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Research Article

Enhancing Community Cooperation through Network Governance and Smart Specialisation to Mitigate Social Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The relevance of the research topic is primarily in introducing the concepts of network management and smart specialisation to strengthen social ties, avoid social conflicts and increase the competitiveness of communities through interactive information exchange and active participation of stakeholders.

Objectives: The main aim of writing a scientific article is to substantiate the need to apply network management practices and smart specialisation within the framework of community cooperation to prevent social conflicts.

Methods: During the study, several general scientific methods of cognition were used, including induction, synergy, comparative analysis, deductive and analytical methods, and systematisation and generalisation.

Results: The study identified areas for effectively implementing network management principles in Ukraine, including developing a unified methodology for evaluating results, a long-term register of initiatives and partnership mechanisms, strengthening territorial communities, adapting the project approach, and increasing its maturity. In addition, priority areas for improving the current strategy of smart specialisation of Ukraine's regions and ways to optimise community cooperation have been identified, including introducing a data collection system, coordinating participants, integrating technologies, and developing communication strategies.

Conclusions: Thus, the developed measures to optimise community cooperation, based on network management and smart specialisation of regions, allow for meeting society's current needs and strengthening the community population's trust in state institutions, ensuring their effectiveness and sustainable development of the region of Ukraine.

Keywords: network management, smart specialisation, public administration, cooperation, decentralisation, development strategy, social conflict, society, region, community.

INTRODUCTION

The current challenges of the management process in Ukraine require new approaches to optimising cooperation between communities. The decentralisation and related reforms of local self-government and territorial organisation of power in Ukraine have created new opportunities for developing communities and regions. In particular, they

contribute to the authorities' motivation to stimulate the development of communities and regions. It should be noted that there is currently no direct link between the opportunities provided and the improvement of the population's quality of life, regardless of the region, which is accompanied by growing asymmetries, both between and within different regions, in terms of socio-economic development. Primarily caused by political and economic instability against the backdrop of the war, the problems of emergence and escalation of social conflicts require their prompt detection, high-quality regulation and prevention. However, according to a survey of civil servants conducted by the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service (NAUCS) [1] before the full-scale invasion, the lack of systematic conflict resolution within communities is mainly due to the lack of experience in using the latest methods and tools for analysing and resolving conflict situations, as stated by 76.5% of the survey participants, and, accordingly, 23.5% of civil servants, although unable to fully use the tools for analysing and preventing conflict situations, stated In this context, the issue of improving modern practices of community cooperation through network management and smart specialisation to prevent social conflicts is becoming increasingly relevant. In this context, network governance acts as a critical tool that allows for the creation of interactive platforms for the exchange of information and resources, and thus promotes the development of social ties that can mitigate social tensions and conflicts at the local level. Instead, smart specialisation allows communities to develop their unique strengths and needs, increasing their competitiveness in the long run. Optimisation of community cooperation using the identified tools requires a systematic analysis of existing relationships, active involvement of stakeholders, including government, business, and academia, and consideration of the potential of innovative technologies, which will ensure the effectiveness of the local governance process and increase the level of social cohesion within the community.

The article substantiates the need to apply network management and smart specialisation practices within the framework of community cooperation to prevent social conflicts. It also aims to identify promising areas and gaps in the implementation of network management and smart specialisation strategies in different countries with non-identical levels of development and regions' functioning conditions. The study includes directions for improving network management, analysis of international experience in achieving regional development goals through the introduction of smart specialisation, and priority areas for optimising community cooperation to prevent social conflicts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The optimisation of community cooperation through network governance and smart specialisation is one of the most important aspects of modern territorial development in the context of decentralisation, and it is widely considered in scientific discourse. According to Kvitka and Mazur [2], the most effective mechanism for counteracting social conflicts is to apply network technologies to digital governance, which is currently at the stage of decentralisation, in order to predict social changes in the course of modelling the further development of a country, region or community. Thus, network governance is a transitional stage that involves ensuring transparency of cooperation and the formation of mutually beneficial relations between government institutions, citizens and the business sector due to the integration of the latest information and communication technologies [3]. Provan et al. [4] note that community partnerships or networks of cooperating public and non-profit organisations are essential to address a wide range of community problems and needs.

