

## **BOTH ARE IMPORTANT - “ABOUT WHAT” AND “HOW”**

### **Interview with HANNA DAVYDENKO**

*In-depth interview with a public figure, deputy of the Vinnytsia City Council of the VII convocation.*

**In your opinion, what was the participation of the citizens and the community in the conflicts that arose in Vinnytsia and how they were resolved? How timely, complete and effective was it? Are there examples when people defended something and succeeded? When was a certain consensus reached?**

We must start with the fact that conflicts are not starting from nothing. As a rule, any critical reaction of citizens is caused by the actions of the authorities with which people do not agree.

I will give you an example from the German experience that I studied some time ago. When they started building the road a few years ago without consulting people, it infuriated them. People of completely different political views, as well as those public organizations that usually conflict with each other, have united around the protests against the government’s actions. They were united not by the problem of road construction itself, but by the fact that the authorities started doing something without asking the community. But this is in Germany, a country with a developed democracy.

If we return to my native city of Vinnytsia, then any dissatisfaction of Vinnytsia residents is a consequence of the lack of dialogue between the authorities and the community. Authorities often do not consider it necessary to consult with residents. In my opinion, it is wrong.

I would like to discuss a specific example. Let’s look at the chaotic construction in the city centre, and its results – the destruction of underground passages or the case of Zamkova Hora (Castle Hill). On the one hand, the city needs to be developed and rebuilt. Can this be done by destroying our history? Here is our perspective. Officials, who are given the power by the people in every election to dispose of their resources, give (by the way, often free of charge) land plots in the city centre for the construction of just another shopping centre or apartment building. At the same time, public hearings, frankly speaking, are often held just for the sake of appearance, and there are often utility workers specially chased out to vote “properly”. It is not a secret, and much has been written about these manipulative technologies by local investigative journalists. But in the specific situation with the destruction of Zamkova Hora, Vinnytsia residents not only actively protested on social networks. They submitted a draft decision to the city council session through the local initiative procedure. In this draft decision,

they demanded to take away the land from the developer and create a historical park on it. Instead, officials submitted their alternative draft decision to the same session, cynically manipulating that their draft decision is also about preserving a historical monument. But we know that the devil is in the details. And there was no mention of any preservation of Zamkova Hora in the draft decision from officials. At that time, at the session of the city council, I was the only deputy who did not just speak and explain these things to colleagues. Instead, I insisted that the city council violated the law in this situation. Because when residents initiate a draft decision, their draft decision must be considered first. And there can be no alternative here. The result of this situation was a lawsuit against the Vinnytsia City Council, which the people of Vinnytsia won, essentially obliging the local authorities to preserve Zamkova Hora.

We can briefly cite two other resonant positive examples from my deputy activity: the preservation of Sotske Lake and the forests around it and the creation of a new city program to regulate the number of stray animals by humane methods. The story about Sotske Lake was the following. I was preparing for the next session of the city council and saw in the materials of the session the issue of the lake and the surrounding forest. They wanted to give it to a charitable foundation registered in Kyiv for free for 49 years. We launched an information campaign in 2-3 days, and this issue was simply removed from consideration.

Another positive example concerns the program for regulating the number of stray animals. It did not work, and there was a clause about killing animals 40 days after they were taken from the street. Through a public discussion and the collection of signatures, it was possible to prepare a new program that was adjusted at the session. But together with public activists, we did not just develop a new program and force deputies to adjust it. We constantly do everything to make it work effectively. Once a year, we count the number of homeless animals (which, incidentally, due to this program decreases annually), we have invited Four Paws international charity fund to Vinnytsia, which annually sterilizes animals for free and assists in organizing the activities of the municipal shelter.

Therefore, to sum up, I can say this briefly: any government behaves as brazenly as its voters allow it to do so. If people are active, caring, critical and constantly demand explanations of government actions, officials will have no choice but to ask people's opinions and listen to them. It is a democracy.

**If conflicts do arise, in your experience, who are typically parties to the conflict? Community? Government? Developer?**

I cannot say that these cases are true conflicts. People do not have the tools and mechanisms to protect themselves. On paper, in-law, they seem to be. But in practice, it is almost impossible to achieve the truth. Especially this refers to cases when exactly the authorities violate the civil rights. As a rule, in all loud confrontations in Vinnytsia, people used all possible legal methods: peaceful protests, lawsuits, statements to the prosecutor's office and the police. In particular, as a deputy, I appealed to the prosecutor's office and the police. They initiated more than ten criminal proceedings. I also wrote appeals to deputies and other bodies and institutions. That means to use all possible methods. But the police were openly inactive, delaying the investigation and bungling the cases. The prosecutor's office shut eyes to all this. The State Investigation Bureau waved its hands, and National Anticorruption Bureau said that it was not their competence, and the courts just palm off with the appeals transferring the case from the court of general jurisdiction to the administrative court.

