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ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DECENTRALIZATION REFORM IN UKRAINE

Abstract. The reform of local self-government and decentralization began in Ukraine in 2014 and is still ongoing. Over the course of 10 years, many of the results of the reform are already becoming noticeable and one can draw a conclusion about its success or failure. The purpose of this article is to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the Ukrainian decentralization reform, in order to understand whether this model is suitable as a model for other post-Soviet states, including Kazakhstan. An assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the reform was carried out through in-depth interviews with Ukrainian experts, as well as through SWOT analysis. The main conclusions formulated based on the results of the article are that the Ukrainian decentralization reform has more advantages than disadvantages. The main advantages of the reform are improving the quality of administrative services provided, as well as increasing their accessibility, optimizing the administrative-territorial structure and increasing local budgets. The disadvantages of the reform are the strengthening of regional and local patronage elites, as well as the incompleteness of decentralization at the level of districts and regions. As a result of the article, those elements of the Ukrainian reform were identified that could be used in the conditions of Kazakhstan, with the aim of further developing the system of local self-government.

Keywords: Ukraine, decentralization, local government, local democracy, reform.

Мәди Омаров, Арчил Чочиа УКРАИНАДАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚТАСТЫРУ РЕФОРМАСЫНЫҢ АРТЫҚШЫЛЫҚТАРЫ МЕН КЕМШІЛІКТЕРІ

Андатпа. Жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару және орталықсыздандыру реформасы Украинада 2014 жылы басталды және әлі де жалғасуда. 10 жыл ішінде реформаның көптеген нәтижелері қазірдің өзінде байқалып, оның сәтті немесе сәтсіздігі туралы қорытынды жасауға болады. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты - Украинаның орталықсыздандыру реформасының

артықшылықтары мен кемшіліктерін талдау, бұл модель басқа пост-кеңестік мемлекеттерге, соның ішінде Қазақстанға үлгі ретінде жарамды ма екенін түсіну. Реформаның артықшылықтары мен кемшіліктерін бағалау украиндық сарапшылармен тереңдетілген сұхбат, сондай-ақ SWOT талдау арқылы жүзеге асырылды. Мақаланың нәтижелері бойынша негізгі тұжырымдар: Украинаның орталықсыздандыру реформасының кемшіліктерден гөрі артықшылығы көп. Реформаның негізгі артықшылықтары ретінде көрсетілетін әкімшілік қызметтердің сапасын арттыру, сондай-ақ олардың қолжетімділігін арттыру, әкімшілік-аумақтық құрылымды оңтайландыру және жергілікті бюджеттерді ұлғайту болып табылады. Реформаның кемшіліктері аймақтық және жергілікті патроналды элиталардың күшеюі, сондай-ақ аудандар мен облыстар деңгейінде орталықсыздандырудың толық еместігі болып табылады. Мақаланың нәтижесінде жергілікті өзін-өзі басқару жүйесін одан әрі дамыту мақсатында Қазақстан жағдайында қолдануға болатын украин реформасының элементтері анықталды.

Түйін сөздер: *Украина, орталықсыздандыру, жергілікті басқару, жергілікті демократия, реформа.*

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ПРЕИМУЩЕСТВА И НЕДОСТАТКИ РЕФОРМЫ ДЕЦЕНТРАЛИЗАЦИИ В УКРАИНЕ

Аннотация. Реформа местного самоуправления и децентрализации началась в Украине в 2014 году и продолжается до сих пор. За 10 лет, многие результаты реформы уже становятся заметны и можно делать вывод о ее успехе или провале. Целью настоящей статьи является анализ преимуществ и недостатков украинской реформы децентрализации, для того, чтобы понять, подходит ли данная модель в качестве образца для других пост-советских государств, в том числе Казахстана. Оценка преимуществ и недостатков реформы проведена посредством глубинных интервью с украинскими экспертами, а также посредством SWOT анализа. Основные выводы, сформулированные по итогам статьи, заключаются в том, что украинская реформа децентрализации имеет больше преимуществ, чем недостатков. Основными преимуществами реформы являются улучшение качества предоставляемых административных услуг, а также увеличение их доступности, оптимизация административно-территориального устройства и увеличение местных бюджетов. Недостатками реформы являются усиление региональных и местных патрональных элит, а также незавершенность децентрализации на уровне районов и областей. По итогам статьи, были выявлены те элементы украинской реформы, которые можно было бы использовать в условиях Казахстана, с целью дальнейшего развития системы местного самоуправления.

Ключевые слова: *Украина, децентрализация, местное самоуправление, локальная демократия, реформа.*

Introduction

In Kazakhstan, the development of local self-government and decentralization of state power are on the agenda. By decree of the President of Kazakhstan, on August 18, 2021, the Concept for the development of local self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025 [1] was approved, which indicates the main directions for the development of local self-government in the country until 2025, provides an overview of international experience, and also indicates the need for further decentralization of powers and creating an effective system of local self-government. The problem of further development of local self-government was emphasized by the President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev in his message dated September 1, 2021 [2]. In addition, in 2023, the Draft Law “On Local Self-Government” [3] was also presented, which envisages the introduction of new local government bodies - *kenes*. However, this bill was criticized by the expert community [4]. Accordingly, the question arises about choosing the most optimal and appropriate model for reforming local government and decentralization.