Among the main problems associated with network governance, public administration scholars identify the following: Sørensen and Torfing [5] highlight the inability of national and local governments to solve specific policy problems and seize new opportunities due to hierarchical command and control, which provokes the widespread use of market regulation in the provision of public goods and services; Hu et al. [6] note the lack of proper coordination between different levels of government and sectors, and thus the relationship between network structures and network effects; Shenkoya [7] emphasises the lack of transparency and accountability of network structures, which deepens the problem of trust in public institutions among citizens; and the threat of conflicts of interest between network participants, as emphasised by Fang et al. [8], leads to conflicts between different community actors when performing tasks to achieve the overall governance goal.

In turn, the concept of smart specialisation, according to Shevchenko [9], is the ability of the authorities to encourage and stimulate cooperation between local authorities, business, academia and civil society to improve the efficiency of the main sectors of the region's specialisation. A similar definition of smart specialisation is provided by Kogut-Jaworska and Ociepa-Kicińska [10], who describe it as a process based on a partnership between representatives of business, government, scientific and technical institutions, and the public. The main feature of smart specialisation

is primarily the stimulation of cooperation between representatives of the business sector, researchers and developers by the authorities to activate the main areas and sectors of specialisation in the region [11].

Instead, the barriers to smart specialisation at the current stage include, first of all, the lack of absorption and networking capabilities and strong cooperative links between universities and entrepreneurial businesses [12]; and the lack of complementary interregional links, which significantly reduces the likelihood of developing new technological specialisations in the regions (especially in the case of peripheral regions) [10, 13, 14]; as well as the lack of a clearly defined innovation component that should give impetus to structural changes in the economy [9]. According to Kavun and Zamula [15], solving the problem of missing data is crucial to obtaining accurate information that optimises decision-making and avoids ambiguity in management processes. In this context, it is worth noting the main ways to optimise community cooperation through network governance and smart specialisation, which include, on the one hand, ensuring the stability of interactions and involvement in public discussion through network governance [2], and on the other hand, it involves the integration of smart specialisation principles into state economic policy and coordination of regional actions [16].

There is a particular discrepancy between the definitions of social conflict in contemporary academic discourse. According to Etzioni-Halevy [17], conflict is an inevitable component of social relations and a source of social change, thus stimulating the development of society. However, Blikhar et al. [18] point out the harmful nature of social conflicts, which are accompanied by the destabilisation of society, economic losses and a decrease in public trust in state institutions. Therefore, in order to prevent the negative manifestations of social conflicts that have socio-economic, ethnic, political and religious backgrounds [19], public policy based on the principles of network management and smart specialisation helps to harmonise the interests of social groups, reduce tension and align different goals of the participants in interaction [16].

METHODS

The following methods were used in the research:

- The induction method was used to systematise the information collected by the author on the current state of development of community network management mechanisms and their role in shaping social and economic processes at the regional and national levels. In contrast, the deductive method was used to substantiate measures to optimise community cooperation based on existing network management concepts in public administration.
- The synthesis method was used to formulate measures to ensure the effectiveness of developing strategies and further implementing network management in Ukraine.
- Comparative analysis was used to analyse the experience of implementing smart specialisation in the regions of different EU member states.
- Case analysis was applied to identify the most effective measures for implementing smart specialisation of EU member states' regions and to identify the most relevant approaches to regional development.
- The analytical method is used to systematise the directions for introducing smart specialisation defined in 24 regional development strategies and to identify general trends in the development of Ukrainian regions.
- The systematisation method was used to identify barriers and formulate priority areas for improving the current strategy of smart specialisation of the regions of Ukraine.

A synergy method was employed to study the relationship between social conflicts' positive and negative functions and identify critical areas for optimising community cooperation through network management and smart specialisation to prevent them.

