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Rethinking destructive rumors as a legal means of solving the problems of intercultural interactions

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to analyze situations of occurrence and spread of destructive rumors and, at the same time, to identify effective legal practices to counteract them in multicultural urban communities. In most cases, rumors do not reflect the factual situation, so they cannot be a tool for unbiased presentation of facts and, in the case of intercultural interaction, they can also provoke extreme and unlawful negative feelings about a certain group of people. The results of the study indicate that in the city Melitopol there are rumors about immigrants, refugees, ethnic groups, national communities or other groups, which are mostly negative. The analysis made it possible to identify the most common ethnic rumors: «Roma are thieves», «Jews are selfish»; confessional: «Muslims are terrorists»; socio-cultural: «IDPs live on state aid», «Ukrainians are cheap labor from Western Europe». Based on a qualitative analysis of social practices of Melitopol community members, in the conclusions the authors corroborate the effectiveness of ways of counteracting destructive rumors in multicultural urban communities as a legal means of solving the problems of intercultural interactions.

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Keywords: destructive rumors; incitement to hatred; critical legal thinking; interaction with others; hate speech.

Repensar los rumores destructivos como medio legal de resolver los problemas de las interacciones interculturales

Resumen

El propósito del estudio fue analizar las situaciones de aparición y propagación de rumores destructivos y, al mismo tiempo, identificar prácticas legales eficaces para contrarrestarlos en comunidades urbanas multiculturales. En la mayoría de los casos, los rumores no reflejan la situación objetiva, por lo que no pueden ser una herramienta para la presentación imparcial de los hechos y, en el caso de la interacción intercultural, también pueden provocar sentimientos negativos extremos e ilícitos sobre un determinado grupo de personas. Los resultados del estudio indican que en la ciudad Melitópolis existen rumores sobre inmigrantes, refugiados, grupos étnicos, comunidades nacionales u otros grupos, que en su mayoría son negativos. El análisis permitió identificar los rumores étnicos más comunes: «Los romaníes son ladrones», «Los judíos son egoístas»; confesionales: «Los musulmanes son terroristas»; socioculturales: «Los desplazados internos viven de las ayudas del Estado», «Los ucranianos son mano de obra barata de Europa Occidental». Basándose en un análisis cualitativo de las prácticas sociales de los miembros de la comunidad de Melitópolis, en las conclusiones los autores corroboran la eficacia de las formas de contrarrestar los rumores destructivos en las comunidades urbanas multiculturales, como medio legal de resolver los problemas de las interacciones interculturales.

Palabras clave: rumores destructivos; incitación al odio; pensamiento jurídico crítico; interacción intercultural; problemas socioculturales.

Introduction

The study of the phenomenon of rumors is primarily driven by the need to develop and effectively function mechanisms for regulating the legal social behavior of citizens in interethnic interactions and to address such problems as manipulation of public and individual consciousness, and the spread of various forms of intolerance in society. The complexity of the

phenomenon of rumors lies in the fact that stereotypes of consciousness are a rather unstable subject that can be studied only at the stage of their material embodiment in human behavior.

From a theoretical point of view, the relevance of the research topic is confirmed by the need to deepen the knowledge developed in sociology about intercultural interaction and, accordingly, those legal forms of group counteraction to destructive factors of consciousness and behavior of people which ensure the integrity of multinational communities. Since modern society is characterized by a high level of tension, which increases the number of intercultural conflicts, sociological science and practice have recently detailed and specified many essential aspects of the emergence and spread of rumors as a manifestation of hate speech.

Therefore, from a practical point of view, the relevance of a qualitative sociological study of intercultural interaction is explained by the need to identify effective means of overcoming the consequences of acute illegal manifestations of negativism, in particular, finding effective means of group counteraction to the manipulative use of rumors as a manifestation of hate speech in multinational communities.

1. Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

Theoretical and methodological developments in the field of intercultural communication and interaction show that it is important for sociological science to analyze the possibilities of understanding social interaction based on the theory of social communication and the subject of attention of such scholars as Aksenova (2013), Batsevych (2007), Donets (2019), Horovyi (2010), Kvit (2006), Rizun (2008), Kholod (2018), Timler (2008) and others. The social and psychological aspects of studying the factors of rumor origination and spread are reflected in the works of Moskalenko (2008), Potapchuk and Potapchuk (2015) and other researchers.

