

**MARIUPOL SIEGE VIBER-COMMUNITY
AS A FORM OF GRASSROOT MOVEMENT
IN THE CONTEXT OF “DECLINING STATE OF GLOBAL DEMOCRACY”**

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Abstract. *The method of case analysis for examining the operations of the Viber channel of Mariupol citizens during and after the siege of the city was applied in this article. A relational content analysis of text messages and meta-data of the channel were conducted. The resulting empirical material was conceptualized in the logic of thematization of basic models of democracy and their criticism. The Viber channel media community during wartime was considered in the context of the concepts of the natural state and the social contract. A special place is occupied by the optics of the diversity of forms of “grassroots democracy” and their localization. In terms of “networks of trust” in the context of the opposition of “democratization–de-democratization” (Charles Tilly) and the search for a “deliberation sense of community” (Joseph Bessette). The non-political nature of grassroots movements of media communities and their homology to the decentralization reform in Ukraine are emphasized.*

Key words: *crisis of democracy, grassroots democracy, trust network, Ukraine, Mariupol siege, state of nature, deliberation, democratic renovation.*

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Democracy, as a form of government that was invented and comprehended in the ancient world and has been firmly rooted both in the intellectual tradition and in political practices since that time, is still in the process of transformation. Today, political studies experts mention external threats to democracy (such as “xenophobic nationalism and nativist authoritarians” or even the emergency, which “led governments to take on far-reaching executive powers and restrict many democratic freedoms”) in the context of the coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic (Youngs 2021b). In addition, these experts also mention the context of the dangers of the internal crisis of democracy that can be explained only in the context of certain theoretical approaches (models) for understanding this internal crisis.

This subject area is well known and is too broad to describe in one study. As Youngs emphasized, “the narrative of democracy laboring in deep crisis is now well established” (Youngs 2021a). Brief characteristics of the models of democracy are given according to the typology presented by Amy Gutmann in a review article (Gutmann 2007), and the criticisms of each model provide a panorama of views for understanding the essence of the crisis in attempts to find ways out of such crises.

Case analysis formed the methodological basis of this article. The Mariupol siege, during which the Viber channel was created and operated, is a problematic situation unfolding in real-time and space, and thus, is significant in the research perspective.

The need to adequately clarify the situation led to the use of relational content analysis as a research tool. The source of data was a chat room of a Viber channel. As a result of the collection of material (storing the channel's meta-data, its text messages, and image print screens), preliminary analysis of the materials, certain concepts (words in various forms, synonyms that were valid in this context), and topics were coded by hand and categorized into “code categories” (themes in accordance with other meta-data parameters, such as timing, number of messages and themes, their co-occurrence of explicit concepts in the text). The set of themes was interactive with the flexibility to add categories throughout the entire coding process. This process made it possible to structure the discourse content as a whole and identify ways of audience production. The data were processed with the categorized code by using the structured query language (SQL) Lite Browser software, a program for processing Viber channels.

The application of this toolkit resulted in several findings:

- 1) the structure of the author's message and the target audience,
- 2) the dynamics of significant themes (number and frequency of messages), and
- 3) the contextuality of statements based on the reconstruction of their meaning.

The specifics of relational content analysis allowed for an emotional evaluation of concepts explicit in a text in addition to substantiating its connection with the degree of rationality of deliberation and agreement as a corresponding result.

The resulting problematic field dictated the further sequence of theory activation to identify socially meaningful problems of the situation (problem analysis). It should be noted that situational analysis uses not just theories but also contains a certain social engineering component, which leads to the development of specific models (elements of praxeological analysis), the system of assessments of the situation and its consequences (axiological analysis), and preparation of predictions regarding the desired development of the situation (prognostic analysis).

The resulting empirical parameters were conceptualized through the optics of Charles Tilly's opposition to "democratization–de-democratization" by identifying their structural elements ("trust networks," "public politics," and "autonomous coercive power centers") and their ways of forming correlations. Important perspectives for understanding the form of audience production of a Viber channel as a "grassroots democracy" (Kaufman 1997; Poggi 2013; Popović 2018; Yenerall 2009) with a "deliberate sense of the community" (Besette 1980) in the logic of the "deliberative turn" (Dryzek 2002) were the contradictory concepts of the state of nature (Hobbes 1998; Locke 1988), depoliticization (Beveridge 2017; Himmelstrand 1962), and depoliticizing (Jessop 2014) in addition to the dispute between Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1998) and John Rawls (Rawls 2005) over the prospects for transforming disagreement into reasonable disagreement. The general context for the reconstruction of the functioning of grassroots democracy was the definition of the current stage of the democracy crisis (Besette 1994; Žižek 2008; Schedler 2002; Piorkowski 2023) in accordance with the general dynamics of its models (Gutman 2007; Schumpeter 1943) and the prospects for its renovation (Youngs 2021b). The peculiarities of the trends of Ukrainian civil society in general are reflected in the works of Mykhailo Minakov (Minakov et al. 2021) and Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 2022b).

Definite results concerning the Viber channel are fixed, and correlations with the basic trends of the development of the Ukrainian situation and the renovation of democracy in general are presented in the conclusions.

The aim of the article was to empirically and theoretically research the Viber channel community (created and operated during the Mariupol siege of 2022) as a form of grassroots democracy and to clarify the regularities and significance of its organizational model in the context of the renovation of the contemporary stage of democracy's development, in particular, the prospects of its digitalization.

Models of democracy and their crises

First of all, Joseph Schumpeterian theory is noteworthy. In the middle of the 20th century, he defined democracy as

[T]hat institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's votes. (Schumpeter 1943: 269)

In fact, reduced to procedural moments, democracy in such a prospect existing in apartheid “South Africa or in Stalinist Russia would have been if only members of the Communist Party could vote” (Gutmann 2007: 522). Andreas Schedler, an expert in the field of “electoral authoritarianism” follows the same vision of the problems of electoral democracy. He noted that “elections, usually taken to be a hallmark of democracy, can also become a tool of authoritarian powerholders seeking to legitimize their rule” (Schedler 2002).

In this case, we address a family of views on the electoral dimension of democracy. The main points of tension are the ways in which the population is represented in the elected structures, including the ratio of the majority and the minority in the representative bodies.

Today, the issue of the hybridization of democracy with the so-called “illiberal regimes” is actively problematized. Richard Youngs, for example, noticed that Hungary and Poland “overturned several core areas of democratic politics” in the way “from democracy to illiberal democracy” (Youngs 2021b). Keeping the formal electoral procedures of formal electoral democracies, these countries are moving towards “illiberal democracy” (Fukuyama 2022a) and even direct authoritarianism. We can add that elections according to the same scheme are held in a number of post-Soviet countries. According to Marlene Laruelle, these states “organize elections and thus nominally qualify as democracies, but without respecting such liberal principles as pluralism, individual freedoms, or checks and balances” (Laruelle 2022: 304).

The importance of this dimension of the problematic action of democracy is discussed not only in the circles of political philosophers (Youngs 2021b) but also in public discourse (Piorkowski 2023). This dimension represents an obvious drift of power towards non-representative institutions, which leaves the impression of manipulation of the positions of voters, people, and others.

Tangent to the electoral model of democracy is also social democracy, which extends the logic of liberal democracy to realms that were traditionally considered private and not subject to democratic principles. In this situation, we mean the economic levers of influence, in particular, the owners of firms on the lives and fate of employees and the ability of the latter to make decisions about profits and effective management of a firm. Questions about the possibility of state control over industry are also present. It is dangerous that “too much state control threatens state tyranny, which is potentially far worse than the tyranny any economic enterprise can exert over its employees or a democratic state” (Gutmann 2007: 526).

An important aspect of the impact of economic life on democratization trends is the problem of its imbalance. This imbalance is the basic foundation of criticism of a political economy in its Marxist version. In particular, Slavoj Žižek repeatedly emphasized that the “normal” state of capitalism is the permanent revolutionizing of its own conditions of existence and its “constitutive imbalance” (Žižek 2008: 53–54) are derived from the contradictions between accumulation as the ultimate goal of capitalism and the means of production by which this goal is achieved.

The internal contradictions as characteristics of capitalism in general can also have an influence on the models of political practices. However, the last half century was a period of relative prosperity. Contemporary democratic practices have many problems, but they exist in conditions of economic welfare. Charles Tilly wrote that even the reports of the World Bank recorded “a close correspondence among democratization, economic expansion, redistribution, and equity” (Tilly 2007: 187). Today, the economic parameters of life are changing. Democracies have to learn to live under the conditions of uncertainty. Therefore, attention is being given to various transitional forms of democracy and their capability of adapting to conditions of economic instability. As it seems, the models that have been considered the most ambiguous so far can potentially be the ones that can adapt.

Amy Gutmann highlights populist and liberal models of democracy. It should be noted that in the text written more than 15 years ago, she operated differently from the contemporary content of the concept *populism* (see: Rohozha 2020). Gutman understands populist democracy broadly as

... the people ruling themselves as free and equal beings rather than being ruled by an external power or by a self-selected minority among themselves. (Gutmann 2007: 523)

Gutman defines the constraints to ensure forms of expression of popular will (“constraints that are typically built into populist democracy to ensure that democratic decisions reflect the popular will” (Gutmann 2007: 523)) are built into populist democracy, not “democracy for the few” (Parenti 2010)). Such forms of expression include free speech, press, and association, the rule of law, formal voting equality, and inclusive citizenship.

The reverse side of the “popular will” manifestation is the problem of competence and rationality of broad political participation. Concurrently, the actualization of grassroots movements encompasses “cooperation of many people,” which according to Sarah Poggi, is precisely a form of prevention of the “democracy of the few” (Poggi 2013). In fact, grassroots democracy initiatives “provided a modest antidote by centering on practical local issues” to contemporary “national-level populism” across Eastern Europe. That is why it is so relevant to study the positive potential of public mobilization against the background of “a bruising one for the health of European democracy” (Youngs 2021a).