RESULTS

Modern technological evolution, based on the principles of networking and information flows, fundamentally changes the structure of society and the economy, forming a new management paradigm. Network structures are becoming the basis for organising economic processes that develop within a dynamic environment with numerous interconnected groups capable of constant renewal and adaptation. Thus, the issue of ensuring practical cooperation between government institutions, the business sector, and educational and research institutions is becoming

particularly relevant. One of the critical tools for ensuring effective interaction is network governance, which is based on the principles of transparency, openness and integration of different stakeholders [20].

Network governance is a unique form of organising interaction between government institutions, citizens and the business sector as a result of the integration of the latest information and communication technologies while ensuring the development of transparent cooperation based on mutually beneficial relations between all participants, in particular through the establishment of a system of communication and coordination of actions to solve everyday problems.

To be effective, networked governance requires collecting and disseminating information quickly through various channels, such as email, websites, social media or SMS, providing continuous access to real-time services at a minimal, publicly affordable cost. The peculiarity of networked governance is that it puts citizens and other stakeholders who are customers of public services at the centre of attention, emphasising the priority of consumer interests over the needs of public institutions or their employees.

The primary function of a public administrator in this model is to ensure a high standard of living for the population of a particular administrative unit or the state as a whole, to make optimal use of available resources (material, technological, infrastructural) to provide services and meet the needs of the community, and to establish effective communication between citizens and authorities, which requires the training of qualified public administrators capable of working effectively in various sectors, including state, municipal, commercial and non-profit organisations.

Several measures must be considered to implement network governance in Ukraine successfully. First, it is necessary to develop a unified methodology for evaluating the results of regional programmes and create a long-term register of such initiatives, which will ensure systematisation and control of the effectiveness of state and local development programmes. Secondly, network management integration should be accompanied by strengthening amalgamated territorial communities, which should become the main subjects of local management decisions. The reform of decentralisation requires the search for modern tools that will help increase the capacity of local communities. In addition, special attention should be paid to developing partnership mechanisms and co-financing in project implementation, as the lack of financial resources and insufficient staff qualifications remain serious challenges. The project approach, which is already being gradually introduced into the activities of public authorities, needs to be adapted to the specifics of the national governance system, including project maturity mechanisms to assess the capacity of public authorities to manage and implement projects effectively. In this context, a key element of success is increasing public management's project maturity based on networked systems. Integrating these principles helps improve the quality of management decisions and ensure the sustainable development of territorial communities, efficient use of resources, and implementation of long-term development strategies.

Thus, to ensure the effectiveness of community interaction in the face of global and local challenges, as well as the need to prevent social conflicts in the context of digital transformation, the need for network management is undeniable, but requires an integrated approach using other tools, including the concept of smart specialisation, in order to achieve sustainable economic growth and social cohesion within the country. Smart specialisation involves identifying the competitive advantages of regions and focusing on developing the most promising sectors of the economy through innovation. As part of this strategy, communities can pool internal resources and knowledge to solve common problems, using network management models to coordinate actions and minimise the risks of social conflict.

In the European Union (EU) countries, the most effective tool for mobilising the internal resources of the national economy in the process is smart specialisation, which stimulates the processes of achieving sustainable development goals and the country's recovery in the post-crisis period. In this context, smart specialisation satisfies the economy's need for consistency and coherence between the development tools of regions and individual communities and the national goals of the state. This approach also correlates with the principles of pan-European economic policy, thus stimulating the innovative development of the most competitive activities of the regions. It should also be noted that the synergy between regional funding instruments and other EU programmes is essential for attracting and stimulating smart investments in each member state.

The Belgian experience in shaping the Smart Specialisation Strategy 2.0 (2021–2027), which is centred around priority areas of investment that coincide with the four Flanders Strategic Research Centres and 7 Spearhead clusters,

which act as a facilitator of triple helix collaboration to move in the respective S3 areas for co-investment in EU value chains. The Flemish priority areas coincide with the regional R&D structure, consisting of 4 strategic research centres and 7 clusters. The S3 domains in Flanders are: sustainable chemistry, advanced materials, intelligent manufacturing, health and life sciences, specialised logistics, agro-industry, electronic systems, internet and photonic systems, energy, environment and clean technologies, blue economy (creative industries are considered an S3 domain). The provides insight into the alignment of Flanders' priorities with the S3s of other regions, for example in cross-cutting themes (e.g. bioeconomy), where regions combine their strengths and cooperate in pilot actions to develop value chains in the EU [21].