To select an appropriate model for local government reform and decentralization, the choice of international experience plays an important role, especially if it is associated with a country that has similar starting conditions, as well as a similar political, economic and socio-cultural context. In this regard, in our opinion, it makes sense to study the experience of Ukraine, as a country that, like Kazakhstan, is a post-Soviet state with a three-level system of administrative-territorial structure. V. Romanova and A. Umland [5] point out that the reform of local government and decentralization in Ukraine can serve as a model for other post-communist states that have problems with excessive centralization and insufficient powers of local authorities. The authors emphasize that Ukraine's experience can provide valuable information to countries facing similar problems.

At the same time, there is not enough information in Kazakhstani scientific literature analyzing international experience in reforming local self-government, which could potentially serve as a model for carrying out similar reforms in Kazakhstan. In this regard, we intend to fill this gap and analyze the Ukrainian experience as a potentially acceptable model for decentralization in Kazakhstan. The Ukrainian decentralization reform is one of the most successful reforms carried out in Ukraine after the change of government in 2014 [6], which gives us reason to consider the experience of this country as one of the possible models for carrying out a similar reform in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this article is to study the Ukrainian reform of local government and decentralization to identify the advantages and disadvantages of this reform. This purpose is achieved by performing the following tasks: (1) review of existing theoretical literature on the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization in general and in Ukraine in particular; (2) conducting expert interviews with experts to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the reform; (3) processing of the obtained data using a special computer program designed for analyzing qualitative data (MAXQDA24); (4) interpretation of results and formulation of conclusions.

The object of study of this article is the reform of local self-government and decentralization in Ukraine, carried out in the period from 2014 to 2020 (active phase). The subject of this article are advantages and disadvantages of reform in the prism of administrative, fiscal and political aspects. To conduct this research, we use the method of in-depth interviews with experts, as well as the SWOT analysis method. Our hypothesis is based on the assumption, that the Ukrainian decentralization reform has such advantages as increased administrative and fiscal independence of local governments, increased efficiency in decision-making at the local level, improved quality of public services provided to the population, as well as increased accountability of local authorities to the local community. At the same time, the reform has such shortcomings as the strengthening of regional and local elites and the incompleteness of the reform of regional self-government at the level of regions and districts. This hypothesis is based on the theories of such authors as Sh. Cheema and D. Rondinelli [7], M. Illner and H. Wollmann [8], J. – P. Fague and C. Poschl [9], and D. Treisman [10].

Materials and methods

Our research methodology for examining decentralization and its benefits and drawbacks is based on the qualitative approach of J. B. P. Harguindéguy, A. Cole and R. Pasquier [11], which involves conducting in-depth interviews with experts to assess decentralization. The main methods used in this study are in-depth interviews with experts, as well as SWOT analysis. The experts in this study are representatives of the scientific community involved in studying the problem of decentralization in various aspects, as well as former municipal employees and deputies of local representative bodies of Ukraine. To conduct in-depth interviews, we developed a guide in Russian and Ukrainian, consisting of 8 main questions and 32 auxiliary questions. All in-depth interviews with experts were conducted between November 2023 and February 2024, via video conference using Google Meet and Zoom. Recording of in-depth interviews was carried out through video and audio recording. All in-depth interview recordings were transcribed manually. The interview transcripts were processed and coded using the MAXQDA24 computer program, designed for processing and analyzing qualitative data.

In turn, based on the results of processing and analysis of in-depth interviews, a SWOT analysis was carried out, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of decentralization reform in Ukraine. SWOT analysis is based solely on in-depth interview data obtained during the study.

The scientific literature contains many fundamental works on the theory of decentralization, as well as its advantages and disadvantages [12], [13], [14], [7], [10], [15], [9]. A number of authors ([16]; [17]; [18]; [10]; [7]; [19]) identify 3 main aspects of decentralization: administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization and political decentralization. We also consider decentralization in our article in the light of these three aspects. Many authors have studied the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization reform in Ukraine ([20]; [21];

[22]; [23]; [24]; [25]; [26]; [5]; [27]; [22]). The work of most of these authors examines both the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization reform.

Literature review

The existing variety of scientific literature on decentralization contains enough information about all the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization that were identified by the authors of these scientific studies. At the same time, it should be noted that all these studies differ from each other, firstly, in the object of study of scientists, and secondly, in how they present the positive and negative aspects of decentralization.