Close to the populist (in the sense of Gutmann’s term) is the liberal model of democracy within which the priority of freedom over democratic decision-making is determined. Freedoms are those that John Rawls defined as components of political justice:

- 1) freedom of thought, speech, press, association, and religion;
- 2) the right to hold personal property;
- 3) the freedom to vote and hold public office; and
- 4) freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure (Rawls 1971).

Gutmann added that all these liberties are defined by the concept of the rule of law (Gutmann 2007: 524).

However, as Francis Fukuyama points out “liberalism rather than democracy that has come under the sharpest attack in recent years” (Fukuyama 2022a: 3), even though liberalism and democracy are “based on distinct principles and institutions” (ibid.: 2).

Participatory and deliberative models are especially important for understanding the problem of the crisis of democracy. The problem lies in the form of broad public involvement in democratic processes. In fact, participatory democracy is capable of involving citizens in direct processes of political decision-making and increasing their understanding of politics and interest in politics in the form of interactive media deliberation. The study of the forms of democracy functioning in interactive media and the digitization of democracy in general is an important perspective of future research, which is currently being actively investigated (in particular, in the Varieties of Democracy database (V-Dem)).

The problems of deliberative democracy were already evident in the disputes of the founding fathers over the American Constitution. In that case, the crisis of democracy appeared as an imbalance between limiting the arbitrariness of the majority and providing the rule of the majority (see: Kiryukhin 2020: 75), the dominance of an educated minority, or the “dangers of unreflective popular sentiments” (Bessette 1994). Oscillations and imbalances in either direction lead to corresponding distortions of democratic forms even in conditions of a “deliberative turn” (Dryzek 2002).

In this situation, we are describing the integration of populist (in the broadest sense) and liberal ideals in encouraging public discussion of popular current issues through the common use of reasonable arguments, evidence, assessments, and beliefs to achieve “reasonable disagreement.” The conceptual foundations for this model were developed by John Rawls (justification of the normative principles for a well-ordered society whose members share ideas about the basic principles of justice (Rawls 2005)) and Jürgen Habermas (democratic procedure for the political will-formation (Habermas 1998: 49–73)). The social contract was a key idea in their considerations. Actually, the differences in the Rawls’ and Habermas’ concepts lie in the specifics of their interpretations of the contract, possibilities of its establishment, and compliance.

Gutmann argues that, provided the belief in the event that the capability of deliberative democracy to support individual autonomy is true, the ideal of this model may be more persuasive than other ideals (Gutmann 2007: 528). It is about the fact that in the conditions of “deliberative majority,” representatives of citizens are guided by a “deliberate sense of the community” (Bessette 1980) in the process of discussing state issues.

Many contemporary diagnoses of the democracy crisis resonate with the above-mentioned models in determining the basic trends, which have expanded due to new concepts in addition to democratic life problematization that is closer to the epicenter of the Western world.

That problematization is related not only to “electoral authoritarianism” countries but also to “traditional democracies” (Popović 2018). According to Youngs, “all European governments have chipped away at civil liberties, judicial independence, and civil society” (Youngs 2021a). However, it is too early to absolutize the “declining state of global democracy” (Fukuyama 2022b). Attempts have been made to go beyond “democratic pessimism” (Youngs 2021b) and find the forms of resistance to anti-democratic processes and ways of renovation. In this context, the work of Richard Youngs in which he emphasizes the significance of the following trends in the European region as important concepts:

Citizens’ mobilization to defend and reinvent democracy; European governments’ initiatives for democratic consultation and participation; political parties’ efforts to renew their contribution to European democracy; different actors’ strategies to restore the democratic potential of the digital sphere; the EU’s moves to take firmer action against systemic threats to democracy; and different actors’ efforts to open up new routes to European-level democratic accountability. (Youngs 2021b)

Such a diagnosis always concerns the political forms of democracy in the context of democracy as a form of government. To understand the trends in the crisis and the transformations of democracy, it would be important to look and understand in what forms it is functioning in the circumstances of extreme danger, for example, under the conditions of the acute phase of the war in Ukraine. Does this lead to total de-democratization? According to Tilly, the latter involves the correlation of three processes: (1) reversal of any or all of these processes de-democratizes regimes, (2) integration of trust networks and insulation of public politics from categorical inequality, and (3) reduction of autonomous power centers (Tilly 2007: 188).

Grassroots democracy under the conditions of war: "Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi" Viber channel

As a post-Soviet state, Ukraine objectively joined liberal-democratic processes in a rather specific way only in the 1990s. Gaining independence in 1991 in the third wave of democratization, our country was founded on a commitment to liberal principles, including individual rights, competitive elections, and citizen participation in decision-making, factors that are broken in the Soviet political system (Minakov et al. 2021: 1). However, due to the specifics of the refraction of historical experience and the peculiarities of the interactions between the government, citizens, and business, the initial vector resulted in the fact that freedom in practice was confronted by competitive authoritarianism. Under these conditions, constitutional democracy collided with the rule of oligarchic clans, the development of civil society was restrained by a powerful state bureaucracy, freedom of speech was constrained by large-scale manipulations in mass media, and participatory citizenship by fake democracy and imitation of reforms occurred (Minakov et al. 2021: 2).

A year after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, qualitative changes in the fabric of public life in our country became evident.

First of all, civil mobilization of Ukrainians occurred and could be viewed in various forms of volunteer movements. However, in our opinion, the processes of democratization are much more extensive. These processes involve, in particular, the formation of *trust networks* as a necessary component of democratic transformations (Tilly 2007, 80), which in turn, inspire new hopes and expectations not only for Ukrainians but also for all those who are interested in global democratic processes. As Francis Fukuyama optimistically stated:

A Russian defeat will make possible a “new birth of freedom,” and get us out of our funk about the declining state of global democracy. The spirit of 1989 will live on, thanks to a bunch of brave Ukrainians. (Fukuyama 2022b)

It is noteworthy that this optimism appears in circumstances when the life of civilians proceeds amid military operations under conditions in which political life freezes and law does not work after which such democratic forms are shaped and can be called “grassroots democracy” (Kaufman, Dilla & Alfonso 1997). Therefore, given the importance of these trends for further configurations of democratic transformations in Ukraine and the world, it is worth focusing on defining the parameters, features of the movement of grassroots democracy in Ukraine, the specificity of their media forms during the active phase of hostilities, determining around what they are centered, how they are organized, and how they can clarify the specifics of the contemporary stage of democracy in the perspective of such a crisis.

The context

On February 24, 2022, a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops began. Mariupol, as many other Ukrainian cities, came under massive attack starting on the first day. As early as March 2, 2022, telephone communication with the city was cut off. This lack of communication was a sign that the infrastructure had been destroyed, and the city was in tactical surroundings at that point.

People from Mariupol who lived elsewhere in Ukraine or abroad called those whose relatives or friends lived in the city and asked if they had any contact with the city. Mariupol residents who had their own power generators could communicate by phone only sporadically. The news that someone from the city was responding united those outside the city who wanted to know about their relatives and friends in the city. Thus, those who were worried about their relatives and friends in the besieged city were the first to unite. However, very little information was accessible, and by and large, the communication channels that already existed before the siege were enough to incorporate any new information. For almost two weeks, the situation in and destruction of Mariupol could only be observed via satellites (Fig. 1).¹

In mid-March, the Ukrainian government got the chance to evacuate civilians from the city for the first time. Because of this opportunity, more information about the besieged city was obtained. The number of people in social media chat rooms also increased as those who had left the city joined these rooms.

¹ This and others figures are in the Annex at the end of this article.

Concurrently, townspeople began to communicate sporadically as generators were brought to Mariupol for common use.

In the second half of March, under the new conditions of generator power supply, Viber channels began to appear in large numbers in Mariupol. These channels became an adequate way to communicate under those critical circumstances when the official chat rooms that were convenient in peacetime proved incapable of addressing urgent needs of survival. Peacetime channels did not allow people outside Mariupol to find relatives, to understand their whereabouts after their home was destroyed, and to help find new shelters for such displaced people within Mariupol. In the absence of connections with their relatives (Fig. 2), people outside the city even asked their semi-familiar people about them. One could ask the neighbors about his/her relatives to understand the direction of people's movement in general.¹

The communicative role of the Viber channels

It was obvious that the size of the Viber channels' audience fluctuated; the channels grew very quickly and then periodically became abandoned because it was impossible to find a certain person or at least some news about him/her if the channel's audience exceeded a certain number of people. The selection of the optimal number of channel audiences began, and as a result, multiplication and fragmentation of already existing channels began. People joined many channels of information but gradually focused on two or three optimal ones as it was impossible to follow more than that number in those terrible days. The audience migrated from channel to channel in search of their relatives' communications and tracked how their relatives moved to safe locations. Therefore, it can be noted that the fluctuations in channels' audiences correlated to some extent with the migration of residents within Mariupol itself.

People spread information about other channels through the existing Viber channels and then created new channels themselves (Fig. 3). Some channels had only one member, while others grew to several thousand. It seems that the optimal channel size was 300 to 700 participants as those channels existed for the longest period of time. However, different parameters were optimal during different stages of the city siege.

The channels and coordination of people's cooperative efforts were based on self-organization. They usually functioned around the clock because the danger for the population of the sieged citizens was constant.

¹ Two trends are worth noting: (1) the linking of communication chat rooms to locations and (2) the fragmentation of channels. The first trend was traditional as strengthening the ties of a territorial community is a classic in the logic of glocalization and grassroots movements. The second trend was determined by the circumstances of the situation and contradicted the standard media orientation to maximize audience expansion.