Greece's National Strategy for Smart Specialisation 2021–2027, adopted in June 2022 (Ministerial Decision 66021/30-6-2022), is based on knowledge and its commercialisation to produce high-value-added products and services capable of integrating into global value chains. In line with the European regulations governing structural funds, the new S3 strategy, along with research innovation and new technologies, also covers the specific objectives of digitalisation, enhancing the competitiveness and growth of SMEs, and developing the necessary skills for the double transition. In addition, the national S3 has regional offshoots in addition to 13 regional smart specialisation strategies for the country's regions [22].

Thus, a characteristic feature of smart specialisation policy implementation is the constant emphasis on entrepreneurial search. In contrast, for Central and Eastern European countries, which are at the stage of gradual decentralisation, the practical implementation of smart specialisation is a complex process that involves initiating research and innovation policies based on the principles of smart specialisation by state and regional authorities.

In this context, Latvia's Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) aims to transform the country's economy towards higher added value, productivity and more efficient use of resources. With this goal in mind, Latvia is implementing three critical areas of RIS3, namely: changing the structure of production and exports in traditional sectors of the economy; developing sectors of future growth where high value-added products and services exist or may appear; and developing sectors with significant horizontal spillovers and contribution to economic transformation [23].

Ukraine is currently the most advanced in smart specialisation among the EU candidate countries. Despite the ongoing war and the accompanying economic crisis, Ukraine's Vision for Regional Development until 2027 [24], the principal strategic document, has been adopted. The socio-economic goals of this strategy include, first of all, a high level of social, economic and spatial cooperation in the country; secondly, ensuring a stable competitive advantage of the regions, and multi-level governance based on the principles of human centrism. This regional policy, which underpins the overall Strategy for Regional Development of Ukraine, focuses on providing state support for less developed sectors and territories, as well as the construction of infrastructure facilities and the creation of comprehensive development projects that focus on a detailed analysis of opportunities and challenges for regions and communities and within the country. In order to implement state programmes and projects within the framework of the regional development strategy, special attention should be paid to developing and implementing a list of relevant spatial planning documents in functional areas that require additional financial support.

Given the current development strategies of Ukraine's regions, each of which has points related to smart specialisation, their main goal is to ensure innovation and efficiency in implementing the region's highest-priority economic activities. Based on the analysis of regional development strategies until 2027, the main areas of smart specialisation implementation among 24 regions of Ukraine were summarised, as shown in Figure 1. Thus, industrial and related economic activities show the highest results in the smart specialisation field; smart specialisation is a relevant tool for implementing Ukraine's industrial policy.