The advantages and disadvantages of decentralization reform in Ukraine are also considered by many authors in their scientific works. Thus, A. Kruglashov and N. Sidash [25, p. 29] highlight among the advantages of the Ukrainian decentralization reform that decentralization has opened up wide opportunities for the development of various forms and instruments of local democracy. The authors point out that the reform contributed to a noticeable renewal of regional and local elites, both political and managerial. Also, the authors point to the widespread involvement of the local community in the process of public decision-making at the local level, which was facilitated by the new status of territorial communities, which opened up more opportunities for direct democracy and civic participation. It is noted that new tools, such as electronic petitions, have become widespread among citizens. In addition, the popularity of participatory budgets is also highlighted, especially at the level of large cities with large financial resources. At the same time, despite all the successes achieved, the authors point out a number of shortcomings and problems that still remain unresolved. In particular, the authors note that decentralization reform at the regional and district level has remained incomplete, which has an impact on managerial efficiency [25, p. 34]. In addition, the authors point out that initially the reform often encountered great resistance and misunderstanding [25, p. 26], and in a number of regions, the decentralization process took place with a significant delay [25, p. 32].

Other authors [26, p. 35] highlight among the advantages that the voluntary amalgamation of territorial communities allowed the newly formed local governments to receive greater powers and financial resources that previously only cities of regional significance had. Also, the authors emphasize that the amalgamated territorial communities (ATC) received 1.5 million hectares of agricultural land at their disposal. In addition, there were mechanisms for solving joint problems of several territorial communities, such as waste collection and recycling, development of joint infrastructure, etc. On the other hand, the authors highlight a number of shortcomings of the reform. In particular, they point out that regional and district councils have not received their own executive bodies (executive committees), and therefore are deprived of the opportunity to exercise their powers. Another serious drawback, the authors call, is the lack of legal consolidation of reform at the level of the Constitution, which would streamline the relations between the central government and the regions. In addition, among

the shortcomings, the authors also highlighted the low level of qualifications of specialists and municipal employees at the local level, the risk of “enclavization” of some territorial communities on linguistic and ethnic grounds, as well as problems associated with the differentiation of the budgets of territorial communities in the process of their creation [26, p. 41].

V. Romanova and A. Umland [5, p. 371] note that the decentralization reform made it possible to improve the quality of administrative services provided to the population, as well as make them more accessible, since their provision was brought down to the level of territorial communities. Also, territorial communities were entrusted with the provision of some social services, such as school education and healthcare (maintenance of outpatient clinics). Among other advantages of the reform, the authors name the strengthening of local governments by transferring the majority (60%) of the personal income tax to amalgamated territorial communities. In addition, budget rules became more transparent as the opaque subsidy mechanism was replaced by equalization grants, which required more accountability from local governments [5, p. 371]. At the same time, the authors highlight a number of problems that had to be encountered during the implementation of the reform. They note that improving the quality of public services provided requires not only the construction of new facilities, such as Centers for the provision of administrative services, but also optimization of the social infrastructure network. The authors emphasize that local governments elected in direct elections did not always want to take responsibility for the implementation of these unpopular decisions [5, p. 375].

W. Dudley [21, p. 29] among the advantages of the Ukrainian decentralization reform names the increased trust of the population to local governments, and this level of trust is higher than the level of trust to central authorities, such as the Parliament, Government and President. The author considers the disadvantages that despite the reform, at the local level politics is still dominated by informal patronage networks, usually headed by local influential businessmen who are closely connected with local politicians. This, in turn, prevents the reduction of corruption.

Results and discussion

One of the main research questions that we pose in our study is to assess the effectiveness, advantages and disadvantages of the reform of local government (decentralization) and the territorial organization of power, which has been carried out in the country since 2014. As stated in the Introduction, the assessment was carried out primarily on three aspects of decentralization: administrative, fiscal and political.

Most experts rate the reform as a whole either good or above average. They emphasize that in the post-Soviet space, not counting the Baltic countries, the Ukrainian decentralization reform is the most complete. This reform, according to them, significantly distinguishes Ukraine from other post-Soviet states where local government reform in one form or another began, that is, in comparison with Moldova and Georgia:

«The Ukrainian example best shows how this transition period can be organized, that is, moving from one model to a more optimal one, which is conditioned or focused on a completely different type of economy and administration».

From the point of view of conceptualizing this reform, the expert assesses the reform as “B+”. From the point of view of the legal and regulatory support of the reform, it is rated as a “B -”, and from the point of view of the results achieved, as a “C +”. They emphasize that much in the overall assessment depends on the stages of implementation of this reform:

«The stage of government reform at the local level was resolved quite successfully. We can consider it a “B+”. However, the overall assessment is not as successful as we would like. It all depends on the stages. At the first stage everything was more than good, at the second stage - average, and at the third - the assessment was unsatisfactory».

Experts note that the reform of local self-government and territorial organization of power in Ukraine is one of the most successful reforms carried out by the Ukrainian authorities after the Revolution of Dignity of 2014. This progress is also noted in various studies [6] and assessments of international organizations [28]:

«It is considered one of the most successful reforms after Euromaidan and, in principle, if I had to choose one of the successful reforms, I would say that it is decentralization».

Experts point out that from the beginning, the reform faced great difficulties and challenges, among which resistance, non-acceptance [25], as well as external and internal pressure on reformers stand out.

It is noted that not all reform goals were achieved. A large number of problems arose, especially related to social infrastructure, since the newly created territorial communities did not want to take unprofitable objects on their balance sheet, which is also confirmed by other studies [5, p. 375]. Also, among the difficulties and obstacles to carrying out local government reform, experts highlighted the lack of a system for informing the population about how the community should work.

