey was conducted in two ways: with the option “I do not know” and without it. In the first case (with option) in March 2016 33% decided to say “yes” to the AA, in February – 32%, in January – 31%. At the same time the number of those opposing to the AA was 44% in March, and 38 % – in January and February. The number of those who answered “I do not know” fell to 23% in March against 30% in February. In the second case (without the option “I do not know”) in March 43% of respondents supported the AA against 45% in February; while in February the number of supports equaled to 55% (*U Niderlandakh zmeshylasia kilnist*, 2016).

Once in October 2015 a plan to hold a referendum on the ratification of the AA had been announced, mass media of the Netherlands paid much attention to this event. Opinion polls, reflecting citizens’ attitudes to the referendum, appeared in the Dutch press regularly and showed that the approaching voting increased the interest of the Dutch.

In such a difficult situation Ukraine faced a new communication challenge, i.e., to convince citizens of the Netherlands, in general negatively or indifferently minded, to vote in support of the ratification of the AA. To this end, under the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, public organizations arranged a number of communication actions.

One of the first, but highly controversial in terms of media coverage, was the first official visit of President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko to the Netherlands in late 2015. The initiative group of the Ukrainian community in the Netherlands *Ukraine – The Referendum*, which had been working on the popularization of the AA, decided to analyze the reaction of Dutch media to the visit of the President of Ukraine in order to assess how the visit could influence the attitudes of the Dutch society in the context of the referendum. That visit did not attract special media attention as leading channels and front pages of national newspapers were busy with the war in Syria and its wider consequences: terrorism, the problem of refugees, the Russian-Turkish conflict and domestic news. Most Dutch media based their reports on the visit of President of Ukraine on one or two sources, rarely resorting to comment. Only opponents of the AA paid bigger attention, in

particular, half a dozen articles appeared that tried to stress all possible mistakes P. Poroshenko had done while in the Netherlands. Dutch media generally ignored P. Poroshenko's half-hour lecture in Leiden University on 27 November, although some of the messages of the lecture got to press (Kozak, Snidalov, 2015).

Ja. Kozak and O. Snidalov (2015), analyzing media coverage of P. Poroshenko's visit to the Netherlands, provide such Eurosceptic reactions: 1) they snatched some quotes that confirmed the authors' prejudices regarding Ukraine; 2) they criticized the AA ignoring its provisions on reforms and stressing that as a trade agreement it gives almost nothing to Europe; while Ukraine really needs Europe, Europe does not need Ukraine, and trade benefits of the AA could be achieved even without the Agreement; 3) recalling the words of P. Poroshenko that Ukraine would join the EU and that the referendum would not stop the AA, they expressed suspicion of conspiracy between the governments in order to ignore the results of the referendum; 4) they focused on how the President of Ukraine had made his fortune and how he had avoided paying taxes through offshore companies (in contrast to Ukraine, the Netherlands authorities are perceived purely as hired specialists and experts and if they do anything illegal, they will be severely punished); 5) they spread stereotypes or myths about Ukraine: civil war, coup, Nazi volunteer battalions, corruption, destruction of opponents of the previous government, that the agreement is bad for the economy of Ukraine and that the Ukrainians are dreaming of how to migrate to Europe (Kozak, Snidalov, 2015).

On 7 December 2015 the issue connected with Ukraine undermined the Dutch media space (but it was negative for Ukraine): classic paintings by Dutch masters, which had been stolen almost 11 years ago from the Museum of Western Friesland, seemed to be found in Ukraine. The scandal hit the media of the Netherlands. Analyzing the situation, often getting tangled in their messages and evaluating events, implicitly and explicitly, Dutch experts, media, politicians constructed the image of Ukraine as a "country with a lot of lies". Netherlands channels mostly avoided far-reaching conclusions. Comments in online versions of local media were full of phrases like "and this country wants to Europe?" (Kozak, 2015). In the situation when many Dutch citizens accused Ukraine of the Malaysian Boeing crash because Ukraine had not closed the sky over the zone of military conflict, the history of the paintings worsened the Dutch attitudes to future referendum. However, the Ukraine's challenge was that politicians and responsible high-ranking officials seemed not realize the scope of the problem.