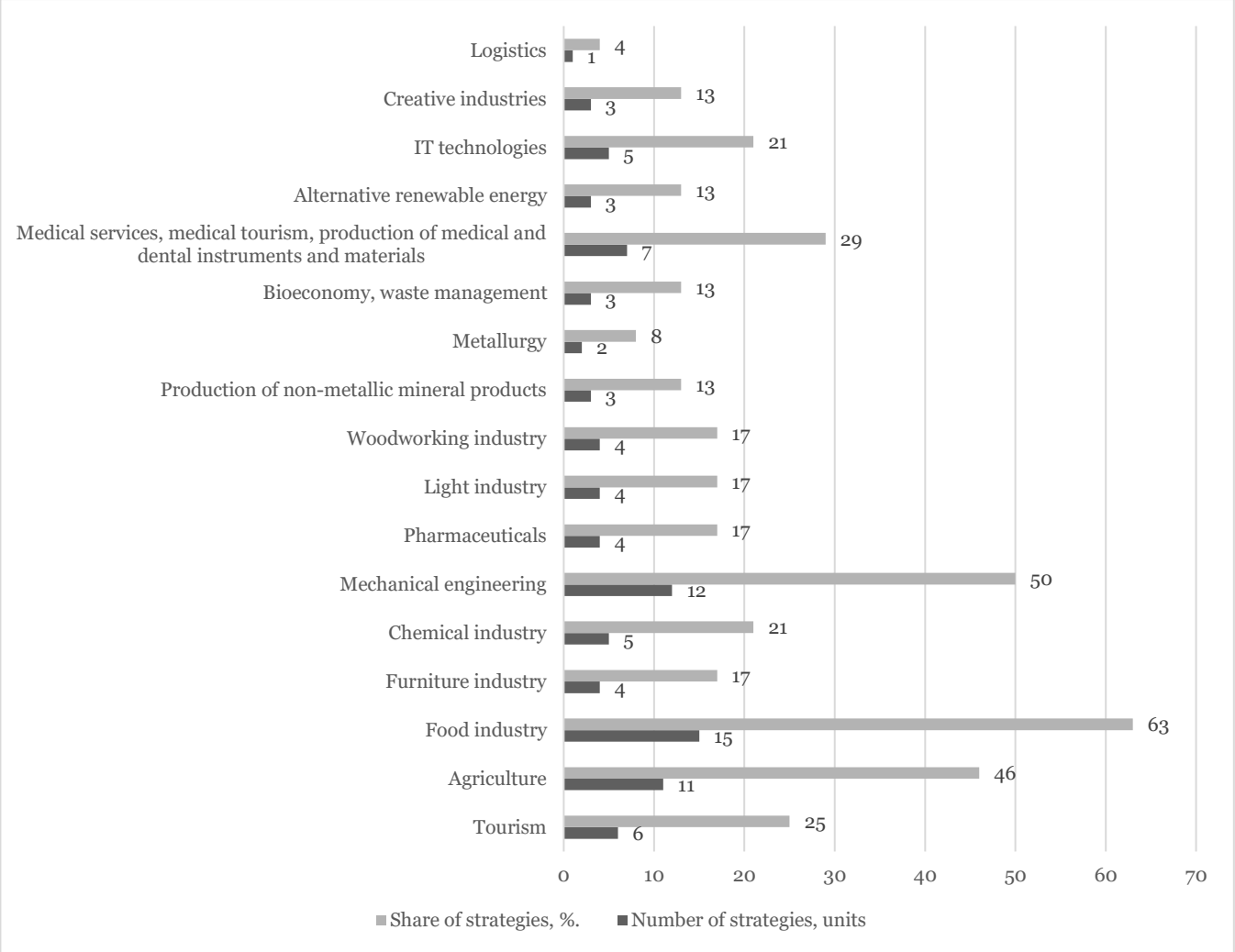

Figure 1. Areas of Smart Specialisation Defined in the Development Strategies of Ukrainian Regions until 2027

Source: Shevchenko [9]

Thus, the current development of Ukraine's regions is characterised by the predominance of several industries, mainly the industrial sector, which specialises in producing low-value-added products, low levels of innovation and high energy and material costs. In addition, there is low private sector involvement, a limited number of start-ups, insufficient incentives for innovation, and weak interaction between business and academia Senchenko [25]. In this context, the sectoral distribution of smart specialisation areas in regional strategies indicates a significant share of the food industry (15 strategies) and agriculture (11 strategies). Other areas of smart specialisation that are indirectly related to industrial economic activities include mechanical engineering (12 strategies), chemical (5 strategies), pharmaceutical (4 strategies), light (4 strategies), woodworking (4 strategies), and furniture (4 strategies) industries, which demonstrates the high potential of the smart specialisation approach for structural diversification of production in the regions. Other shortcomings of the current Regional Development Strategy include the mediocrity of the authorities in implementing priority areas of regional development, which creates barriers to maintaining structural imbalances with a predominance of raw material production. Given the existing limitations of the existing measures of smart specialisation, it is necessary to formulate ways to improve the state policy in this area, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Priority Areas for Improving the Modern Strategy of Smart Specialisation of Ukraine's Regions