Assessing the Ukrainian reform of local self-government and decentralization through the prism of administrative decentralization, experts highlight both pros and cons. According to experts, the key parameter was to improve the quality of public services, which was done in many territorial communities.

It is also emphasized that, as a result of the reform, Centers for the Provision of Administrative Services were created at the level of territorial communities, where most of the public services could be obtained according to the one-stop-shop principle. Thus, people had the opportunity to receive all the necessary services in their locations, without having to go to the district center:

«People from some small communities got the opportunity not to go to the district or region when they need some piece of paper, but to receive it in their united community. And there they... A wide range of different administrative

services are provided in these centers. Well, there, for example, you can change your driving license, passports, in general, all this “paper work”».

Experts say a significant advantage of the reform is the multiple reduction in the number of territorial communities. It is emphasized that before the reform, there were more than 11 thousand territorial communities in Ukraine, the vast majority of which were subsidized (with the exception of cities of regional significance). They could not cope with the functions and responsibilities assigned to them, such as maintaining schools and hospitals, and providing administrative services. An administrative-territorial reform was carried out at the level of territorial units of the basic level, which made it possible to optimize the number of territorial communities and increase their self-sufficiency [29].

Also, among the advantages of administrative decentralization, experts include the fact that territorial communities received a number of new functions and powers, including the functions of registering acts of civil status, as well as resolving property issues.

In addition, experts named the creation of the Ministry of Development of Communities and Territories (formerly the Ministry of Regional Development), which interacts with territorial communities, takes into account their interests and acts as an intermediary between local authorities and the center, as a positive element of administrative decentralization.

One of the shortcomings of the reform in terms of administrative decentralization, experts called the incompleteness of the work associated with the abandonment of regional state administrations and the introduction of the institution of prefect. The original plan of the reform assumed that instead of regional state administrations, each of which contains a large state apparatus and also occupies huge premises, the institution of prefects would be introduced, which would be deprived of executive powers, and all its activities would be concentrated on monitoring the legality of the activities of local governments. It was assumed that the prefect would have a small office, which would employ about 15 people, which is less than the number of employees of regional public administrations. However, to implement this step it was necessary to amend the Constitution of Ukraine, which was not done due to political disagreements between members of the ruling coalition [26].

At the same time, the introduction of the institution of prefects, proposed at the initial stage of the reform, but which remained unrealized, is assessed by experts differently. On the one hand, it is noted that the institution of prefects is outdated, and its introduction is explained only by the reluctance of the central government to lose tight control over local governments. It is emphasized that in the presence of an adversarial and independent court, there are every opportunity for central authorities to defend their interests, or to overturn decisions of local governments if they contradict the law:

«If you have an adversarial court or the law quite well regulates certain responsibilities or opportunities, then it is not entirely necessary to have a representative of the central authorities who oversee the implementation of

certain laws, instructions or government decisions that will be required to be executed by local authorities».

According to them, instead of creating an institute of prefects, these functions can be delegated to a special Ministry. In this case, there will be no need to create a large number of new institutions and recruit staff.

Among the disadvantages of the reform in terms of administrative decentralization, experts note that real decentralization did not occur at the district level. Despite the fact that the districts were enlarged and more people began to live in them, nevertheless, district councils did not receive the right to form their own executive committees [26], which would be responsible for the implementation of their powers. Moreover, district councils also did not receive new powers. In addition, experts emphasize that district councils do not have real opportunities to exercise their existing powers. Executive powers are delegated to district state administrations [30], which causes many legal and procedural conflicts. In addition, as a result of the reform, the district level has lost the greatest leverage and is currently in an uncertain state:

«There was a clear proposal that at the district level it is necessary to carry out administrative-territorial reform and redistribute administrative powers in favor of district councils. This assumed a scenario where the district level remained and the district administrations were eliminated. Instead, district councils receive strong powers in relation to the second level of service provision. It became clear that this sub-regional level acquired a completely different meaning in this system and this is a fairly wide range of tasks and powers. But, unfortunately, the reform of public administration at the district level is not completed. At the district level, very few functions remain; in fact, even today, the district level is the weakest. The least well-off even at the level of executive power, not to mention at the level of local self-government, that is, representative power».

As for financial decentralization, experts attribute greater certainty in budget policy at the local level to its advantages. The amendments made to the Budget Code [31], which established a clear percentage of revenues from certain taxes to local budgets, made it possible for territorial communities to better plan their budgets and not depend on the decisions of the central authorities. Territorial communities knew in advance what their approximate amount of revenue would be and, based on this, they could better plan their expenses:

«Previously, it was not clear to the communities how much money they had and when they would have it. They were heavily dependent on these interbudgetary transfers and no certain income was assigned to them. After the reform, they were assigned 60% of income from personal income taxes, and this is still their largest income, and after the war they increased to 64% of what they receive. And, of course, they became more certain, they began to better plan the financing of some projects. They could afford, again, to reconstruct something, etc.».