The search for ways to counteract destructive manifestations in intercultural relations in modern Ukrainian society is the subject of research by Stegnyy (2011), Ruchka (2014), Afanasieva *et al.* (2021) a large group of researchers - authors of the "Antirumors Rumor Counteraction Manual" and many others. In considering the method of critical thinking as a means of a conscious approach of an individual to socio-cultural phenomena in social practice, we relied on the principles set forth in the works of Terno (2009), Tyaglo (2017), Halpern (2013) and other researchers of the problem.

Intercultural relations have different forms of manifestation and channels of functioning. However, the traditionally formed stereotypes of interethnic and intercultural relations, connections and communications

do not fully correspond to modern realities, and the insufficient level of intercultural competence today is often the cause of illegal conflict situations and various communication difficulties (Aksenova, 2013). In the process of this interaction, forms of unmanaged information exchange are also manifested, which is expressed in the phenomenon of “destructive rumors” (2021).

Based on the fact that rumors as a form of intercultural interaction function through language, to understand the nature of this interaction, we rely on the scientific concept of the theory of intercultural communication, according to which this phenomenon is considered as “the process of communication between people (groups of people) who belong to different national communities, who, using different languages, feel the linguistic and cultural “foreignness” of the communication partner, have different communicative competence, which can cause communicative failures or cultural shock in communication” (Potapchuk and Potapchuk, 2015).

Rumors are among the most influential and actively circulating phenomena in the spiritual life of people and remain an objectively inevitable attribute of interpersonal communication. A rumor is an informative message based on true or false information about real or fictitious facts, events, and phenomena of reality.

Rumors most often do not reflect the objective situation, so they cannot be a tool for objective presentation of facts, and in the case of intercultural interaction, they can also provoke unlawful extreme negative feelings towards a particular group of people or specific representatives of groups with a different attitude to the problem, in particular, groups of people defined by race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

The fundamental features of a productive dialogue of cultures include not only traditional cultural and communicative compatibility in everyday life, but also active counteraction to the destructive influences of the information environment. It is this activity, based on critical thinking, that expresses the socio-cultural orientation of the joint activities of different groups and their members in their desire to reach agreement. The search for criteria for such compatibility is evidenced by a wide range of scientific discourse: these include value, motivational, and normative criteria and orientations of the subjects of the dialogue, critical objectivity, experience, and practices of dialogue.

The realities of today have extremely actualized the approach associated with its understanding of these correspondences as a means of minimizing illegal risks, and the modern type of this kind of social relations can be attributed to those based on expert qualitative sociological knowledge, which, therefore, acts as a systemic factor in predicting the necessary measures to counteract destructive rumors (Batsevych, 2007).

2. Materials

Since modern society is characterized by a high degree of tension, which increases the number of intercultural conflicts, sociological science and practice have recently detailed and specified many essential aspects of the emergence and spread of rumors as a manifestation of hate speech. Therefore, from a practical point of view, the relevance of a qualitative sociological study of intercultural interaction is explained by the need to identify effective means of overcoming the consequences of acute unlawful manifestations of negativism, in particular, to find effective legal means of group counteraction to the manipulative use of rumors as a manifestation of hate speech in multinational communities.

Hate speech is a generalized designation of linguistic means of expressing a sharply negative attitude of “opponents” - holders of a different system of religious, national, cultural or more specific, subcultural values. This phenomenon can be an unlawful form of racism, xenophobia, ethnic hatred and intolerance, homophobia, and sexism (Hate speech, 2021).

As for rumors, hate speech should be understood as all types of statements that spread, incite, support or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred caused by intolerance, including intolerance manifested in the form of aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination against minorities and hostile attitudes towards them, as well as immigrants and persons of immigrant origin. The main characteristic of hate speech is that it provokes extreme negative feelings about a particular group of people or specific members of a group through communication and is based on such phenomena as social stereotypes, rumors and discrimination.