The case description and analysis

The Viber channel “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” was selected by the authors as a representative channel for several reasons. It was used by 600 to 700 people. The size of such an audience was the most common although larger channels were also functioning.¹ The channel was created on March 20, 2022, and terminated on August 28, 2022.

The dynamics of the number of messages since its inception can be represented by several trends:

- (1) on March 20, 22 messages appeared on the channel;
- (2) on March 21, 212 messages were found, and
- (3) on the morning of March 22, more than 300 messages appeared.

The channel's audience quickly reached 500 people and remained within this number for a long time although it was not stable. Members of the Viber channel were constantly changing, but as a rule, they were those who lived or had lived in houses around the school. Being tied to the definite two or three houses became the optimal scale of communication that was vital in this situation. Gradually, this kind of communication allowed the inhabitants of Mariupol to contact each other and solve urgent issues for their survival.

Table 1 summarizes the data from the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” channel. The data was classified by time. All periods were analyzed according to several parameters: (1) the number of messages, (2) basic themes, and (3) actors of messages (Mariupol and non-Mariupol residents). The audience was identified by the content of the messages and the design of the images.

Table 1. The major data on the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” Viber channel

Nº	Period	Number of messages, pcs.	Key topics (arranged in order of frequency)	Audience (Mariupol and non-Mariupol residents), %
1	March 20–April 5	3795	1. Search for people (mostly relatives	30–70

¹ The choice of the channel “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi”, which contained the number of one of the Mariupol schools, was autobiographical. One of the authors of the article graduated from this school, lived nearby, and had relatives, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances living there. During the channel's lifetime, she periodically took screenshots. Later, when the channel ceased to be active, and her immediate emotions passed, her experience became the subject of the study.

As far as we can tell, most of the channels that emerged were the same in that they had no additional functions and did not form a more complex, vertical structure. That was, in Niklas Luhmann's terms, “segmentary societies” (Luhmann 2013: 50), namely, any channel replicated the parameters of the previous one from which it separated and had no potential for increase and, accordingly, excessive complexity, and therefore no potential for hierarchical growth. Segmented differentiation that was also a feature of grassroots movements. Therefore, no fundamental difference as to which one to study existed.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (80%) and neighbors (20%) (Fig. 2) 2. Intensity of shelling 3. What was destroyed (Fig. 4) 4. Search for safe places 5. Search for those who will take relatives out 6. Evacuees lists 7. Places and times of evacuation 8. Calls to rescue people under the ruins (Fig. 6) 9. Informing about other channels (Fig. 3) 	
2	April 6–April 19	885	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Search for people (mostly relatives, about 50%) 2. Evacuees lists 3. Lists of people in bomb shelters 4. Lists of the dead 5. Places and time of evacuation 6. What was destroyed 7. Places of humanitarian aid provision 	40–60
3	April 20–May 19	1985	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Search for people (mostly relatives, 50%) 2. What was destroyed (Fig. 4) 3. Lists of evacuated people 4. Availability of mobile communication 5. Filtering conditions 6. Places of humanitarian aid provision 7. Lists of the dead 	50–50
4	May 20–June 19	817	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Search for people (relatives, 40%) 2. What was destroyed 3. Filtering conditions 4. Money transfers 5. Use of license plates 6. Conditions of survival of evacuated people 7. Where to move to? 8. Lists of the dead 	30–70
5	June 20–July 19	820	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What was destroyed 2. Search for people (relatives, 40%) 3. Conditions of movement 4. Russian mobile operators 5. Orders of the occupation administration 6. Political conflicts (Fig. 7) 7. Conditions of survival of Mariupol 	20–80

			residents 8. Search for animals	
6	July 20–August 28	976	1. What was destroyed 2. Political conflicts (Fig. 8) 3. Orders of the Russian administration 3. Restoration of infrastructure 4) Search for people (20%) 5. Promises to restore housing 6. Search for housing for the homeless 7. Help with documents (labor books) 8. Prices for food products	20–80

The table shows that the channel's relevance peaked in the first month of the siege and even within the first two weeks when the fighting for the city was most intense. This pattern can be first observed based on the number of messages in the channel (more than a third of the total) after which the channel existed for some time by inertia. Second, the intensity of the change of themes also supports that finding.

According to the content analysis, the search for missing people was the key theme for the channel, which was the first to emerge, existed continuously, and eventually led to its closure.

The second most frequently reported theme was damage to houses (Fig. 5). People, even if they had heard about the destruction of their dwellings, did not believe it until they saw the destruction with their own eyes. When they saw photos of the destruction, they wanted to see the photos again closer and from other angles. They asked people who were nearby to take pictures and send them to the group. Whoever could respond to such requests sent pictures. This contemplation of the destruction of one's life was a traumatic but fascinating experience. Requests for such visualizations¹ came mainly from those outside Mariupol. However, the citizens who were far from their places of residence at the time also wanted to see the fate of their homes. As the channel faded away in the last two months, this theme came to the forefront.

Manifestations of emotion and grief were rare (Fig. 9). Such feelings were not criticized or commented on at all, but this lack of commenting was usually how they were extinguished. The channel's community worked to minimize not only the conflict and ideological impact of statements (Fig. 7) but also the intensity of emotions, the growth of which did not contribute to the task of survival. As the opposite of an emotional state, a non-reflective state was the most reasonable way of reaching an agreement as a condition for communication on any issue. Messages, such as a generator was brought to power the device at a specific location, water and food were brought here (Fig. 10), a shelter was destroyed there, do not go there,

¹ Studies of visualization with the help of computer technologies were conducted in the article (Petrova et al. 2022).

it is safe here now, or no shooting (Fig. 11), were usually concise and referential. Everyone's efforts as a "deliberate sense of community" were aimed at survival and supporting each other as much as possible. When eyewitnesses wrote in real-time that they could hear people under the ruins (Fig. 6) and needed to dig them out, no one asked additional questions.

In the last period of the channel's operation, the search for missing persons remained the main topic. People were constantly posting their requests about the missing individuals, mostly relatives. Some people posted from the moment the channel was created until it ceased to exist. However, with the end of the active phase of the fighting, the intensity of disappearances and, accordingly, the search for people decreased significantly although they did not stop altogether. Therefore, the main theme of the channel, the core that held the architectonics of communication, was exhausted. The decrease in the immediate danger to life led to a broadening of themes and an increase in discussion messages.

An important role in the fate of the channel was played by the slow but steady restoration of the infrastructure by the Russians. Along with this restoration, a technical opportunity to communicate in person, not just through social media, was present. The Viber channel became a form of complementing real-time community communication and more conventional forms of media communication (such as telephone, radio, television, and regular Internet connection). The most productive use of the Viber channel was in the cases of sporadic connections and crucial lack of infrastructure¹.

On August 28, 2022, the moderator closed the "Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi" channel and has not re-opened it. The reasons for the closure included a decrease in the importance of the main theme (search for people), the restoration of the possibility of personal and more standard media communications, and the incompatibility of the ideological impact with the original mission of its creation.

The "state of nature" and the "social contract": modes of actualization in the circumstances of the siege of the city

First, the circumstances in which the residents of Mariupol found themselves in the times of siege can be identified with the *state of nature*, the conceptual content of which was developed by early Modern philosophers.

It seems appropriate at this point to discuss war as the position of people in the state of nature according to Thomas Hobbes.² In this situation in the circumstances of the siege, the townspeople did not have any guarantees of safety, and civil laws did not apply, that is, a state of nature existed.

¹ Such media trust networks became a form of "strengthening weak ties" in a society (Granovetter 1973) in a society where the everyday production of presence and meaning normally provided by regular media were disrupted.

² As Aloysius Martinich points out, the *war*, according to Hobbes, "does not necessarily consist of actual fighting; it resides essentially in the disposition or inclination to fight" (Martinich 1998: 310).

The natural mutual equality of people in such circumstances turns into distrust and permanent rivalry with the result that everyone feels fear and hostility. It seems that Hobbes' famous words when he mentioned fear and criticized opponents for its narrow understanding as to be frightened are appropriate here. Instead, he pointed out that fear is

... any anticipation of future evil. ... [A]lso distrust, suspicion, precaution and provision against fear are all characteristics of men who are afraid... Men take precautions because they are afraid - by running away and hiding if they see no alternative but most often by using arms and instruments of defence; the result is that when they do risk an advance, each tries to probe the other's mind. (Hobbes 1998: 25)

Thereafter, Hobbes noted the foundation of the civil state to overcome that fear.

The appeal to Hobbes is appropriate here only in appearance. After all, the destruction of peaceful life in Mariupol and diving into the state of nature did not cause discord and enmity between the townspeople but rather a specific trust network, cooperation in the search for the living and dead people, partnerships for providing the coordinates of safe places of stay, help for strangers to evacuate, and sorting out ruins of buildings and searching for people under them as channel data indicated. Youngs defined new forms of "civic mutual aid initiatives" as the vector of grassroots democracy and its renewal, not only in the form of "on-line initiatives" (Youngs 2021a).

One can understand the situation from another point of view, namely, the traditional Hobbes' opponent, John Locke, and his conception of the state of nature in which the law of nature is in force and mandatory for everyone:

Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions. (Locke 1988: 271)

Under the conditions of the Mariupol siege, possessions and even liberty were considered less important factors. The main important factor was health as representative of life in the most general sense, which had become the core factor, and Viber channel participants cooperated and helped each other achieve this aim. The problem of the ratio between the boundaries of agreement and disagreement was dynamically mobile and related to the public good. The "intuitive" idea of the *right to life* dominated the situation in which other natural rights, even the right to property to say nothing of the right to liberty, became doubtful. Disagreement regarding other values was relegated to parentheses, up to depoliticization of the subject of discussion (weakening of the "ideological impact" (Himmelstrand, 1962: 87)) in addition to optimizing the shape and number of the community itself.

