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## **INEQUALITY IN UKRAINE UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: GOVERNMENTAL CHALLENGES**

*The paper deals with the complicated relationships between COVID-19 and inequality in Ukraine, in particular, between public health protection and human rights. Its premise is the fact that equality and public health are both included in human rights instruments. The paper therefore asks to what extent the protection of the individual could – or should – be overridden to enable the protection of the equality of the general public in times of COVID outbreaks. Through theoretical analysis and practical examples, the paper addresses the issues of economic and social inequality of groups in vulnerable situations, and particularly women; older persons; national minorities; persons living in homelessness etc. The paper concludes with some trends for governments to overcome inequality under the COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Key words:** government; COVID-19 pandemic; inequality; public health protection; human rights; to overcome inequality.

Постановка проблеми

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the root cause, but a reinforcement, exaggerator and aggravator of that what has been discriminatory and unjust before in our systems and communities. Viruses don't discriminate, societies and systems do. The issues which often prevent disease outbreaks such as COVID-19 include political maneuvering, adequate financial agility, efficient coordination, strong response structures, and understanding in key relationships. The outbreak of COVID-19 started simultaneously with the change of government in early March [10]. The internal factors included the institutional weakness of the state, inadequate level of training and lack of professionalism among high-ranking officials, high vulnerability of society in the socio-economic sphere. The new ruling team's lack of a systematic and realistic vision of strategic development benchmarks and ways to achieve them also took its toll [3, с. 154]. The mentioned challenges have influenced different areas in politics and socio-economic life, leading to increase of inequality in the society.

Аналіз останніх досліджень і публікацій

Much of literature is devoted to the study of inequality by famous foreign scientists, such as K. Davis, E. Durkheim, J. Connolly, S. Kuznets, J. Lensky, A. Munro, D. Moore, T. Parsons, P. Flora, and others. In Ukraine, the problem of inequality has only recently become the subject of scientific interest of economists, sociologists and political scientists. Today, most Ukrainian scholars study specific aspects of inequality, including living standards and income inequality (K. Kurbanov, E. Libanova, L. Cherenko); distribution of income (O. Alexandrova, A. Babenko, N. Kholod); problems of poverty, forms and types of social inequality (M. Semenkov, O. Chuprina); global problems of inequality (Yu. Zarapina, E. Sulima) and others. Pashkov V. researched the legal characterization and classification of threats in the field of health protection [2]. Feinberg M., Niada-Avshalom L. and Toebes B. studied human rights in the field of public health [6]. However, the issue of COVID-19 as a reason for inequality in Ukraine has not been studied in scientific sources. This indicates a scientific novelty and enhances the relevance of this paper.

Виділення невирішених раніше частин загальної проблеми

Today in the Ukrainian research literature there is a lack of investigations on governmental practices in overcoming inequality during COVID-19 pandemic. Contemporary issues of successful decisions in human rights protection within the limitations of all-Ukrainian and regional quarantines is at the stage of their study.

Мета

The purpose of the article is to reveal the issues of inequality among the population of Ukraine under the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine the challenges for the government in overcoming them.

Виклад основного матеріалу

The pandemic has further revealed the existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in Ukraine, says UN Human Rights [11]. Inequalities and human rights concerns that existed before were further exacerbated during

the COVID-19 pandemic. The thematic report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the impact of COVID-19 on human rights in Ukraine analyses economic and social rights [9]. The impact of COVID-19 on the economic and social rights of: groups in vulnerable situations, and particularly women and girls, Roma; persons with disabilities and older persons, in particular those living in long-term care facilities; persons living in homelessness. In addition, the pandemic created new vulnerabilities, including among healthcare workers involved in the COVID-19 response. The rights to health, work, education and an adequate standard of living, which are linked directly to SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 2 (hunger), SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 10 (inequalities) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) were most affected.

From the beginning of pandemic:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the hardships and deprivations faced by the conflict-affected population in eastern Ukraine, in particular because of restrictions on freedom of movement and their impact on the enjoyment of social and economic rights. The monthly average number of crossings through the contact line has decreased (from 1.1 million (over a similar period in 2019) to less than 300 people). The restrictions on freedom of movement have resulted in the separation of thousands of people from their families, and the loss of access to healthcare, education, pensions and sources of livelihoods.