Experts also named the replacement of subsidies with subventions as an advantage of fiscal decentralization. Their main difference is that a subvention is a targeted transfer for which territorial communities must report to the center

[31]. They received subsidies without any control and reporting to the central authorities:

«Subventions are a targeted tool. It has a little more reporting than before and after its use. Subventions, they are considered more effective than subsidies. The experience that there were more subsidies, this also helped».

The establishment of direct inter-budgetary relations between the central budget and all other levels of budgets is also assessed by experts as an advantage of fiscal decentralization, which avoids intermediation at the regional and district levels. According to experts, this mechanism allows territorial communities to directly receive funds and use them for the economic development of their territories.

Another advantage of fiscal decentralization, experts say, is the receipt by territorial communities of significant resources for more effective implementation of their own powers and functions. According to experts, there has never been such access to resources as after the reform in Ukraine.

As for the financial condition of territorial communities, the number of subsidized territorial communities has decreased. Most of them, as experts note, are at an average level. The number of subsidized communities has decreased to 20-30%.

Experts attribute the disadvantages of fiscal decentralization to the fact that the very principle of own income has not been revised. It is emphasized that in Ukraine, own income refers only to tax revenues to the budget, whereas this should be income from business activities. This, in turn, creates a situation where territorial communities lack tax revenues and continue to depend on the state from a financial point of view:

«What is considered the own income of local communities or municipalities is not exactly what is considered our own income. In Ukraine, the own income means that communities receive a piece of tax revenue, and not what they would have to earn themselves».

Another problem in terms of fiscal decentralization, experts call the issue of registering business enterprises. All taxes on business activities are paid at the place of registration of enterprises, as a result of which large cities benefit and small rural territorial communities suffer. The same problem exists with personal income tax, which is also paid at the place of registration of the employer, not the employee, as a result of which many territorial communities have excess income, especially if large enterprises or military installations are located on their territory, despite the fact that those working for them citizens can be registered in another territorial community:

«One community, in the Lviv region, where the Yavoriv military training ground is located, which was heavily bombed in the first days, and a lot of military personnel are registered there. And their income is taxed there, so this is the richest community in general in the Lviv region. But at the same time, it does nothing for this. That is, it was just so lucky. And there are communities that... They don't have anything like that there, they don't have any military facilities or units, so they suffer».

Also, among the disadvantages of fiscal decentralization, experts point out that despite the simplification of budget administration and the redistribution of part of taxes in favor of local budgets, Ukraine still remains a corrupt country where there are no good institutions for oversight of the expenditure of local budget funds. Despite the fact that territorial communities received more resources, as well as the right to independently dispose of them, nevertheless, experts note that because of this it has become easier to engage in corrupt activities at the local level. This is especially typical for small territorial communities, where there is less activity of the local community. In this regard, the misuse of budget funds is increasing.:

«It comes to absurd situations. For example, about an order for grass mowing at the end of October. Well, excuse me, but everything is clear».

Among the achievements of the Ukrainian decentralization reform in terms of political decentralization, experts call the formation of a competitive political environment at the local level. If at the local elections of 2015 there were quite a few political players, then during the elections of 2020 mature regional and local political forces were formed that defended local interests. Before the 2020 elections, there was a trend for large national political parties to attract local politicians to their ranks, selling a “franchise” to use the party brand, however, in the 2020 elections, regional and local political parties began to play a greater role, which greatly diversified party field:

«A political space has emerged where local interests, local political parties that do not have national representation, but have strong regional representation, fight or represent themselves. The dynamics have changed as local political organizations emerge and new channels of interaction with society are formed».

Experts emphasize that people have more opportunities to promote their own interests through elections, as well as through local representative bodies. In addition, it is noted that in the course of political decentralization, the status of heads (mayors) of territorial communities has sharply increased. It is indicated that the heads of territorial communities have become very influential political figures, which generally changes the political spectrum within the country. There is a change in the political behavior of many politicians who no longer strive to get into the Verkhovna Rada, but instead have concentrated their activities at the local level, in their own territorial communities, which in turn has a positive effect on regional and local development:

«They are trying harder now, looking at how to become mayors, because it is safer. You are less embedded in the system or party organization at the national level. That is, relatively speaking, why would you become the tenth person there in Batkivshchyna, when you can become the first with your small party in Odessa».

In addition, experts point out that the population has more opportunities to interact with local governments, as well as for civilian control over their activities. This trend is especially typical for large cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odessa. It is noted that political decentralization gave impetus to the emergence of many non-governmental organizations that exercise civil control over the activities of

local authorities, as well as over the expenditure of budget funds at the local level. Separately, it is also noted that there are many new opportunities for citizen participation in local politics, not only through elections, but also through civil hearings, petitions, civic participation budgets, public consultations, and also through public councils that have been created in many local government bodies.

Experts call an important aspect of political decentralization the emergence of opportunities for cooperation between territorial communities. Before the reform, local government did not have such powers, since there was no legal basis for these processes. During the reform, the law “On Cooperation of Territorial Communities” [32] was adopted, which makes it possible to conclude cooperation agreements, implement joint projects, and also establish inter-budgetary relations with each other.