From the perspective of intercultural conflict, linguistic unlawful aggression is understood as a speech action that establishes psychological or social inequality between participants in a communicative discourse. This is an individualistic and self-centered manner of human behavior that denies moral canons, aimed at destroying or partially destroying the social status of the addressee, with the possible subsequent illegal subjugation of oppression and exploitation of the aggressor's victim.

3. Methodology

In order to identify situations of emergence and spread of destructive rumors and effective legal practices to counter them in multicultural urban communities, we analyzed the materials of the survey of city residents of the Ukrainian Network of Intercultural Cities (UNIC-Ukraine), conducted by the Center for Sociological Research of Melitopol Bohdan Khmelnytsky

State Pedagogical University from June 11 to July 02, 2021, in order to classify existing rumors and prejudices related to cultural diversity (Terno, 2009).

The empirical basis of the article is based on the materials of the sociological study “Fighting Rumors” conducted by the Center for Sociological Research of Bohdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University from June 11 to July 02, 2021, among residents of the cities of the Ukrainian Network of Intercultural Cities (ICC-Ukraine). (Analysis and classification of rumors. ICC-Ukraine project “Fighting Rumors”, 2021).

The article aims to accomplish the following tasks:

- to identify the essence and role of rumors in the manifestation of various illegal forms of negativism and intolerance in the relations of multicultural communities;
- to identify effective ways of counteracting destructive rumors in multicultural urban communities based on a qualitative sociological analysis of effective legal practices.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the prevalence survey indicate that more than half (54%) of Ukrainian city residents answered positively to the question “Are there any rumors about migrants, refugees, ethnicities, national communities or other groups in your city?”, and 73% of them noted that these rumors are mostly negative. The analysis also made it possible to identify the most common ethnic rumors - “Roma are thieves”, “Jews are selfish”; confessional rumors - “Muslims are terrorists”; socio-cultural rumors - “internally displaced persons live on state aid”, “Ukrainians are cheap Western European labor” (Terno, 2009).

Since the frequency of detection of rumors about representatives of a certain group in different media is almost identical, and respondents identify “indigenous people” as the leaders of the spread of all stereotypical expressions-rumors offered for evaluation, the negative stereotype about Roma - “Roma are thieves”, and usually latent and not so emotionally expressed rumor that “Jews are selfish” should be classified as “chronic” for many cultures. At the same time, given the vague personalization and uncritical argumentation, these rumors have all the social prerequisites for overcoming them.

The second-ranked rumor containing signs of a dismissive attitude towards the nation, “Ukrainians are cheap Western European labor,” is classified by respondents as primarily a consequence of current and

unresolved social issues in Ukraine, such as economic security, employment, political trends, etc.

Indeed, if we think about the content of the positive arguments given by Ukrainian specialists who have worked abroad for a long time: “People everywhere are valued for their moral qualities, life principles, culture and professionalism”; “in Europe, Ukrainians have salaries at the level of indigenous citizens and their work is appreciated”; “good specialists earn good money abroad”, the importance of the socio-psychological contexts of self-esteem of Ukrainians in their own communities as talented and hardworking people becomes obvious. Obviously, major cultural and industrial centers in Europe (as well as domestic ones) have always needed high-quality specialists. Therefore, the activity of recruitment agencies inviting qualified specialists shows that the presence of qualified, and thus adequately rewarded, Ukrainians there will only grow.

The third position in the ranking is occupied by the rumor that internally displaced persons do not want to work (“live off state aid”). This is a fairly widespread negative stereotype, one of the reasons for which respondents cited the fact that wealthier IDPs of the first waves had enough money to take their time with employment and the final choice of a place of permanent residence. However, according to the survey data, in practice this statement is most often associated with significant problems of finding a job in their specialty in the context of high regional unemployment rates.