Aims	Tasks
Formation of new tables of mechanisms for implementing priority areas of smart specialisation	To take into account new global challenges, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, as well as current challenges related to the legal regime of martial law, hostilities, political and socio-economic crisis, and commitments under European integration, in particular the European Green Deal (EGD).
Integration of smart specialisation into other instruments of state economic policy	Ensure synergies with other programmes to support innovation, investment, and exports and programmes to develop industrial and scientific parks aimed at a “green transition” in Ukraine.
Create a risk assessment and prevention system	Develop a transparent system to monitor the implementation of smart specialisation strategies, eliminate corruption risks, and ensure flexible task adjustment in response to changing conditions.
Creation of a national policy for the development of value chains	To apply the principles of the European approach to interregional cooperation, which involves the creation of specialised smart specialisation platforms, as well as coordination between the actions of regional authorities and the development of cooperation between regions.
Analysis of current regional priorities and challenges of smart specialisation	Conduct a thorough assessment of smart specialisation priorities regarding their relevance in the context of war and the need to achieve sustainable development goals. Based on the results of the analysis, it is necessary to initiate changes to regional strategies and adapt them to the regions' current problems.
Developing a national smart specialisation policy	Systematise the priorities and tasks of individual territorial communities within regions, and focus on developing mechanisms for their financial and organisational support at the national level.
Support for industrial and scientific parks that meet the priorities of smart specialisation	Introduce state support for industrial and scientific parks to facilitate the development of innovation and investment activities in line with the priorities of smart specialisation.
Formation of regional smart specialisation platforms	Create regional platforms to enhance cooperation between participants in smart specialisation projects and attract investors. Subsequently, an all-Ukrainian platform could be created to support projects of interregional importance.
Supporting projects to improve energy efficiency and resource conservation in the regions	Establish financial support programmes and preferential loan systems for smart specialisation projects as part of the national contribution to the Paris Agreement, particularly for energy efficiency and resource conservation measures.
Consideration of smart specialisation priorities in national strategic and innovation plans	The Law of Ukraine “On Priority Areas of Innovation Activities in Ukraine” requires that regional priorities be integrated into the national strategic directions of innovation activities after 2021.

Source: compiled by the author

A large number of concepts aimed at resolving, managing and preventing social conflicts are critical in the context of global digital transformation, which leads to an increase in the number of conflicts (including interethnic, interethnic, intra-state) and the evolution of their causes [2]. In social development, conflict is the escalation of contradictions in relations between people or social groups, characterised by a clash of divergent interests that can be overt or covert,

but are always associated with a lack of agreement between the parties. Social conflicts are usually caused by social inequality, selfishness, differences in values, religious differences, and psychological characteristics. Social conflicts result from specific conditions and factors that influence their occurrence. Therefore, it is now essential to develop new ways of managing conflicts aimed at preventing and regulating them. The appropriate tools for managing social conflicts include network management of cooperation between communities and regions based on smart specialisation, which combines digital technologies (networks, platforms) in decentralised digital governance. Thus, social processes are modelled, and the future development of communities within individual regions and at the national level is forecasted. However, an ineffective approach to this process leads to an aggravation of social conflicts (which, in the worst case, leads to armed confrontation, revolution, and civil war). Given that the nature of social conflicts can be both positive (stimulating qualitative transformation and development of society) [17] and negative (destabilisation of society, economic losses, reduction of public trust in the authorities) [18], it is essential to analyse the functions of conflicts and the possibilities of strengthening those that contribute to the development of communities and society as a whole and avoid their destructive consequences. The developed ways to optimise community cooperation through network management and smart specialisation to prevent social conflicts are shown in Figure 2.