The members of the Viber community demanded exclusion of any content that did not respond to the basic needs of the members of the community (Fig. 8). Such a position can also happen beyond a military situation, but the level of compliance with the messages content at the "Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi" channel was consistent for the time it was in operation.

After all, for Locke, as for his predecessors, the state of nature was “a concept to explain the origin of political power and the specific features that characterize civil society (positive laws, enforcement of those laws, rights and duties, public good)” (Yolton 1993: 280). The historical examples he cited to confirm the foundation of the political society on the basis of consent (Locke 1988: 335–336) are important mainly for showing the primacy of cooperation and consent of the people in the political space. As Locke pointed out,

The *beginning of Politick Society* depends upon the consent of the Individuals, to join into and make one Society. (Locke 1988: 337).

Viber channel data illustrate Locke's thesis. Political issues appeared in the last periods of the channel's life (it should be noted that since they were formulated in a conflictogenic manner, they ultimately led to the termination of its existence), and communication based on consent generally made it possible to unite the channel's participants into a media community. It is worth coming back to the development of this thesis below. At this point, it is appropriate to recall not only the examples that inspired Locke but also the cases when his social contract doctrine defined the practice of social life and to show their homology despite time and circumstances.

Hannah Arendt pointed out that Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* influenced the founding fathers of the United States. But she also pointed at a curious fact that the early colonists long before the American Revolution [that is, during Locke's time—O.P., M.R.] put the idea of a social contract into practice in the Lockean spirit, having no notion of any theory (Arendt 1990: 169).

Furthermore, Arendt emphasized the fundamental differences between the two types of social contract. One of them, the Hobbesian Leviathan contract, remains beyond our focus as it is not relevant to the issues under consideration in this study. The second type is

...a mutual contract by which people bind themselves together in order to form a community based on reciprocity and presupposes equality. (Arendt 1990: 170)

This type of social contract was drawn up on the *Mayflower*. According to Arendt, the power of this type of contract is constituted by the ancient republican principle of *potestas in populo* according to which power resides in the people and “in which mutual submission makes domination impossible”; this type of contract is supported by mutual “promises and covenants” (Arendt 1990: 171, 176).

If the early colonists in the pre-political state drew up and signed a covenant that regulated their relationships, then members of the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” channel media community did not sign such contracts. Instead, they shaped a common communicative space. These situations are comparable because they represent the frontier in which people act under extreme circumstances in complete uncertainty about the future. To some extent, the processes of organizing common life are homologous.

The minimum requirement for joining the Viber channel was the availability of charging locations and having enough communication devices to find relatives, friends, and resources for survival (transportation, shelter, access to information). Everyone who joined came from a situation in which he/she could not rely on anyone else except for the channel members themselves. Thus, concurrently, they all worked together to shape the media community. Belonging to the community was informal and became possible not because of ideas of justice but because of the public goal of survival. The latter provided the achievement of consensus in ideologically heterogeneous groups in which unity was tied to a common location (the production of presence, but not meaning, according to Gumbrecht (2003)). Such a fact also proves that media communities could be shaped not only on the basis of “the aesthetic aura” (Maffesoli 1996: 9) but also on survival in circumstances of extreme economic difficulty. The city siege brought lifestyle pluralism to a standstill and also defined clearly the consensus on the deliberation subject matters and methods.

Non-political aspect of the grassroots movement

Communication in the space of a Viber channel¹ can be seen as a specific form of *deliberative democracy*. However, it should be kept in mind that the channel functioned not in the political but in the social sphere as it did not ensure the integration of disparate trust networks into the public political sphere in addition to their institutionalization. A channel provided a way of constructing a community, enabling the self-organization of Mariupol residents in the form of a grassroots movement that was essentially apolitical (although the political component is traditionally important for grassroots democracy (Yenerall 2009)). However, as the Serbian activist Srđan Popović emphasized,

Grassroots movements can be leaderless. They can sprout up outside traditional party structures and they can transcend those dividing lines. (Popović 2018)

¹ The definition of community is based on the classical differentiation of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* by Ferdinand Tönnies. Primarily, community has connotations of horizontality and locality. The concepts of “movement” and “network” suggest types of community since both imply forms of implementation outside institutional politics and outside the institutional form of interaction in general (i.e., outside formally designated structures and functions). The concept of “movement” emphasizes citizen mobilization as a form of aggregation to achieve an “ultimate destination” (Bealey et al. 1999: 182), while the network has a focus on the reciprocity of its members as a “subjective part” (Paxton 1999) of their interpersonal coherence. The relationship of both concepts can be interpreted in a certain range, from understanding the movement as a “network of networks” (Neidhardt et al. 1991) to defining the network as the “social capital” of the movement (Swain 2001). An important point of this understanding is the definition of the Viber channel as a form of de-differentiation of persons, devices, and material infrastructure. The locality of the media community is based on infrastructure unity. Accordingly, the channel’s community is produced as its audience, which has empirically measurable indicators (digital address as well as the number of members, number and timing of messages, sustained themes of deliberation). The ultimate destination and common good of this grassroots movement are the survival of community members, and mutual trust is a resource for achieving safety.

The process of democratic deliberation (Besson 2005: 223) does not imply the existence of a political form of democracy. Democratization as deliberation and as a form of establishing horizontal ties or “non-institutional modes of collective choice” (Besson 2005: 236) was more of a survival tool than a political procedure in this situation. Both for the illiberal democracies and for the media community of the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” channel, democratic procedures (elections in the first case and communication in the second) were tools. The difference is that the instrumentalization of electoral democracy in illiberal states serves to conceal vertically organized power, while for the media community, it is not so much a tool as a basic form of communication in the logic of de-differentiation of the media sphere; therefore, the degree of instrumentalization is different.

The channel's media community from the point-of-view of strengthening weak ties has become a digital form of a trust network as a prerequisite for the democratization process according to Charles Tilly. He distinguished several forms of trust networks at the lowest level of integration:

... truncated democratic institutions of city-states, warrior bands, peasant communities, merchant oligarchies, religious sects, and revolutionary movements provide models for more extensive forms of democracy. (Tilly 2007: 186)

Classically, such forms can be identified with grassroots democracy. In our opinion, the group of the Viber channel users is the closest thing to a digital version of a town assembly of citizens, such as, for example, the Veche, the traditional localized gathering in the eastern Slavic towns or city districts. According to Michael Kaufman, local membership in contrast to political affiliation is a basic attribute of grassroots democracy:

First and foremost, they were all organizations based at the community level. By community we meant a geographic community—in our case, a village, an urban neighborhood, or a city. These organizations were based on common interests where people lived and, in some cases, where people worked. They were not based on political affiliation although partisan politics might play a role in their operation in some cases. (Kaufman 1997: 9)

This tendency is more general, but only under conditions of the city siege did it show its potential as a survival strategy and thus reveal itself in a relevant and quite rational form.

The reasonableness of deliberation within the Viber community was determined by the urgency and severity of “the burdens of reason.” The internal logic of deliberation between free and equal citizens as Besson correctly noted contains the desire to reach such an agreement (Besson 2005: 261). However, its rationality in the themes of the Viber channel was based beyond the constructivist framework of John Rawls who kept in mind the opportunity for citizens to form a group, which encompasses “shared institution and basic arrangements, by citing what are publicly recognized as sufficient reason” (Rawls 1980: 517). In the context of the Mariupol siege, the reasonable agreement was determined by some other factor. No institutions, but rather platforms for deliberating on the basic needs and critical solution, were formed within the depoliticized context.

Information was exchanged on how to resolve the life-threatening problems and coordinate the participants' actions in the extreme situations (Fig. 10, 11).

In the face of the growing problem of survival, the issue of social inequality was minimized, and the form of community fragmentation changed. It was no longer determined by social distance or ideological impact but by territorial binding, namely, it did not disappear but was transformed in the same way that Rawls proceeded from the irresistibility of disagreement but under the conditions of the primacy of the basic good of survival and accordingly, the secondary importance of value orientations.

In fact, the content of the Viber channel demonstrated that the community's reflection worked towards a consensus at the level of devaluing comprehensive doctrines, which according to Rawls, relate to religious, individual beliefs, personal virtues, and acting in accordance with the image of the good life that they define (Rawls 1987: 3). However, the deliberation did not extend to political doctrines that concern the structures that form society as a system of cooperation between equal persons (Rawl 1985: 224). Agreement and forms of publicly accepted reasoning have been developed in some way in the practices of media deliberation as "civil society digital activism" (Youngs 2021b). However, the content of the Viber community's agreement included the desire to avoid establishing a single political or metaphysical doctrine.

"Ideological revivalism" and the decay of the media community

During the last stage of the channel's existence, the deliberate sense of the community changed. At the beginning of the channel's life, the situation of the greatest danger caused the absence of ideological issues and "depoliticization debates" (Beveridge 2017). Ulf Himmelstrand spoke of depoliticization as a reduction of ideological impact but in his opinion, such processes can occur through "a transformation of political ideologies into a set of more or less distinct administrative technology" (Himmelstrand 1962: 83). In the case of "Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi," the Viber channel shows a different trend. At the first stages of its existence in the context of outright violence, members of the channel had to control the conflict potential (Fig. 7) of its communication to achieve certain organizational goals.

The focus on the life and health of city residents decreased the ideological impact of messages, whereas the end of active military actions provoked "ideological revivalism" (Himmelstrand 1962: 87). It meant the restoration of political space and was a point of "repoliticizing depoliticization" (Jessop 2014).

In times of war, the dichotomy of friends and strangers is an effective way to unite and confront the enemy (Simmel 2009: 237–238). This opposition produces an accumulation of solidarizing factors against the foe and external threats.

Obviously, in the politicized media space, the actualization of this dichotomy leads to an increase in the level of aggression of communication. This process reflects how professionally moderated channels work as they are fed by “ideological saliency” (Himmelstrand 1962) content and cause aggressive communication. The restoration of the political component of citizens’ lives in the space of the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” Viber channel led to an increase in the level of discussion of messages, their ideological faithfulness, and ultimately their aggressiveness (Fig. 8).