Let us consider media coverage of the Netherlands concerning the issues *Ukraine – Association Agreement – the Netherlands*. The program *EenVandaag* of Dutch public broadcasting conducted a survey according to which 53% of re-

spondents said that “they would reject the ratification of the document” in the referendum on 6 April; 25% indicated that “they would rather vote against ratification”; about 50% said they would come to the referendum; 17% answered “they would be likely to vote” (*Referendum po Ukrainie v Hollandii*, 2016).

Radio Free Europe surveyed the citizens of Maastricht: out of more than a dozen of local residents of all ages, more than half had a solid intention to say “no” to the AA. The views expressed the following fears that could hinder the Association: Ukraine farmers use a lot of chemicals, harmful pesticides; in the Netherlands there are a lot of domestic problems because of the large migration; they should first discuss the issue with Russia; this is the beginning of Ukraine’s membership in the EU; Ukrainian drivers can replace the Dutch truck drivers and so on. Local Maastricht University is one of the most international in the Netherlands. Over 95% of students in the Netherlands were ready to vote in favour of the rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU. However, experts warned that local elderly citizens were affected by a broad campaign of populist organizations and socialists who convinced not to support the European-Ukrainian initiative (Yeremitsa, 2016).

Algemeen Dagblad analyzed the results of the poll in March 2016 ordered by the Foreign Ministry of the country. The newspaper made the next conclusion based on the research indicators: the number of the ratification supporters had grown and equaled to the number of opponents (both camps had had approximately 25%). Half of the Dutch did not plan to participate in the plebiscite. According to the poll, almost everyone (85%) knew there would be a referendum. In October 2015, only 47% of voters had been aware of it. The number of those who had no idea of the referendum issue was 36%. In October 2015 the figure was 50%. 11% of voters thought that the AA meant an agreement on Ukraine’s accession to the EU (*Shcho pyshe presa Niderlandiv*, 2016).

Algemeen Dagblad noted that Prime Minister of the Netherlands M. Rutte, who had joined the campaign in support of the AA, was trying to explain the provisions of the document to his fellow citizens. In particular, he stressed that the Agreement could meet the interests of everyone, as by means of free trade, which is a manifestation of freedom, it could help Ukraine become more secure, democratic and economically stronger. However, *De Telegraaf* reported that 35% of the Dutch were convinced it was necessary to “fail” the Agreement in order to avert Ukraine’s accession to the EU. These citizens identified signing the AA with Ukraine’s accession to the Union.

To explain the importance of the AA, some newspapers offered views of well-known citizens of the Kingdom on the subject. *NRC Handelsblad* published the

article *The Agreement with Ukraine – About Freedom* by a Dutch writer and researcher L. Fresco, where the author called the Dutch for looking at the referendum in the light of the tragic events in the history of Ukraine, i.e., the Famine (Holodomor), Stalin, the time of the suppression of basic freedoms. She drew attention to the fact that Ukraine needed the AA in order to escape from the grip of dependence on Russia. The writer accused her countrymen of desire to perceive everything, including the Agreement, from the prospects of future financial benefits (*Shcho pyshe presa Niderlandiv*, 2016).

Dutch newspapers were concerned as well with the propaganda campaign preceding the referendum, given the fact that the funds for its implementation had been allocated from the state budget. *Metro* raised questions of objectivity of information materials on the referendum, which the *PostNL* (the provider of postal services) had sent to voters, along with the permit to the plebiscite. The newspaper quoted a member of the Dutch Parliament R. van Raak who believed that the text of brochures was pamphlet-sided, biased, and looked like a recommendation. *De Gelderlander* wrote about the initiative of the owner of *Raspoetin BV*, R. Marsman, who had received a grant of €48,000 to produce 100,000 rolls of “propaganda” toilet paper “packed” with the information against the AA and with the basic message that the AA meant a “hidden accession to the EU” and Ukraine would benefit without taking any obligations.