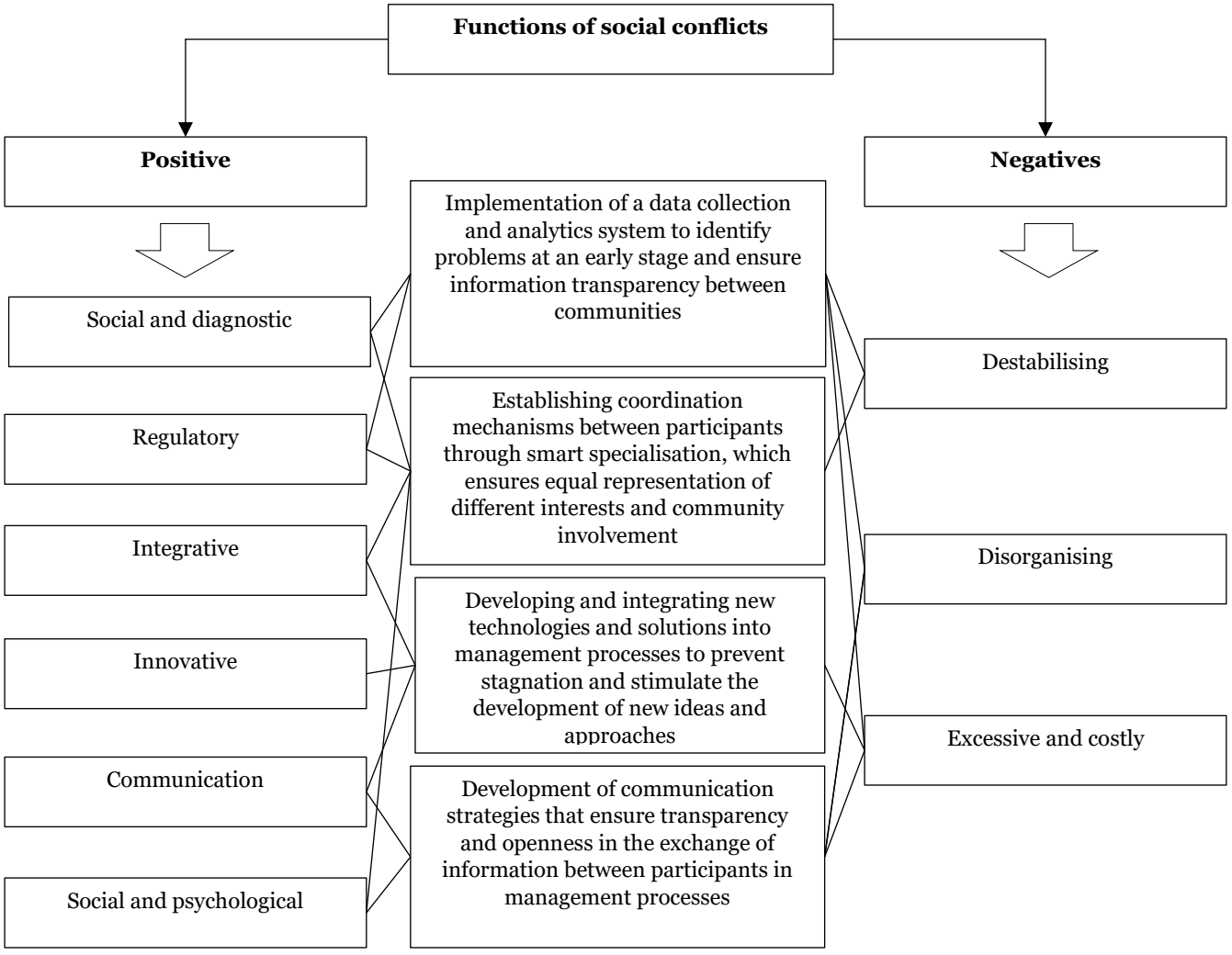

Figure 2. Ways of Optimising Community Cooperation through Network Management and Smart Specialisation to Prevent Social Conflict

Source: compiled by the author

The positive functions of social conflicts include social diagnostic (identifying social contradictions), regulatory (maintaining social balance), integrative (promoting community consolidation), innovative (provoking social change), communicative (stimulating cooperation) and socio-psychological (reducing psychological tension). For example, introducing data collection and analytics systems allows for identifying problem areas and providing information to citizens, helping to improve their involvement in decision-making processes. Developing new coordination mechanisms through smart specialisation increases mutual understanding between different groups, and innovative technologies provide new approaches to conflict resolution. In contrast, the opposing functions of social conflicts include destabilisation (disrupts social balance), disorganisation (slows down development processes) and the excessive cost component (requires additional resources). These negative consequences of social conflicts can be minimised by developing integrative network technologies that reduce social tension. Developing communication strategies is crucial in creating mechanisms to prevent destabilising processes due to social conflicts. In addition, a practical approach is introducing a data collection system that allows for conflict detection and information transparency between communities at its inception, as well as equal representation of different interests and community engagement through smart specialisation.