According to Charles Tilly, democratization processes, growing out of an apolitical grassroots movement, involve the mechanisms of law and public politics (Tilly 2007: 133). One of the most important tasks of political regimes is to “transform disagreement into reasonable agreement” and to manage disagreement in general (Besson 2005: 230). This management is precisely what the Viber community fails to do when the situation became less critical and it was done so in the logic of transition to a higher level of cooperation. This failure is demonstrated by the gap between the form of grassroots movement and the tasks of public politics. The unity of the members’ position, which was possible in a depoliticized space, is the result of oppression not by the state authorities as it can be achieved in a peaceful situation, but by the lack of alternatives to survival and the threat of increased danger with increasing disagreement within the community.

The termination of the Viber channel was precisely due to the media community’s inability to move to the level of public politics. On the one hand, no political system in the occupied city existed into which the existing trust networks could be incorporated. On the other hand, the very structure and content of the messages showed that the media community could not reasonably deliberate on qualitatively different, more complex issues other than the primary benefits of survival, and it disintegrated into closed enclaves of other, more politicized channels. The ideological space of Ukraine possesses its own specifics of functioning (in particular, Storozhuk et al. 2019). Beyond martial law, the trust network found itself in a situation of “the balkanization of opinion” (Schkade et al. 2010: 247). The network disappeared and failed to integrate into a more viable form and could not communicate with vertical associations in a more stable economic situation.

Grassroots movement of the Viber channel community in the context of decentralization reform

The centralization of social and political life in independent Ukraine was derived from the Soviet logic of space organization. However, since 2014, the process of decentralization has been ongoing in Ukraine and is aimed at “the formation of effective local self-government and territorial organization of power for the creation and maintenance of a full-fledged living environment for citizens, the provision of high-quality and accessible public services, the establishment of institutions of direct people’s rule, and the coordination of the interests of the state and territorial communities” (Reforma decentralizacii).

The legal support of the reform was provided by the Laws of Ukraine “On Cooperation of Territorial Communities” (2014), “On Voluntary Consolidation of Territorial Communities” (2015) and other legal documents.

Shifts in the course of the reform occurred gradually but inevitably. Territorially localized communities following the logic of democratic processes of civil society were to some extent prepared for self-organization under the conditions of military operations.

The formation of the grassroots movement in Mariupol, which is conceptualized in this paper, is notable for the resonance of the events that shook the whole world in 2022. However, these processes were possible to visualize and understand because of the unique coincidence of circumstances in which the witness was able to record and had the research competence to analyze direct civil activities in the extreme circumstances of the city siege.

Stories about residents of front-line settlements periodically appear in the mass media. These stories are about similar behavior patterns. Residents gather in blocks and streets around sources of energy (generators, firewood), access to mobile communications, food products, organized protection against looting, and others. It is obvious that the satisfaction of basic survival needs is possible through community integration as it is very problematic to survive alone in a front-line settlement.

Viber channel deliberation practices are indirectly related to the decentralization reform. However, they follow the same logic of democratization of the Ukrainian community. The media and self-organizational levels coincide at this point. The skills of self-organization along this line increase people’s ability to survive in addition to the power and will to resist beyond the logic of the state that requires further research of both the processes of self-organization of Ukrainian society and the revitalization of the grassroots level of democracy, which will allow it to survive any form of crisis.

Conclusions

The global crisis of democracy not only poses a problem but also provides an opportunity for the further process of its renovation. Theoretical visions are supported by the analysis of definite situations. The latter serve not so much as an illustration of the theory but as a productive model that allows us to track certain processes under specific conditions and circumstances.

The analysis of the chosen situation of the grassroots movement of the participants of the “Bus Station, School 36, Kuindzhi” Viber channel became possible under the conditions of the immersion of the city in the state of nature during the siege. In this case, a number of important issues concerning the work of the channel should be fixed.

1.1. The *grassroots movement* of the Viber community in the besieged city was a form of *deliberative democracy*, a form of organizing a non-political social space in which the social aspects are understood more broadly than the political ones. The procedures of deliberation media in an extreme situation established a “deliberate sense of the community” and became a factor in the community construction of the Viber channel when the efforts of all non-combatants were directed at ways to optimize survival.

1.2. Deliberative disagreement grows under ideological revivalism, and the exchange of reasonable arguments at the level of grassroots democracy becomes impossible. The need for political technologies and institutions to achieve reasonable deliberation is then present. The form of horizontal communication then becomes more complicated, and the channel as a necessary form of trust in an emergency situation disappears along with specific conditions.

1.3 Complete de-democratization did not occur even in the situation of the city siege although violence dominated, and the institutionalization of public politics was halted. The integration of trust networks into public politics could not be fully achieved. In the face of significant destruction of infrastructure, trust networks were significantly transformed and found a form adequate for enhancing people’s survival.

If we look at the situation in the context of Ukraine's democratization processes, a number of the following points should be noted:

2.1. Media communities are a type of trust networks that are meaningful to Ukraine. They continue the citizens’ mobilization at the level of grassroots democracy along with the volunteer movement, which has become the basic form of resistance to military aggression. These forms of horizontal communication are quite autonomous in citizens’ mobilization and do not contradict the official position of the Ukrainian state.

2.2. The grassroots movement of media channels is a form of deliberative democracy and revitalization of local communities, which in the logic of Ukraine’s decentralization increases its resistance to military aggression. However, the study of the mechanisms of action of democracy on a national scale needs further attention.

2.3. Media channels in a certain way have balanced the state monopoly on television forced in wartime. In the situation of information warfare, control over freedom of speech is inevitable; however, when carried out by the state, this control acts as censorship and an external vertical form of power. Concurrently, the culture of vigilance as self-censorship of the community is a form of horizontal communication and civil mobilization, which ultimately work for the democratization of socio-political processes in Ukraine.

2.4. In the crucial situation of Ukraine's struggle for independence, it is especially important to understand and correct such means of horizontal communication since vertical ones are destroyed first. The practice of information security and self-organization in such a situation is

an extremely urgent issue. It is necessary to understand the transitional forms from production of meaning to production of presence in such situations.

2.5. Democracy is important not only as an intrinsic value in the perspective of socio-political transformations. It is a guarantee for further economic prosperity of Ukraine because the existence of trust networks is crucially necessary for the development of the economy. Their absence leads to a significant increase in the cost of controlling violence on the part of the state and society, both of which have to organize and pay for coercive efforts.

In the logic of the renovation of democracy, the following statements should be highlighted:

3.1. Social forms of deliberative democracy include new forms of civil activism. That activism occurs because of the formation and functioning of a non-controversial core of deliberation in crucial conditions. However, this process needs further study in terms of the possibility of clarifying how this experience of grassroots democracy helps us to understand the grounds for the formation of rational agreement beyond the boundary situations of survival.

3.2. In this situation, democracy of the few is represented by the limits in size of the Viber community, a local community, and the unit of the trust network. That process opens up new perspectives for the study of forms of democracy in the context of digital media. In the future, it is necessary to look for new approaches for collecting digital data and its analysis, first of all, the media chat room database and identification of the units of their analysis. The experience of reflection on quantitative measures on democracy (V-Dem) is important for studying basic trends.

3.3. New media forms of digital trust networks need ways of integration into public policy. That integration objectively determines the growth of the influence of ordinary citizens on the latter and the strengthening of its control over the activities of the state, which can lead to a potential reversal of the decline of democracy from the local to the national and global levels. The study of new forms of civic activism in media communities proved that they are less politically engaged, self-critical, and incapable of managing dissent. However, the presence of such trust networks serves as a breeding ground for civic activism and spontaneous forms of deliberative democracy.

3.4. The processes of transformation of democracy are permanent, but the innovation of the form of its renovation should also be seen and taken into account.