The fourth position, according to the rating, is occupied by the rumor that “Muslims are terrorists and we should stay away from them.” This statement has historical roots in the global information space and is relevant today due to the growing level of illegal terrorism in the world. The low readiness (18%) to oppose the least widespread of the rumors offered for evaluation (only 48% have heard the phrase “Muslim terrorists”), despite its relative personalized vagueness, indicates a serious underestimation by respondents of the negative consequences of its spread. This increases the possibility of an uncritical attitude of Ukrainians to both world and domestic news and can be seen as a latent source of interethnic tension.

At the same time, the respondents are aware that since the Muslim community is integrated into the civil and political space of Ukraine and is a full-fledged subject of the development of Ukrainian statehood, ignoring such statements about Muslim Ukrainians in public places is a violation of a number of legislative acts. Given the accessibility and frequency of fabricated biased news feeds of the Russian media in information networks (in fact, the information ethnic war of the Russian Federation against the indigenous people of Ukrainian Crimea - the Crimean Tatars), tolerance of such statements about the Muslim confessional group in the Ukrainian media and public space is unacceptable and is legally classified as participation in inciting interfaith and interethnic hatred.

5. Implementation stages

Understanding this has led to the need for a sociological study of social processes and mechanisms for guiding people's behavior, primarily through their identification and self-identification with certain communities and their inherent normative systems based on critical thinking. Thus, based on the identified peculiarities of the respondents' attitudes towards rumors, and with the aim of developing practical tools for further research, we see that the culture of social groups in relation to the rumor factor is determined by the close interconnection of various forms of behavior of individuals and groups with different values and their hierarchical configurations in the social consciousness of social actors (Terno, 2009).

The present-day Ukrainian urban communities have many dimensions that allow us to identify these features, to show the content and nature of their current trends. A significant role is played by the ability of urban communities to self-develop, which begins with answering simple questions: who are we? how do we treat ourselves? who do we consider ourselves? how do we want to be seen in the eyes of European communities and national cultures? what are we doing for this?

We will consider how the critical thinking revealed by the groups of respondents is realized in the practice of positive narratives on the examples of interaction and solidarity of the Melitopol city community.

Consideration of the rumor that contains signs of a dismissive attitude towards the Ukrainian nation, "Ukrainians are cheap Western European labor," if we understand the content of the positive arguments given by Ukrainian specialists who have worked abroad for a long time: "people are valued everywhere for their moral qualities, life principles, culture and professionalism"; "in Europe, Ukrainians have salaries at the level of indigenous citizens and their work is valued"; "good specialists earn good money abroad," the importance of the socio-psychological contexts of Ukrainians' self-esteem in their own communities as talented and hardworking people becomes apparent, which, in our opinion, is primarily a consequence of current and unresolved social issues in Ukraine, such as economic security, employment, political trends, etc.

Taking into account the problem becomes an important element of the integration theme of the Lift Business Incubator project under the Diversity Connectors for Start-ups: The Art of Mixing program, which has been implemented in Melitopol for a long time by the NGO Committee of the Future. Solidarity and Responsibility".

An example of refuting the rumors about "Ukrainians as cheap labor" is the community's attention to the need of young people for quality vocational education and the involvement of graduates of Melitopol secondary schools,

colleges and universities of Melitopol region - successful professionals in various fields with experience in many European countries. An example of this practice is the recently opened School of Ambassadors in Melitopol, where those who intend to popularize traditional and newest city brands through various communication channels, who voluntarily undertake to conduct promotional activities and promote the values of the Melitopol brand, receive the necessary information and get acquainted with the long-term development plans for various industries in our region.

The emphasis of this School on the promotion of Melitopol region as a diversified regional professional and educational center known in different parts of the world will serve the good cause of introducing our region to the Europe where we are integrating, and will help young people to realize the value of their own professional culture, based on the continuity and continuity of the educational traditions of Melitopol region in many modern industries.

A fairly widespread negative stereotype is reflected in the position in the ranking of rumors about internally displaced persons ("living off state aid"). The analysis of the problem shows that one of the main reasons for this rumor is the significant problems of employment in Ukraine in their specialty in the context of high regional unemployment rates. An example of active counteraction to such rumors is the welcoming policy of Melitopol towards newcomers, which combines the joint efforts of the community, city authorities and active personal and public participation of internally displaced persons in the daily life of the city.