Conflict can be when there is a dialogue. And when there is no dialogue, it turns into a conflict. Often there is no dialogue at all, or there is an imitation. And that's why the community is screaming in despair because they don't know what to do. I often heard from people who came to me for a deputy's reception: "We just don't know where to go. Nobody hears us." And I can understand them.

**Talking about the political dimension of the issue: does the method of decision-making remain important?**

Absolutely. On the other hand, the problem is also in the legal awareness of citizens. People often simply do not know their rights. And even when they do, they are afraid to defend them. Therefore, it is difficult for people to influence the processes, because such a "mess" is difficult to understand. It is difficult for you to find out the truth. If the majority of citizens in each case were united and jointly opposed the arbitrary decisions of the authorities, the situation would be completely different. And tomorrow, when the undesired changes come to their yard, those people will sound the alarm. There have always been few people in all conflict situations. And everyone said: why we should help if it does not concern us? Allegedly...

If citizens were guided in the processes and if they understood the competence of deputies of local self-government bodies and executive bodies, it would be easier to manage the government. For most people, it seems that the mayor, local deputy and city administration official are the same, although

both the mayor and officials receive salaries from people for their work and dispose of all the money from the budget and land of the community. And the task of the deputies is not to allow the mayor and officials to steal these resources.

I see how such issues are resolved in countries with established democracies, how the decision-making process takes place there, how important is a public dialogue, consensus, a duty to hear everyone.

**How to build consensus and dialogue where there are different points of view? Both between different stakeholders and within the community which is also fragmented in many respects: someone agrees with the proposed solutions, but someone doubts or strongly disagrees?**

It all concerns the system of values in society. Nowadays, in our country, it is destroyed. People used to live alone in the Soviet Union. Then there was disintegration, and people got lost. And if the value of the Germans is that they should be heard by the authorities, people with different views, united in protest and made sure that until the government held a referendum, a decision was not made, then we did not. It was important for them to preserve this principle of democracy, to listen to everyone. Nowadays, Ukrainian society is still largely infantile. Nobody wants to take responsibility, and, first of all, the government.

**Who should start the dialogue and be responsible for this process: city authorities, expert environment or civil society?**

Dialogue is always a conversation between the two. On the one hand, there is our government, no matter who is representing it – the department, the mayor, the officials, and there are people. We have already mentioned that the government behaves as far as the people allow it. Therefore, in the modern realities of Ukraine, until the society itself becomes active and demands dialogue from the authorities, there will be no dialogue. We often are waiting for messiah and thinking that the president, the prime minister, the deputy will come and solve all their problems. It does not happen. And it seems to me that Ukrainians are already beginning to understand that they can only rely on themselves.

We have room to grow and, frankly speaking, there is a lot of work for the public sector. The government will not teach the residents, since it is not interested in people that ask questions and make inquiries. When I communicate with people, and when they learn from me what the city budget is, they round their eyes: “We have 5 billion of money???” But this is not confidential information: everyone can take a look at how this money is distributed. But most are not interested. Therefore, there is also the question of the responsibility of everyone.

**Is there a demand from people to be a part of the transformation? What about giving them more positive experiences? Isn't this the exact way to build a civil society?**

We have such a request, of course. And this is the right question. To be part of a transformation, you need to know how to do it. And the experience of successfully solving problems is important here. The positive cases I mentioned at the beginning of the interview are also positive examples. Another issue is that these examples today are the exception rather than the rule. There must always be someone who will take responsibility for making decisions. And so far there are a critically few numbers of such people, although we do have some. It is necessary to understand whom people choose to represent their interests in elections, and by what criteria do they do it.

To conclude our conversation positively, I would like to talk about how we have managed to unite the residents of Vinnytsia and the region around the positive idea over the past two years. On the one hand, we have a problem with illegal logging. But law enforcement agencies should work here, first of all, because we are a state governed by the rule of law. On the other hand, we all want to live in a good environment and breathe fresh air. In order not to wait until someone deals with someone and stops destroying trees, we decided to restore greenery and joined the all-Ukrainian project One Million Trees in One Day. We have joined forces of local authorities, business and residents, and together we are creating such a positive success story. Last year we planted 118 thousand trees in one day in the Vinnytsia region. This year we plan more than 200 thousand. And I am sincerely glad that people respond and support me. It is important to do useful things altogether. Hear each other and treat others and the environment with respect. And then everything will be fine!