2. The number of crossings through the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) with the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation) has decreased by almost 90 per cent in comparison with the same period in 2019. The restrictions have affected people's access to work, education, healthcare, property and family links.

3. Access to justice and the guarantee of a public trial were also affected by COVID-19- related restrictions.

Economic inequality. The economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic led to a sharp decline in labor market demand and deepened the problems inherent in Ukraine's division of labor.

In other words, there are three factors that determine the level of inequality or why people have different incomes. The first is talent. The second is effort (one works hard and therefore earns more). The third is monopoly (one has a monopoly and use it for his/her own enrichment). And these three factors - talent, effort, monopoly - have different effects on inequality in countries.

In Ukraine, even now, the greatest inequality arises through monopoly. For example, Naftogaz (oil and gas company), which had a monopoly position or the oligarchs. During crises and economic collapses, the less protected part of the population suffers the most. These are old, young, unemployed and people with low level of education. The government is to support these people, aiming if not to reduce inequality, then at least to keep it under control. There are several tools that have different effectiveness in terms of this assistance.

In Ukraine the government has chosen subsidies considering it a real tool of assistance. In keeping inequality under control such efficient tool as unemployment benefits can also be used.

Also the problem is wage inequality. Wage inequality is a complex factor in social relations, because if there is great inequality, it always leads to social cataclysms and revolutions.

COVID causes new forms of inequality. If the pandemic drags on, we will get long-term unemployment, and it will be extremely difficult to deal with it. Long-term unemployment is a long-term source of inequality in the economy. Long-term inequality means disappearing of skills, attempts in finding a job becomes even harder (besides, new job as a rule means less money than before).

Generally, there are the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), employment, living conditions, livelihoods, autonomy and decision-making for women and men, taking into account the type of settlement (urban, rural), age, gender, across all regions in Ukraine, with a focus on identifying the gender gaps under each topic/sector:

- the crisis and the imposed quarantine and lockdown caused a reduction in output, household spending and trade. The global value chains were disrupted leading to a steep decline of GDP in Ukraine;
- in general, an over-reliance on social transfers and remittances to drive the economy made the country particularly vulnerable to shocks;
- more than 8 percent of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are on the brink of bankruptcy and may have to close down;
- unemployment is increasing;
- more than 9 million people may fall back into poverty during the pandemic (increase from 6.3 to 9 million).

Social inequality. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (January 1, 2021), the current population of Ukraine without the Autonomous Republic of Crimea is 41,629 people.

According to the State Employment Service of Ukraine, in March 2020 (beginning of quarantine), the unemployment rate increased by 22% compared to the same period in 2019. 20, 501 thousand were registered in Ukraine as unemployed (May 2020). This is 196 thousand (64%) more than in May 2019.

By the beginning of 2021 the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce has estimated that more than half a million people are unemployed (as the result of the quarantine) [4].

Inequality in access to Internet. Under lockdown, a great number of people in Ukraine have been struggling to adapt to the new challenges, either due to a lack of digital skills or simply because they have limited access to the internet. The coronavirus pandemic is forcing institutions, businesses and individuals to come to grips with digital technology fast. But those who cannot keep up with the new way of doing business risk being left behind.

COVID-19 has affected everyone: the rich, and the poor remain at home and have limited mobility. Inequality is in fact that not everyone "sitting home", are on equal terms. The data of the State Statistics Service testifies [1]:

1. For many Ukrainians, the availability of a computer during a nationwide quarantine has become an important condition for learning, distance work, payment for services online, ordering products and communication with family and friends.

2. Significant inequality between the richest and the poorest households. If among the richest over 85% of people have a computer (laptop), then among the poorest there are only 55%.

3. Place of living also has a significant effect on access to a computer. 85% of residents of large cities and only a little more than half (56%) of rural residents have a computer (laptop) home.

4. Only every fourth child in a rural area suffers from not being able to buy a computer due to lack of money.

5. Before the pandemic: 37% of the Ukraine population (14,058,960 people) did not use the Internet at all; the frequency of Internet use differed significantly in terms of i) age groups, ii) area, iii) level of education and iii) socio-economic status.