Experts emphasize that political decentralization has created equal conditions and opportunities for all territorial communities to implement various projects. However, how they are used depends on the leadership of territorial communities and the human factor. Given equal starting conditions, territorial communities can achieve completely different results from their activities:

«You could interview some community that would tell you that it has dozens of agreements with everyone, that it has already done this, done that, and then applied for an international project, etc. And if the people there are not very active, they do not have good management experience, then it may turn out that everything is very sad for them, given the same more or less initial economic conditions».

Among the obvious advantages of the reform in terms of political decentralization, experts cite the provision of territorial communities with the right to cooperate not only among themselves, but also with local governments in other states. Experts emphasize that territorial communities began to actively use new powers to build relationships with local governments abroad, which benefited the economic development of territorial communities. Experts point out that this was a very ambitious initiative effect, which allowed local governments to provide not only symbolic support, but also to facilitate the joining of local governments in other states in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

Experts named the strengthening of regional and local elites as a result of the decentralization reform as the most important disadvantage in terms of political decentralization. This phenomenon is known as “elite capture” has been studied in many works in Ukrainian context [21], [22], [33].

Experts note that the clan-corporate structure of management of Ukrainian society has progressed throughout the entire period of independence, starting with the presidency of Leonid Kuchma. Experts call the apogee of clan-oligarchic governance the period of the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, who actually tried to build a single-pyramid vertical of power according to the Russian model [25]. However, paradoxically, oligarchic pluralism and competition among clan-oligarchic groups ensured the preservation of opportunities for democratic development in Ukraine. Thus, experts actually confirm the existence of a “patronal democracy” regime in Ukraine [33], which is characterized by a high

degree of patronalism and informal patronal-client relations, but unlike patronal autocracy, it is characterized by competition between patronal networks and does not allow one of them to establish monopoly on political, economic and communal spheres.

Experts emphasize that the process of oligarchy in Ukraine presupposed the creation of a system of sectoral and then territorial influence of oligarchs. Thus, oligarchic groups initially established control over certain sectors of the economy, allowing them to earn large amounts of capital, and then extend their influence and control to certain territories. Moreover, the territorial division of spheres of influence was largely the result of the oligarchic “consensus”:

«At first, the oligarchs captured those industries and areas where it was easiest to obtain administrative rent and siphon off resources. And then, accordingly, the process of such a conditional oligarchic “consensus” began to take shape on the division of influence in the territories».

This situation, according to experts, has led to the fact that one or another region of Ukraine has become associated with the name of a certain oligarch. In certain regions, oligarchs became economic monopolists, creating most of the jobs for residents of these regions. In addition, they significantly influenced political processes at the local level, personnel policies of government bodies, as well as the selection of deputies and heads of territorial communities:

«It has become so that, for example, Donbass is Akhmetov, Chernivtsi and Ternopil regions are Firtash, Transcarpathia is Baloga. And so on».

It is noted that when oligarchs at the “national level” began to establish control over certain regions, the regional and local elite (political, managerial, economic and business) faced a choice: either join national clan-oligarchic groups, or try to form their own clans. Many representatives of regional and local elites, especially in large cities and regional centers, managed to implement this practice. The clan of Gennady Trukhanov in Odessa and the clan of Gennady Kernes in Kharkiv were especially cited as examples. Both of them were mayors of these cities for a long time, and in 2019 they even tried to organize a “party of mayors” to participate in parliamentary elections [34]. The example of Viktor Baloga and his family was also given, who managed to establish significant control over the Transcarpathian region and, in particular, some cities such as Mukachevo [35].

Certain regional and local clans, at certain periods of time, managed to extend their influence to the national level. In the first years of Ukraine's independence, the greatest influence was exerted by the Dnipropetrovsk clan, known since Soviet times, from which the second President Leonid Kuchma came [33]. By the beginning of the 2010s, the Donetsk clan, whose representative was the fourth President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich, had significantly strengthened:

«The Dnepropetrovsk clan, it became one of the most noticeable even on the scale of the USSR, not to mention Ukraine. When independent Ukraine appeared, he was already influential. The Donetsk clan grew very quickly. There were also attempts by the Lviv clan, but nothing worked out for them».

It is emphasized that the decentralization reform strengthened not regional, but rather local, local elites [22]. According to experts, the latest local elections

in 2020 demonstrated that incumbent mayors in many Ukrainian cities are very popular. In addition, it is noted that local authorities have become so strong that they can oppose the central authorities and even push their interests at the central level. As an example, they cited the initiative of President Vladimir Zelensky to further continue the decentralization reform, which involved the division of regional governance at the level of regions and districts. It was assumed that local state administrations would remain at the level of regions and districts, but regional councils and districts would be able to form their own executive committees. However, this initiative was opposed by the heads of territorial communities who did not want to strengthen the regional and sub-regional levels of self-government. The President's bill had already been submitted to the Verkhovna Rada, but Zelensky withdrew it, deciding to listen to the opinion of the heads of territorial communities.