However, the Dutch media did not ignore the efforts of Ukraine on the eve of the referendum. *Algemeen Dagblad* told about the propaganda campaign run by the young participants of the Ukrainian Academy of leadership in long-distance trains, cities and universities of the Netherlands. They talked about Ukraine's struggle for independence and attempt to take the European way of development. Striving for freedom, tolerance, democracy and similar values depends on the support of the citizens of the Netherlands (*Shcho pyshe presa Niderlandiv*, 2016).

According to Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine P. Klimkin, voters should be given more information so they can make a justified decision because “the people able to make informed decisions, would say ‘yes’. Eurosceptic propaganda, which works with the Russian one, creates permanent entirely abstract myths saying that by approving this Agreement, the Netherlands will be directly involved in the situation in the Donbas and thousands of Ukrainians will come to the Netherlands illegally. No one, who comprehends the situation, believes such fears” (*Klimkin rozpoviv*, 2016).

NGOs, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Information Policy, initiated a communication campaign aimed at inspiring the Dutch to vote in favour of the ratification of the AA on 6 April. Dignity, freedom and

creativity were the main features which had to represent Ukraine during the information campaign in the Netherlands. Videotapes of the Dutch and Ukrainians who had spent some time in the Netherlands, social media campaigns, presentations and meetings with Ukrainian politicians, artists, writers, Days of Ukrainian Cinema in Amsterdam were among the planned activities (Kachkan, 2016).

On the eve of the referendum the Dutch who lived in Ukraine or had close links with it, called for the support of Kyiv on its way to democracy. In an 18-minute film made on the initiative of the Belgian NGO *Promote Ukraine* they talked about their impressions of Ukraine. The idea of the film was to view the country through the eyes of the Netherlanders owing to their personal experience. In particular, the following ideas were expressed: 1) if you combine the experience and knowledge of Ukraine and the Netherlands, it is possible to feed the world; 2) currently in Ukraine there is a clear will to change and the Ukrainians are ready to fight corruption and oligarchy, but they urgently need support; 3) for the last three years much has changed and in Ukraine it has got much easier to work; 4) many laws have been changed, European standards work; 5) Ukraine was on the “bad side of the Berlin Wall and was not able to grow”, but this division no longer exists, so there is no reason to fail to support Ukraine in its aspiration to join the democratic camp (Kachkan, 2016).

The activists of the movement *Young Democrats* held a demonstration “occupation” of the Dutch village of *Krim* to support the AA. Video of the actions was presented in Youtube: a small group of activists with banners and a tank for paintball entered a village called *De Krim*. The caption to the video ran “*Young Democrats* have joined the Crimea. With military transport equipment and small forces of invasion they attacked the Dutch village to attract attention for a referendum on the Association Agreement with Ukraine” (*Aktyvisty rukhu ‘Molodi demokraty’*, 2016). *TakisJa, Voor! en Verder?* (in Dutch it means “over and beyond”) were other information campaigns organized by the Dutch to support Ukraine.

Athletes and activists of the Ukrainian movement *Sport for Peace* announced the marathon and bicycle race to be held on 3 April on the route Hague – Amsterdam in support of democracy and European unity. The action *Say ‘YES!’ to Europe* involved over 100 representatives from Ukraine, Poland, Germany, France and the Netherlands. The MFA of Ukraine reported that Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine P. Klimkin would lead the bike race.

On the eve of the Netherlands’ referendum S. Loyko’s novel *Airport* about the war in Donbas was published in Ukraine. The author had to tell about the situation in Ukraine on Dutch television. It was believed to be one more event in support of the AA.

Ukrainian artists, politicians and activists went to the Netherlands to carry out various activities in support of the ratification of the AA. Ten talented Ukrainian children had to convince the Dutch to say 'yes'. Within the framework of the project *Hop, Nederland, hop* ("Come on, the Netherlands, come on") ten gifted children of all ages and from different cities of Ukraine, including musicians, a historian prodigy, a gymnast, a singer and others had been chosen for a series of commercials. Among Dutch stylized huge magnets the children told their stories to the music of a famous song *Zij gelooft in mij* by A. Hazes ("She believes in me").

