USAID'S MEDIA PROGRAM IN UKRAINE: PUBLIC BROADCASTER'S POLITICAL TALK SHOW BOOSTS PUBLIC DISCUSSION DURING ELECTIONS

UA:PBC's "The Countdown" political talk show doubled its audience and reached a total of more than 26.5 million views across all platforms.

What: background

In 2019, Ukraine held both presidential and parliamentary elections. Citizens utilized their right to vote to overhaul their representative government.

Media played a critical role during both elections. Privately-owned national TV channels were promoting their preferred candidates and using black PR against rivals. Ukraine's fledgling national public broadcaster – UA:PBC, having made a tough transition from a state to a public entity, rose up to another challenge: producing high-quality, socially and politically relevant content.

How: UA:PBC engagement

In the run-up to the elections, the public broadcaster (UA:PBC) recognized a demand for quality political content. With the support of USAID's Media Program in Ukraine, implemented by Internews, UA:PBC experts launched "The Countdown" in March 2019. The talk show brought **in candidates for a moderated discussion with election experts, members of the studio audience, and citizens from regions around the country.** The show included also included real-time phone polls of the audience.

Countdown's co-anchors, Myroslava Barchuk and Pavlo Kazarin, from the UA:PBC website.

Presidential candidates, as well as political party representatives and government officials, had to answer tough questions and were given strict time limits for their replies. In addition, VoxUkraine provided live factchecking of guests' statements. The show continued weekly up to the snap elections to the Ukrainian parliament, held on July 21.

Media watchdogs and media commentators highly praised "The Countdown" for its fair but entertaining format. According to the Council of Europe-supported monitoring, conducted by a coalition of NGOs in July 2019, **"The Countdown" was recognized as "the most balanced talk show" presiding over similar programs aired on 10 national channels.**

Impact: debate boosts trust with viewers

"The Countdown" quickly became popular with audiences. Its 28 episodes were broadcast live by 24 UA:PBC regional branches, UA:Culture, UA:Crimea (with Crimean-Tatar voice-over), the UA:PBC You Tube channel (with English subtitles) and Facebook, and UA:PBC's Ukrainian Radio. **As a result, "The Countdown" had more than 26.5 million views across all platforms.**

The show's success demonstrated the public's demand for quality content on elections and candidates. Ukrainians not only had a chance to engage around quality content, they did so for content produced by the public broadcaster, solidifying its role as a source of reliable information for the greater public. Shortly after the show went on air, over 325,000 people on Facebook demanded that a presidential debate should be shown on UA:PBC, creating the hashtags #debates_challenge and #wannaseedebates.

BEFORE:

"UA: Pershyy is not the best television news producer and lacks diverse social and political programming... Important news is often ignored." – Diana Dutsyk, Executive Director of the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication, Member of the Independent Media Council.

AFTER:

"We may have noted that during the presidential elections campaign the UA:PBC paid little attention to the electoral processes, but during the parliamentary campaign the amount of coverage of political events in the channel's news reports increased.
I believe that it is the UA:PBC that can stand up against the oligarch-controlled TV channels and show high-quality reporting standards in the market," - Diana Dutsyk, Executive Director of the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication and Member of the Independent Media Council.
"I've never worked with such a motivated and hyper-responsible team of young people before... I think this project showed that UA:PBC is worth all our efforts and that it can implement big projects of this scale." – Myroslava Barchuk, journalist, co-anchor of Countdown.

Facebook Live: The Countdown quickly became popular with audiences, both on traditional and social media. One viewer commented that he had planned to vote for Yulia Tymoshenko, but changed his mind after watching her perform live on the show.