The data indicate that a large number of older people (from 60% 61-65 years to 92% 75 years and older) did not use the Internet before the pandemic. Also a significant percentage of middle-aged people who are parents (over 40 years) did not have such experience. Accordingly, they are not able to take full advantage of the Internet, moreover they cannot assist children in online learning during quarantine.

Significant inequality is in the use of the Internet among rural residents' areas and cities. Twice the majority of villagers did not use the Internet for last 12 months, compared to residents of large cities (52% and 25% respectively). Among those with higher education, 60% use the Internet every day, but among people without higher education - only 37%. Among retirees 75% did not use the Internet at all last 12 months.

The UNDP Accelerator Lab in Ukraine explored the issue of the digital divide in Ukraine, and in particular the digital literacy of the elderly – those who are now even more vulnerable due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only because of health concerns but also because of the rapid move to digitalization: doing business, connecting with your family, processing your paperwork, paying your bills, shopping, and more.

The problem of the digital divide is complex, but Ukrainian society is responding rapidly. We have seen a large number of free digital services emerging and quite a few opportunities that address the digital gap, including a collection of resources and tips on how to work from home, a free course to teach people how to protect themselves from cyber-criminals, and a new rapidly developed courses by the Ministry of Digital Transformation for public servants and teachers [5].

Inequality in living conditions. At the same time, inequality of living conditions makes some groups of the population especially vulnerable during COVID and national quarantine. The analysis showed that there is a significant inequality of living conditions (availability of water supply, sewerage and hot water supply). Housing inequality conditions observed in the context of "city – village". While 67.5% of residents of large cities noted the availability of hot water supply, in rural areas there is only 19.2%.

Homeless people. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the discrimination that homeless people face:

- in access to medical care (as most homeless people do not have a valid identity card, they cannot sign a declaration with the family doctor, as a result, they cannot get access to medical examinations and tests, including testing for COVID-19, and to other specialists);

- homeless people cannot afford personal protective masks;
- generally, as a result of the burden on the healthcare sector, pandemic people are discharged before they fully recover so that they could continue treatment and recover at home. Homeless people are not able to continue treatment. Lack of health services have particularly affected homeless people with other diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV, venereal and dermatological diseases.

Evidence in inequality of human rights. Freedom House's Report testifies that the level of freedom in Ukraine has decreased [7]. The report says President Volodymyr Zelensky's reform campaign has stalled because of pandemic and political corruption that has resulted in a constitutional crisis. It is noted that in Crimea and Donbas - territories that are temporarily not under the control of the Ukrainian government - political rights and civil liberties have continued to decline [5].

The limited representation of women, social policy and human rights institutions among the members of the response coordinating bodies created a situation of discrimination as lockdown measures, imposed on every citizen, de facto caused some groups to not be treated equally. The impact of emergency measures on fundamental freedoms and human rights was pervasive and diminished access for the most disadvantaged groups in particular. This increased inequalities and further diminished trust in established institutions, and the perceptions on access to political and civil rights, public information, the justice system, security and the rule of law.

Gender inequality. The impacts have also been particularly gendered, with women disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including through a rise in domestic violence and a significant increase in unpaid care work, posing an additional risk to the achievement of SDG 5 (gender equality).

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis because of their high exposure to the virus. Women account for 82 percent of the total health and social workers (compared to 70 percent average worldwide).

The COVID-19 pandemic with its demands for shutdown of economic activities and mandated push for social distancing is not gender-neutral either.

It oppressing, utilizing and victimizing women and girls in many areas of daily life.

1. The loss of employment because of the COVID-19 pandemic affects women more severely. Many women have lost their service jobs or seen their work hours reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Women continue to work in service sectors that are deemed essential such as food distribution or health care. They face a higher occupational health risk because of the pandemic. Women who work in human health and social work activities, including saleswomen, nurses, doctors and other health workers, workers in residential care facilities and social workers, who face serious risk of contracting COVID-19 in the workplace. The risk of exposure in essential jobs is very unevenly distributed between men and women.

3. Women who work in the informal economy such as self-employed day workers, are not or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements that provide them with social, health or job protections. They fall out of the

purview of labor laws leaving many exposed to low pay, exploitation and unsafe working conditions.