«President Zelensky, newly elected, proposed moving to even greater decentralization and proposed amending the Constitution in order to create division. So that the heads of regional administrations would be separate, and the regional councils would have their own executive committees, separate. And who was against it? Let's just say that twice, at the end of December 2019 and the beginning of January 2020, local government acted as a forward for those who were against it. Why? Because they wanted to strengthen the regional level. It was as if they themselves had just become stronger and they did not want to again find themselves in a situation where they would be subordinated to regional self-government at the regional level».

Facts were also noted that the heads of territorial communities can now even enter into open confrontation with the central government. In particular, an example was given when, during the Covid-19 Pandemic, the heads of some territorial communities tried to sabotage or not at all comply with quarantine restrictions established by the central government, since they negatively affected the income of territorial communities:

«They created such a coalition during the “covid”. And as I remember now, the mayors somewhere organized sabotage these coronavirus restrictions. For example, Trukhanov in Odessa, at some point he also said that we were tired of all this, we allow this, this and this, which was prohibited by the state at that time. Several other mayors followed suit. So, there was such a moment during the corona, such a certain opposition of mayors to the state».

Some experts point out that when the head of a territorial community holds this position for several terms, his political associates penetrate and integrate so deeply into the process of managing local authorities that they can maintain influence even without holding a formal position. In particular, the example was given of the former mayor of Poltava, Alexander Mamai, who was removed from office by the city council [35]. It was noted that despite the loss of position, his people continued to control some management structures and the deputy corps could not do anything about it:

«It was also a kind of “usurper” who, indeed, with the processes of decentralization began to strengthen and began to exceed his powers. It even

got to the point that he used his personal housekeepers, registered them with the local council, and their salaries were paid from the local budget. Well, he's gone now, but his "legacy" still exists. That is, there are people who do his work. They have become so deeply integrated into the local government management process that they need to be cleared out very quickly. Or gradually eliminate the consequences of their influence. Yes, of course they have more influence».

Among the disadvantages of political decentralization, they also note the partisanship of the political community at the local level. Thus, experts negatively assess the elimination of the mixed system of forming councils at the local level. Currently, elections of local councils are held exclusively according to a proportional system, which, according to experts, deprives the majority of citizens who do not belong to political parties of passive voting rights, which forces local politicians to join one or another political party. Experts emphasize that collectively, political parties in Ukraine represent the interests of only 3% of citizens. It is also noted that the 2020 local elections did not lead to a significant renewal of the deputy corps:

«In the best case, statistically, political parties in Ukraine represented a total of 3% of voters. I mean by its composition. But they virtually closed the entire electoral process, with the exception of the right of self-nomination at the level of rural and township communities, as well as territorial communities with a population of less than 90 thousand people. The deputy corps in communities with a population of 90 thousand and above, as well as district and regional councils, is completely under the control of parties as a political institution. From the stage of nominating a candidate, creating an election commission, recognizing the election results, to the stage, including the recall of deputies. This is the weakest point in this reform».

The institution of "starostas", introduced at the level of small villages, is also assessed negatively by experts. They point out that the institution itself is undemocratic, since starostas are appointed by local councils. They are not elected by the local community.

Even the reduction and consolidation of districts did not affect the reduction in the number of employees. According to experts, the staff of a typical district state administration was about 80-90 employees. And after the consolidation of districts, there was no significant increase in the size of the state apparatus at the district level. Thus, the size of the state apparatus at the district level was reduced by approximately 30-40%. As for the quality of managerial personnel, in this case, experts note that it is low, which is also confirmed by other studies [26]. It is emphasized that even the 2020 local elections did not lead to a serious renewal of local deputy corps. In addition, it is indicated that the majority of deputies, as a rule, are not prepared to perform their functions, as well as there is no system for training the deputy corps. Professionalization of the deputy corps, according to experts, is happening, but slowly and only partially. However, in Ukraine there are various centers for training and retraining of personnel, centers for advanced training. Thus, it is noted that until 2019, the Academy of Public Administration operated in Ukraine, which trained personnel for categories 1 and 3, in accordance

with the old law “On Civil Service” [36], and for category “A” in accordance with the new law [37]. However, according to experts, a “voluntaristic” decision was made to liquidate it, as well as to liquidate its structural divisions (institutes) in Lviv, Odessa, Dnipro and Kharkiv.

Based on the above expert assessments, we conducted a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and risks of local government reform and decentralization in Ukraine. Detailed analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – SWOT analysis of local government reform and territorial organization of power in Ukraine