Hop, Nederland, hop was one of a series of communication initiatives that encouraged the Dutch to vote in favour of the ratification of the AA between Ukraine and the EU in the referendum. So, the project *Like U* was presented where in 17 video interviews the Dutch and Ukrainians explained why relations between the two countries were important and why the values of Ukrainian young generation were the same as in Europe. The campaign emphasized that the Ukrainians like the Dutch and other Europeans value freedom, creativity, development and democratic society. A trident transforming into a tulip was the symbol of the campaign. In addition to video, social activists created websites that told about Ukraine in three languages, and triggered flash mobs in social networks.

The project was intended to deliver information as clearly and as much as possible in a large extent to the Dutch why they should vote for Ukraine, not only in terms of profitable trading partnership (although it also matters). Meetings with Ukrainian writers, politicians, actors, Days of Ukrainian Cinema in Amsterdam were planned as well. Cultural diplomacy is the key to showing Ukraine to the world because such campaigns allow you to think not only about the referendum, but about the perception of Ukraine in the Netherlands. It is necessary to build relations with European countries whatever the outcome of the referendum.

The investment forum *Ukraine – the Netherlands*, held in late March 2016, was an important impetus to the deepening of bilateral economic relations and strengthening the positive image of Ukraine on the eve of the Dutch referendum. This forum was extremely important in the context of informing the Dutch businesses on opportunities for cooperation and promotion of Ukraine in the Netherlands.

On 6 April 2016 over 61% of the voters rejected the ratification of the AA between the EU and Ukraine (with the turnout of only 32%). It should be noted that the intention of voting "against" the AA was not grounded on a negative attitude towards Ukraine but on relations between Brussels and Amsterdam, i.e., the Netherlands wanted to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the powers of Brussels. The results of the referendum in the Netherlands, enhanced by the migration

crisis and the threat of further fragmentation of the EU, forcing the Union to develop projects to close the borders, could change the balance of power in Europe.

Given the general mood of Euroscepticism of the Dutch society, the support of the ratification of the AA seemed quite doubtful. After the failure it became clear that the communication campaign emphasis had to be done not on conviction to vote in favour but on the inappropriateness of the referendum, on the call not to vote.

Ukraine lost but the Dutch government is in the awkward position either as it cannot ignore the outcome of the referendum, which would be a risky domestic move with general elections scheduled for March 2017, but it also would not want to block the conclusion of a landmark agreement while holding the rotating EU Council Presidency. Two options are possible: 1) the EU, the member states and Ukraine would adopt a kind of an “adjusting protocol”, which would delete the Netherlands as one of the contracting Parties to the agreement; 2) a joint declaration or protocol could be adopted that would address the main concerns of the no-camp. Such a legal instrument can be mainly declaratory, stating for example that the agreement will not lead to Ukraine’s EU accession or to increased EU military involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (*Van der Loo*, 2016).

Nevertheless, the Dutch referendum demonstrated the efficiency of communications of the Parliament and citizens; it has proved the Dutch politicians listen to and hear the voice of their public (like it is stipulated in the EU communication principles) even if it could hurt the political relations of the Netherlands and the EU. Such political communication behavior could be an example for Ukrainian political elite, though the outcomes of this example are rather painful.

So, having chosen the course of European integration, the government of Ukraine did not hold a full-scale communications campaign to ensure sustained promotion of European integration as a priority of state policy. The advisory referendum in the Netherlands on the ratification of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU established regular communication challenges that Ukraine sought to overcome through communication campaigns, supported by the Netherlands’ Government and European policy. While trying to convince the Netherlands of voting in favour of the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Ukraine happened to face quite powerful and efficient communication policy of the Netherlands supported by the Dutch local media. The overall media coverage appeared to be not quite beneficial for Ukraine and Ukrainian communication activity proved to be not effective and a bit disoriented.

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