DISCUSSION

The modern approach to governance involves not only vertical interaction between authorities but also horizontal cooperation between communities, which allows for the optimisation of resources and increased efficiency of decision-making. For example, Kvitka and Mazur [2] note that introducing digital technologies in the modern public administration system allows for regulating predictable cyclical events (including social conflicts) and identifying the sequence of such phenomena in society. Provan et al. [4] concluded that networked governance strengthens the community's ability to meet critical health care, human services, social problems, and development economics needs. Contrary to the conclusions of these authors, our study found that for the successful implementation of network governance in Ukraine, it is necessary to develop a unified methodology for evaluating results, create a long-term register of initiatives, strengthen amalgamated territorial communities, search for modern tools to increase community capacity, stimulate the development of partnership mechanisms and co-financing of projects, adapt the project approach, implement project maturity mechanisms, and increase the project maturity of public management. This approach will provide a prompt solution to current problems of network governance, including hierarchical command and ineffective control by the authorities in countering political problems and taking advantage of new opportunities [5], lack of coordination between levels of government [6], lack of transparency and accountability of network structures [7], and the threat of conflicts of interest between network participants [8].

Instead, the findings of Yermachenko et al. [26] indicate the need for smart governance in the context of socio-spatial development of communities and taking into account the needs of citizens, in order to avoid the bilateral adverse effects of digital inequality and unjustified increases in public spending on the other. According to Soroka [11], smart specialisation involves actively stimulating cooperation between business representatives, scientists, and developers by the authorities to activate the main areas and sectors of specialisation in a region or community. We agree with the authors' conclusions, explaining the need to introduce the principles of smart specialisation by the expediency of its application to optimise community cooperation and prevent social conflicts. In turn, Dudnik et al. [27] consider it necessary to improve the practice of public administration of communities to achieve appropriate results in the context of rapid digital transformation. In this context, our study highlights the essential measures to improve the current strategy of smart specialisation of Ukrainian regions, including the revision of innovative specialisation tasks and their integration into state economic policy, the creation of a risk assessment system and national value chain policy, analysis of regional priorities, support for industrial parks, formation of regional development platforms and energy efficiency projects, and consideration of smart specialisation of regions in general strategic plans.

The problems of implementing smart specialisation noted in Shevchenko [9], in particular the vagueness of the innovation component, the need to ensure sustainable innovation development and the lack of consideration of interregional cooperation opportunities, were solved in the study by developing areas for optimising community cooperation through network management and smart specialisation to prevent social conflicts, namely: the introduction of a data collection system, coordination of participants through smart specialisation, integration of new technologies into management processes and the development of communication strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study identified several measures for effectively implementing network governance in Ukraine. First, it is essential to develop a unified methodology for evaluating the results of regional programmes and create a long-term register of such initiatives, which will help systematise and monitor their effectiveness. In turn, network management integration should be accompanied by strengthening amalgamated territorial communities, which will play a vital role in implementing local management decisions. In addition, the reform of decentralisation requires the search for modern tools that will help increase the capacity of local communities. It is also essential to identify the competitive advantages of the regions and focus on the development of the most promising sectors of the economy through innovation, which in the long run will allow communities to pool resources to solve common problems, using networked governance models to act and reduce the risk of social conflict. Thus, optimisation of community cooperation through network governance and smart specialisation ensures the introduction of a data collection and analytics system for the early detection of problems, the establishment of coordination mechanisms between participants, the integration of new technologies into management processes, and the development of communication strategies to ensure transparency in the exchange of messages. The priority areas and necessary measures aim to prevent social conflicts and ensure sustainable economic growth in the face of current challenges.

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