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Annex

Figure 1. Destruction of Mariupol could only be observed via satellites

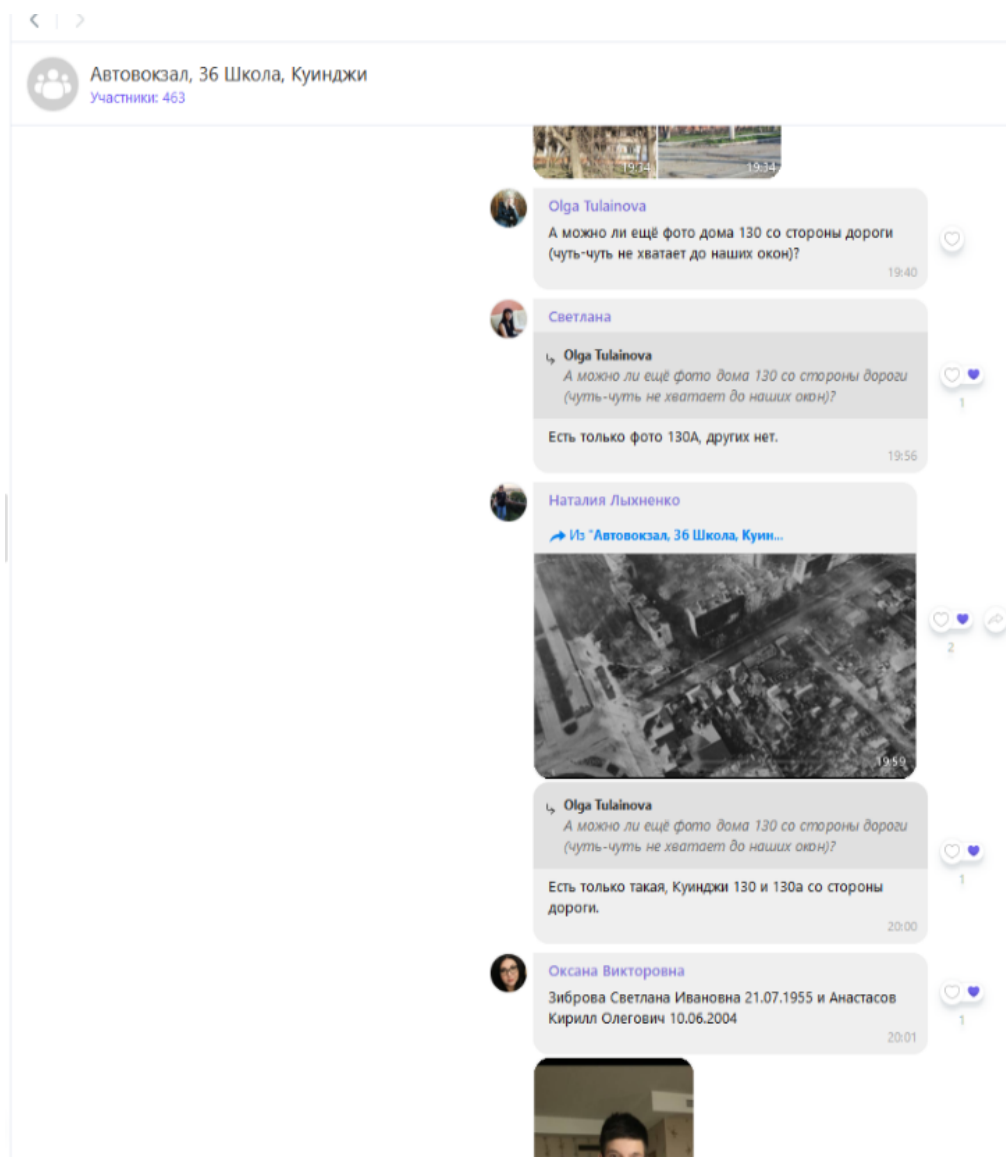


Figure 2. Search for missing persons

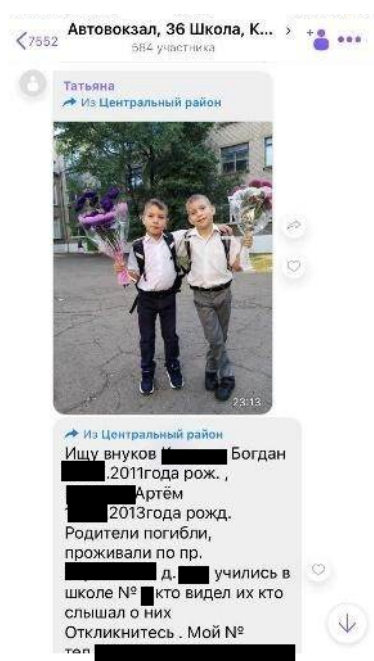


Figure 3. Informing about other channels

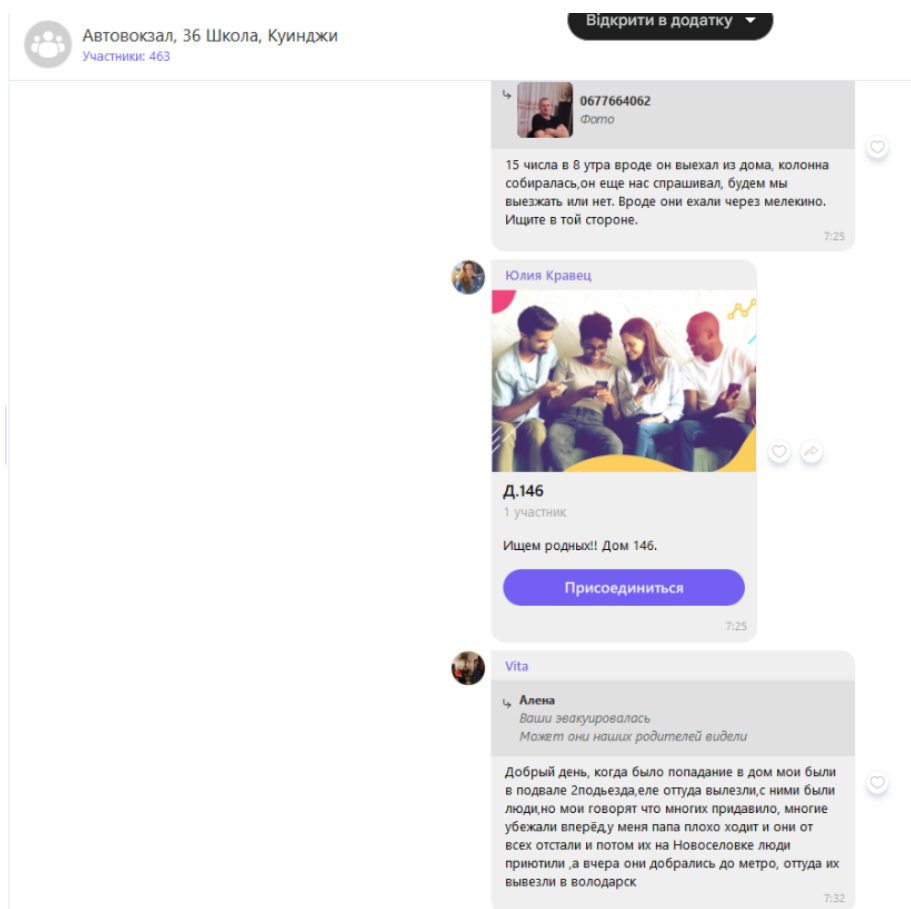


Figure 4. What was destroyed

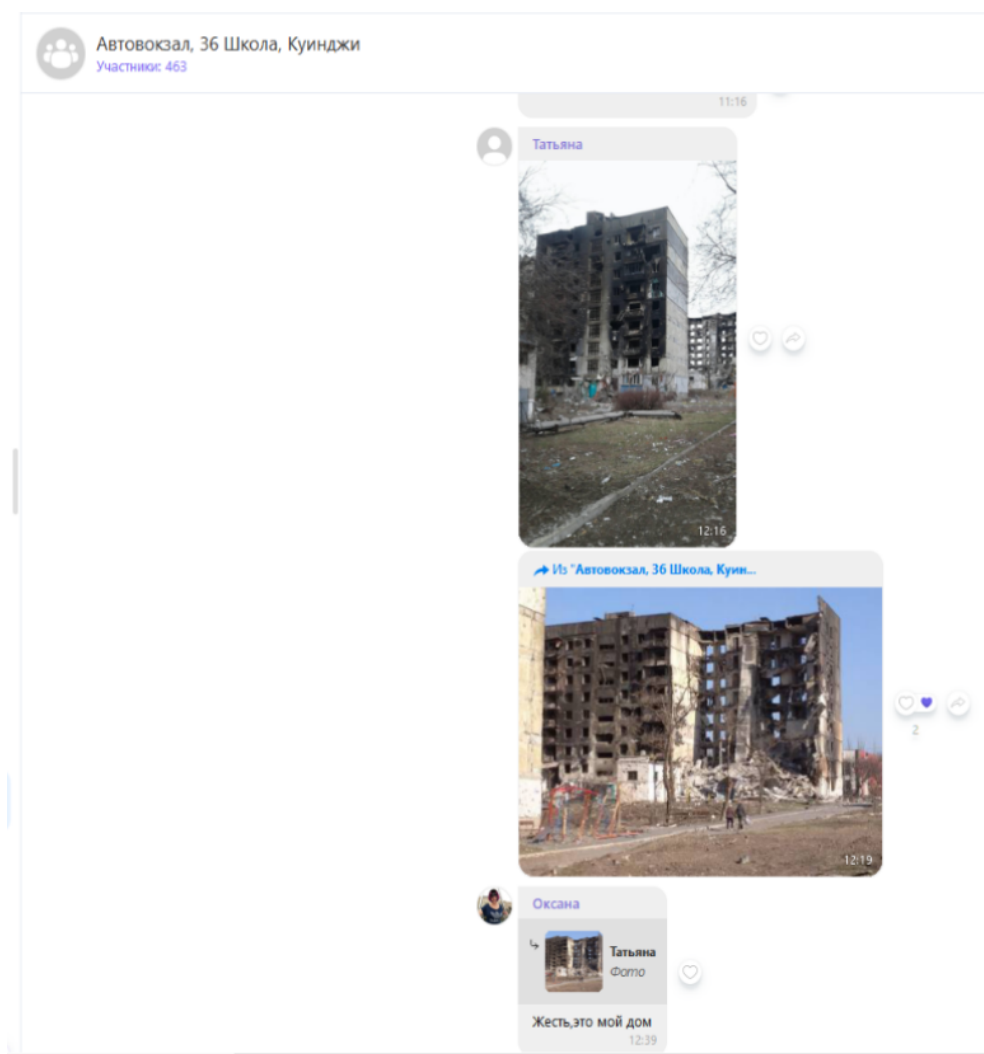


Figure 5. What was destroyed

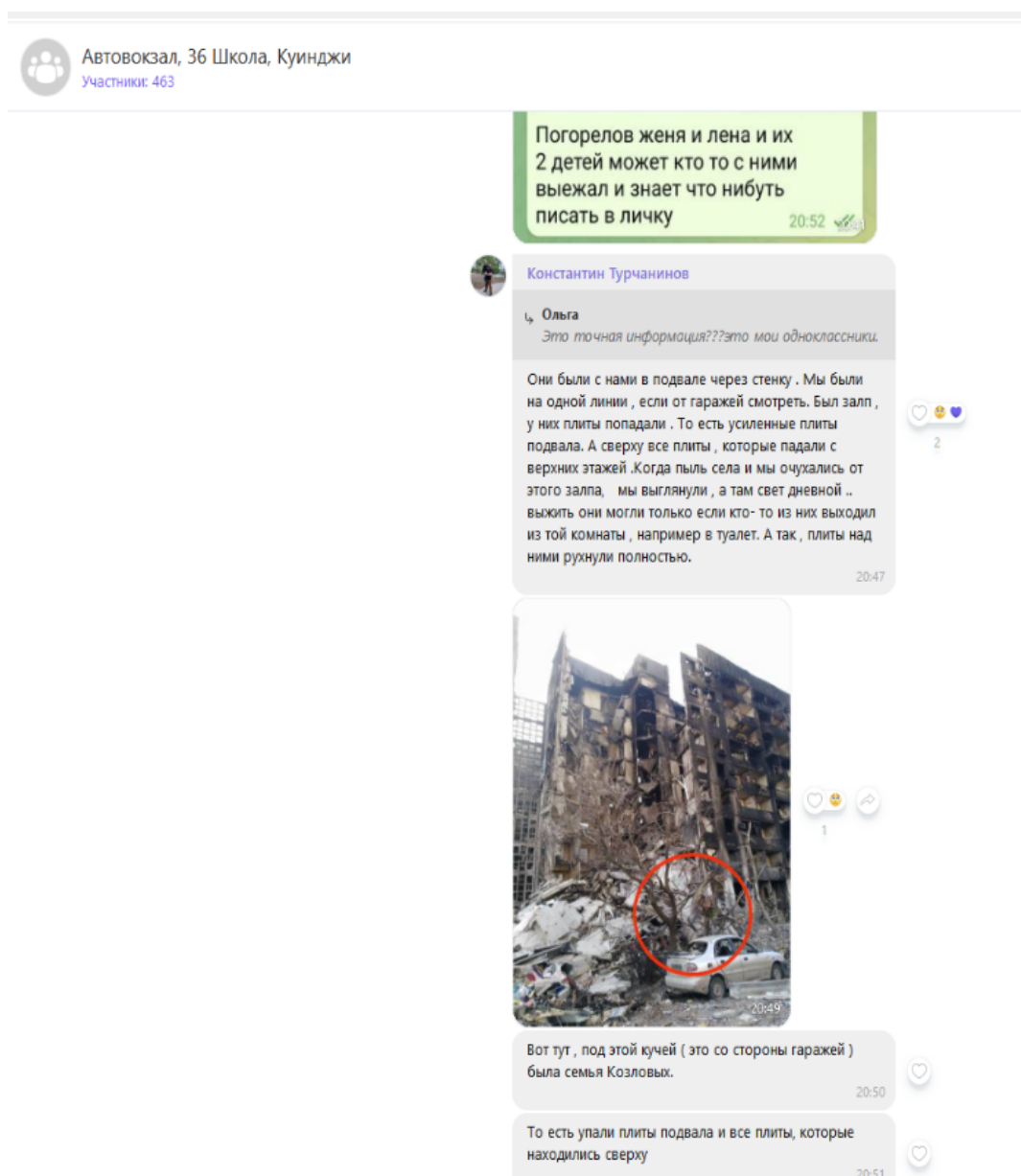


Figure 6. Call to rescue people under the ruins

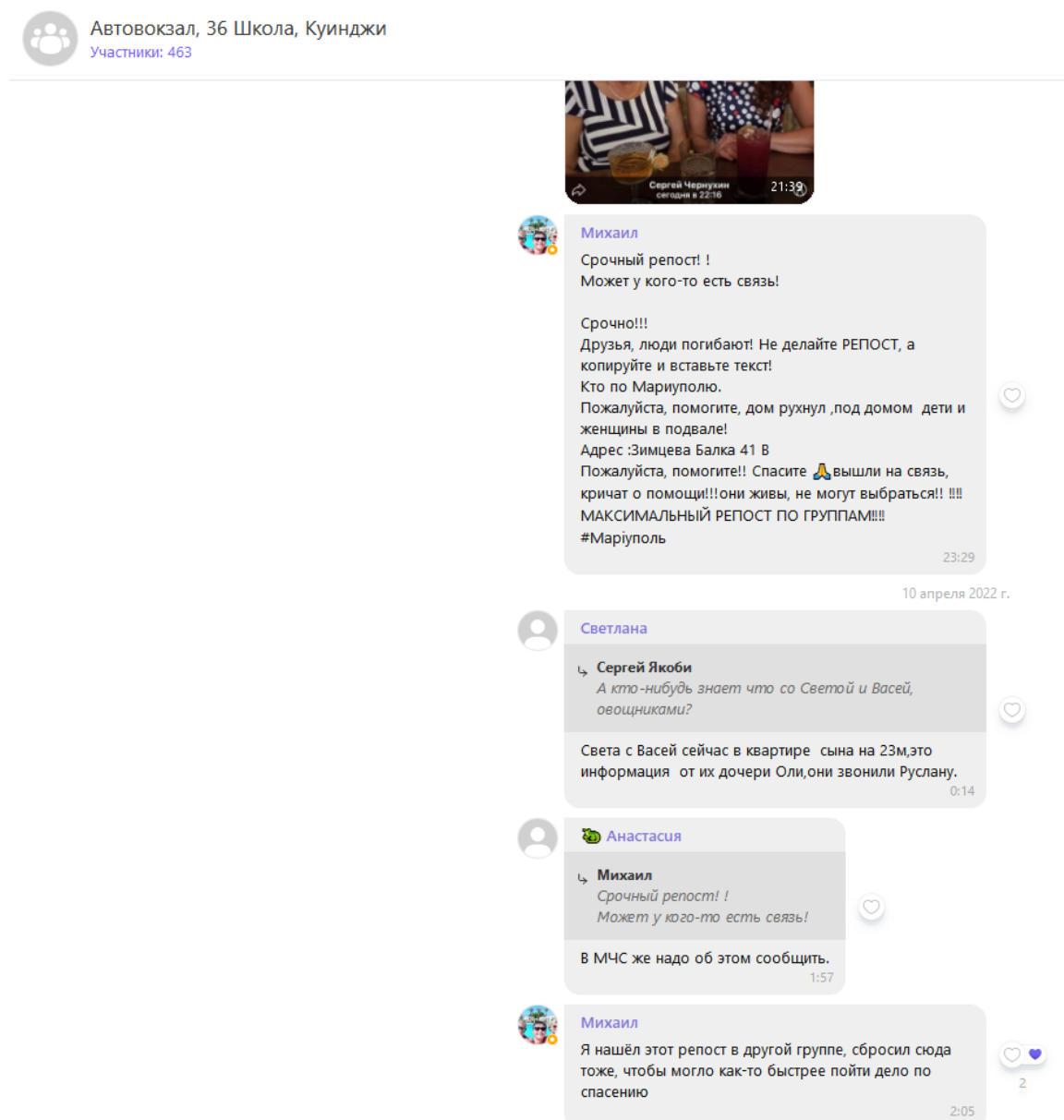




Figure 7. Deliberation rules




Автовокзал, 36 Школа, Куинджи
Участники: 463




Исакова Надежда Васильевна на Западной Украине, вместе с семьей.

21:55




5




Дарья

Кто то знает что то о моей соседке.. подъезд который рухнул. Она на 1м этаже жила с собачкой тошей(как пикинес) сын Рома

21:56







Татьяна

Кто нибудь д150 второй подъезд есть кто нибудь?

21:56







Марина Егиазарян

Назаренко Нина Михайловна была в Донецке

21:56



1



Yulia


↳ Гена

Нас укр миномёт обстреливали!

Дорогой, вас обстреливали все, вы на территории проведения военных действий, а вот какого фига нам войну объявили????

Изменено 23:24

1 мая 2022 г.



Артём

↳ Елена

Надежда Васильевна Исакова последние годы(3 если не ошибаюсь) уже не работала в школе. Но она д...

Красные короткие волосы, говорит на украинском и вообще учитель украинского?

3:14


ПРАВИЛА БЕСЕДЫ

Не обсуждать политику и пропаганда "русского мира"

Есть личные сообщения. Если человек не понимает - бан. Мы тут близких ищем и любую доступную информацию.