The real phenomenon of this movement, which encouraged IDPs from Crimea and Donbas to Melitopol to avoid the dry abbreviation "internally displaced persons" in everyday life, was the initiative of a group of IDPs to create the Alliance of New Melitopolians, a public organization that largely refuted the opinion of many that IDPs are mere freeloaders who want to work and live at the expense of the state on behalf of a quantitatively significant group of people displaced from the temporarily occupied territories.

A new level of contact with the city's residents and local authorities is evidenced by the participation of members of the New Melitopolians NGO, whose membership is now open to all newly displaced persons, migrants, and foreign students who do not want to be positioned as passive, temporary members of the city's community in many city events and roundtables in the format of a contact studio: "Are Melitopol's IDPs a Visitor or a Home?", "Unity as a Guarantee of Ukraine's Unity".

These efforts have borne fruit, many barriers and misunderstandings have been successfully overcome, and newcomers can always count on understanding and assistance in difficult circumstances. At the same time, as we can see, thanks to their active work, members of this social group

are now writing a new bright page in the life of intercultural Melitopol in opposition to rumors.

We consider the rumor that “Muslims are terrorists and we should stay away from them” to be a latent source of interethnic tension, since despite its relative personalized blurring (only 48% have heard the phrase “Muslims are terrorists”), only 18% of Ukrainians are ready to oppose it, which indicates a serious underestimation of the negative consequences of its spread.

Melitopol demonstrates public resistance to this phenomenon by the fact that one of the central streets, named Intercultural, is home to the Center for National Cultures, the Melitopol City Jewish Community, a Muslim Mosque, and the New Generation Christian Charismatic Church, demonstrating the religious tolerance of the city’s residents as the basis for the harmonious existence of a multicultural community. This is not about a city where joint celebrations of the Tatar Sabantu and Hederlez, the Muslim Nowruz, the Moldovan Martishor, and the Bulgarian Martenitsa have long been a tradition of the city community.

The sincerity of the feelings of citizens of all ethnicities in condemning the arbitrary and criminal actions of the Russian authorities against Ukraine and the Crimean Tatar people is also evidenced by the invariably crowded annual Melitopol citywide peaceful rallies of Unity and car rallies to Chongar, held annually on May 18, the anniversary of the deportation of Crimean Tatars from their homeland, as a sign of historical memory and solidarity with them.

The most striking examples of the goodwill of the city’s Muslims for understanding and unity are demonstrated by the confessional leaders and ministers of the Melitopol region through their participation in traditional meetings with representatives of the city authorities and the public in the form of regular prayer breakfasts, as a means of interfaith dialogue on pressing issues of the region and the city.

The women of the Melitopol Committee for the Return of Crimean Tatars to their Historical Homeland “Azat”, as part of the protests against the annexation of Crimea, initiated the action “Women for Peace!”, dedicated to the International Day of Peace. The Crimean Tatar community of Melitopol initiated a peaceful march to show that Crimean Tatars stand for the unity of Ukraine, for peace, spreading compassion, kindness and hope for a peaceful future. This atmosphere of mutual support is perhaps the most significant example of interculturalism in action.

Conclusions

Thus, the above practices of creating positive narratives on the examples of interaction and solidarity of the Melitopol city community, identified by the groups of respondents, allow us to conclude that legal critical thinking is a safeguard against the thoughtless spread of destructive rumors. Only such an approach allows us to learn, create a friendly atmosphere in a multicultural community and develop a culture of interaction through dialogic communication, which requires a high level of social awareness, communicative legal competence, and developed communication skills from all participants.

It can also be argued that in today's difficult conditions, sociological methods of supporting intercultural dialogue are becoming an important and effective factor in identifying ways to encourage each individual to engage in constructive interaction, to develop a positive attitude towards representatives of other nationalities, to develop knowledge about the cultures that surround them, and to flourish a modern multicultural community.

Since the culture of social groups in relation to the rumor factor is determined by the close interconnection of various forms of behavior of individuals and groups with different values and their hierarchical configurations in the social consciousness of social actors, further systematic sociological support is required for the practical development of legal counteraction tools in each case.

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