4. Women working abroad mostly in the informal sector or as undocumented immigrants (mostly as domestic workers), contribute to the economic wealth and wellbeing of both their host and home countries. Already vulnerable to abusive employment conditions in normal times, their risk of abuse is heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, because they are often frontline caregivers without adequate protections and little power.

5. Women suffer from job losses and business closures with livelihoods lost and poverty increasing. Ukraine as the developing country, conflict-ridden and highly indebted one, suffers the losses of development gains and prolonged economic and social devastation which are even more pronounced.

The coronavirus crisis influences women's personal and communal safety and security, whether it is the increased risk of gender-based violence, the changing threat of human trafficking, or the increased humanitarian safety needs. While women and girls have suffered from these brutal forms of violence even before the COVID-19 crisis, the already severe impacts of these forms of violence are now exacerbated by the pandemic at a time when resources and attention to address them are often diverted or prioritized for other response measures. The crisis and the lockdown have led to a spike in domestic violence. The reported cases increased by 30 percent.

National minorities and COVID-19. Persons belonging to national minorities have often faced discrimination, hate speech and stigma, as well as a lack of relevant information in minority languages [8]. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has regrettably often resulted in the unequal access to education and discrimination of children belonging to national minorities, particularly those who were not proficient enough in the official languages to be provided with appropriate educational content. As a result, children of national minorities may be at risk of learning delays and dropping out.

The governmental challenges. At the beginning of COVID-19 in Ukraine the government policy was strongly oriented towards the organization of response to the pandemic, including reorientation of the health care system to fighting the disease and ensuring timely vaccination. The pandemic-related quarantine measures were introduced without adequate analysis of possible consequences, often by trial and error, causing significant damage to most Ukrainians (and hitting small businesses particularly hard) [3, c. 154].

With the COVID-19 pandemic governments throughout the world begin to weaken isolation. At the same time, the problem of coronavirus spreading at the workplace is still remaining. Proper protection in the workplace is a prerequisite for preventing further spread and new outbreaks. Emergency government measures, including job closures, have often been implemented on the advice of health authorities (Health Ministry of Ukraine).

It is therefore necessary that COVID-19 be classified in accordance with national labor protection legislation. The main aspects which are to be taken into account by the government are:

1. Return to work. Job creation and return to work should take place in the absence of "repeated waves" of infection. In some cases, risk assessments may indicate

that jobs should not be created yet. Many jobs and processes are to be reviewed, including those involving large number of workers. Such a review should involve consultation with trade unions. Processes and systems should be carefully inspected to ensure that workplaces are safe to start after a temporary closure. Return to work must be carried out in compliance with social distancing and protection of employees. Similarly, workers who are most vulnerable because of their age and health should not return to work and suffer a loss of income. While more men than women die from COVID-19, the economic consequences and impact on jobs, such as in the health and care sectors, are disproportionate to women. The sharp increase in violence against women around the world is closely linked to forced isolation. For these and many other reasons, the government needs to take gender into account and, in particular, protect women.

2. Social dialogue and collective bargaining as vital elements. National procedures or special bodies should be established for the planning, monitoring and adjustment of return plans. The legislation on labor protection should be strengthened.

3. Organization of work. The organization of work is crucial for a successful return to work. This issue should be discussed in the workplace and at the enterprise level, preferably in the context of national and sectoral plans already agreed by the social partners.

4. Income support. The Government is to provide state support for wages at the return to work stage, providing flexibility, as not all workers can return to full-time paid employment immediately. Due to the uncertain mode of work, the division of responsibilities and the reduction of working hours will become commonplace, so schemes to support such processes should be provided through public funding. The Government must continue to provide or increase payments and reserves on debt, rent and mortgage payments, reimburse medical and food costs, and so on.

**Висновки**

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing and intersecting inequalities and exposed significant structural shortcomings in current social, economic, and political systems. The fight against the coronavirus must therefore be comprehensive and systemic. It cannot be limited to the level of virology and relegated to improving health systems, but must attack discrimination and inequality at home and abroad on multiple interrelated cultural, political, social, and economic levels by applying a feminist, human rights-based, intersectional and justice-oriented analysis throughout based on collaboration, global solidarity and reinvigorated multilateralism to counter nationalist and authoritarian retrenchment and competition.

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