Спасибо за понимание ❤️

3:17



10

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Figure 8. Repoliticization

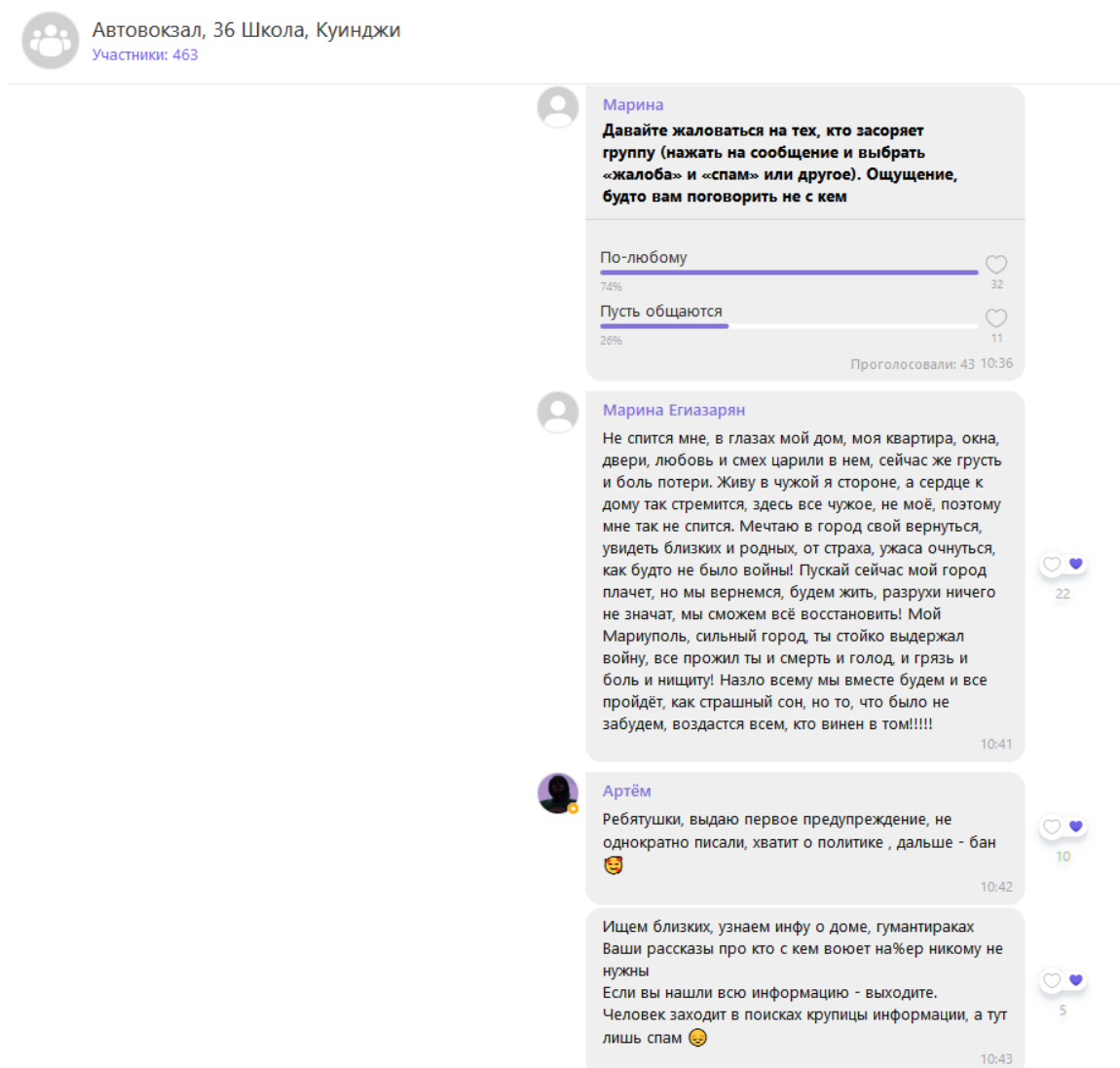


Figure 9. Manifestations of grief

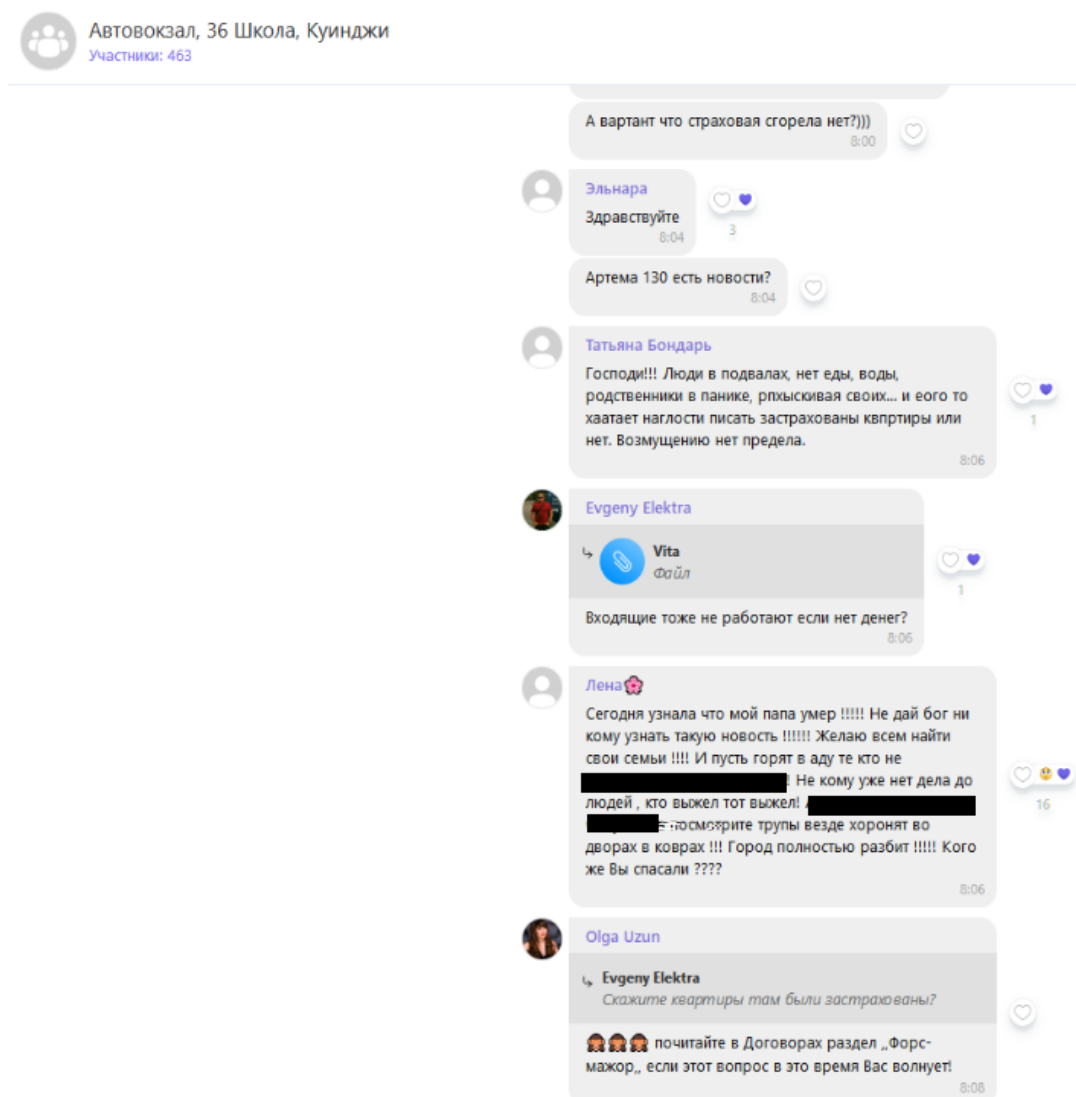


Figure 10. Announcements about water and food

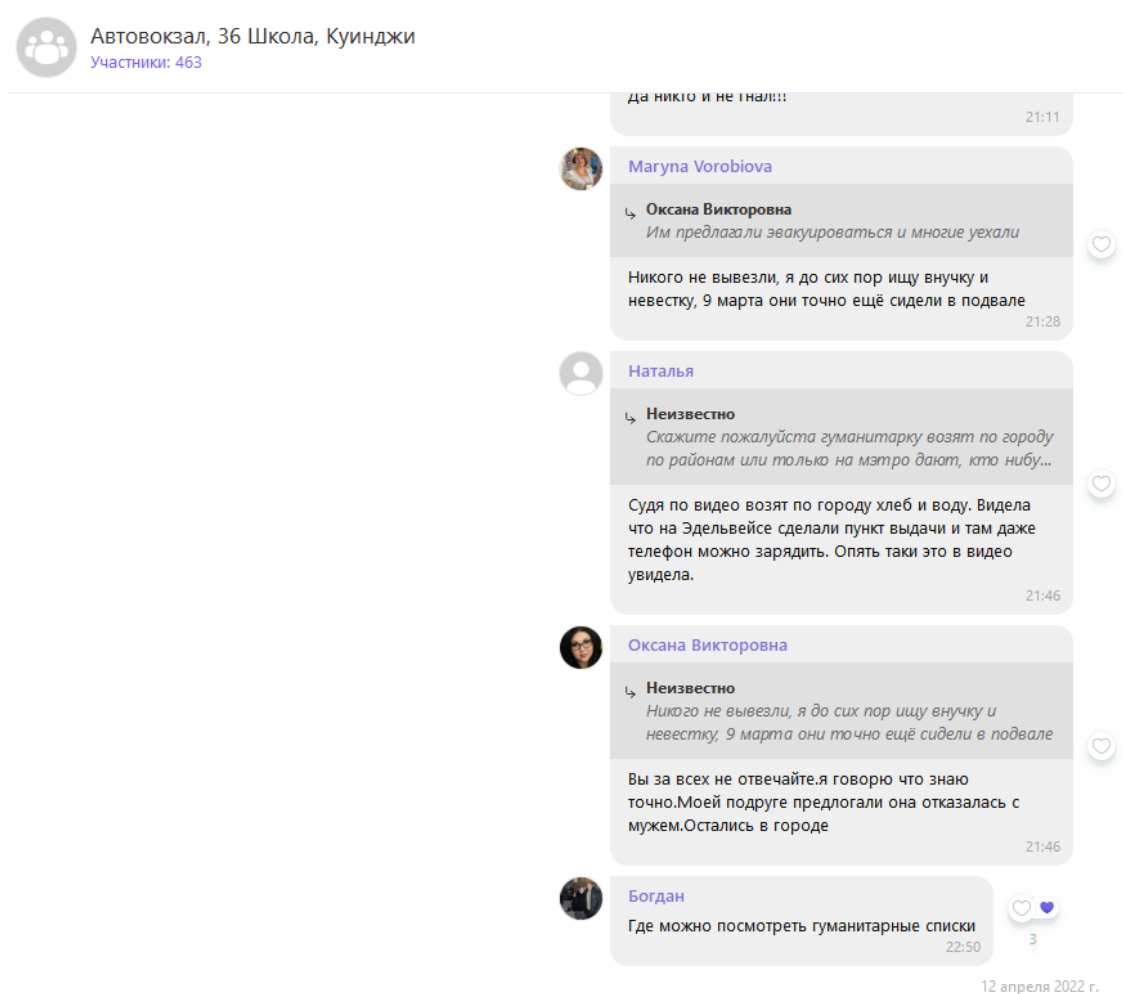


Figure 11. Announcements about safety issues