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the budgets of territorial communities have increased significantly; - budget policy at the local level has become more defined, which allows territorial communities to adequately plan their budgets; - direct interbudgetary relations were established between the central budget and local budgets of all levels, which significantly simplified the process of budget administration; - subsidies were replaced with targeted subventions, which can only be directed to specific areas; - the number of subsidized territorial communities decreased by 20-30%; - territorial communities received new powers to provide public services to the population, and their quality has significantly improved; - the administrative-territorial structure of Ukraine was significantly optimized, the number of territorial communities was reduced by more than 10 times; operate both among themselves and with local governments in other states; - the status of heads of territorial communities has increased significantly; - the population received additional opportunities to participate in the political process at the local level, as well as for public discussion and control of the activities of local government bodies; - political competition at the local level has increased, which improves the quality of regional and local politicians; - the quality of social infrastructure has improved in many territorial communities; - a special Ministry for Community Development (formerly the Ministry of Regional Development) was created, which promotes the development of territorial communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - payment of personal income tax at the place of registration of the employer creates a disproportion in the development of territorial communities; - decentralization at the level of regions and districts was not carried out, regional and district councils never received powers, budget funds and their own executive bodies; - regional and district state administrations were never liquidated, the institution of prefects was not introduced; - the reduction in the number of territorial communities and districts did not lead to a real reduction in the size of the state apparatus; - the last local elections of 2020 did not lead to a significant renewal of the deputy corps at the local level; - the quality of personnel at the local level still remains low, the state does not have a well-functioning system for training and retraining personnel; - decentralization led to the strengthening of representatives of regional and local elites, including those associated with the local mafia; - the transition to an exclusively party principle of forming representative local authorities led to the elimination of the opportunity for non-party members to be elected to local councils, which in turn leads to the “partisanization” of local representative bodies; - the institution of elders appointed by local councils is undemocratic, since these officials are not elected by the population.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cooperation of territorial communities with local self-government in other states makes it possible to involve it in the restoration of the country after the end of the war; - strengthening public control over the activities of local authorities can potentially help combat corruption and misuse of local budget funds; - territorial communities received the opportunity to participate in various grant projects that could potentially contribute to their development; - democratization and the growth of political competition at the local level can contribute to the renewal of the political class with its qualitative improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strengthening the heads of territorial communities can create a situation in which the influence of the central government on the situation in the regions will significantly weaken; - heads of territorial communities can sabotage some decisions of the central authorities; - in those regions where the population is passive and does not participate in public control, an increase in the level of corruption may occur; - in conditions of war, reverse, recentralization processes may begin, necessary for the total mobilization of resources and powers; - further outflow of population due to war can significantly reduce revenues to local budgets;

As our SWOT analysis showed, the reform of local self-government and decentralization still has more advantages than disadvantages. This indicates that the reform can be called more successful than unsuccessful. At the same time, decentralization in Ukraine creates both additional opportunities and threats. However, a significant part of the threats is caused not by the reform itself, but by completely other factors, such as the persisting model of patronal democracy and neopatrimonialism, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which seriously affected not only local self-government, but also all other spheres, including political, economic, sociocultural, humanitarian, demographic, etc.

In assessing the reform after 2022, it is necessary to distinguish between institutional design and wartime governance practice. Following the full-scale Russian invasion, a temporary recentralization of powers occurred through the introduction of military administrations in frontline and de-occupied territories. In several regions, executive authority was effectively transferred from elected local bodies to military administrations in order to ensure coordinated defense, mobilization and humanitarian logistics. However, this should not be interpreted as a formal rollback of decentralization. Rather, it represents an emergency governance regime. Importantly, many territorial communities demonstrated high institutional resilience during the war, independently organizing evacuation, humanitarian support, territorial defense coordination and infrastructure recovery. In this sense, decentralization contributed to state resilience under conditions of external aggression.

After 2024, discussions in Ukraine increasingly focus on post-war reconstruction and anti-corruption safeguards at the local level. The prospect of large-scale international financial assistance has intensified debates on transparency, public procurement control and strengthening audit mechanisms in territorial communities. Thus, the next stage of decentralization reform is likely to be linked not only with completing regional-level reform and constitutional

amendments, but also with institutional strengthening of financial oversight and anti-corruption instruments at the local level.

Conclusion

In 2024, it will be 10 years since the reform of local self-government and decentralization started. It is obvious that the Ukrainian leadership managed to achieve significant positive changes, despite all the difficulties and problems. Many of the necessary steps have been implemented, but it should also be emphasized that many measures have still not been completed.

Based on the results of the study, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the advantages and disadvantages of the reform carried out in Ukraine. Firstly, as the SWOT analysis showed, the number of strengths exceeds the number of weaknesses, which may indicate significant progress that Ukraine has made in reforming local self-government. Secondly, many of the key goals of the reform were nevertheless realized. In particular, it was possible to significantly improve the quality of administrative services provided, as well as to make them as accessible as possible to the population, since now they can be provided directly in the territorial community, without the need to travel to the regional center. The powers of local governments were significantly expanded, and their financial base was also increased, since a number of taxes were redistributed in favor of territorial communities. Thirdly, the administrative-territorial reform carried out made it possible to significantly reduce the number of territorial units, making them more self-sufficient and capable of fulfilling the functions and responsibilities assigned to them. Fourthly, the opportunities that have opened up for territorial communities for mutual and international cooperation, as well as for participation in various international and domestic grant projects, provide additional impetus for the economic development of territorial communities.

Nevertheless, one cannot help but highlight the existing shortcomings and problems of this reform. First of all, it cannot be said that the reform is complete. Decentralization at the regional and subregional levels has not been carried out, which actually makes regional and subregional government bodies (regional and district councils) unable to exercise their powers. The necessary amendments to the Constitution were also not made, which makes further reform of regional self-government at the level of regions and districts impossible. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly altered the trajectory of decentralization reform. While certain elements of reform implementation were suspended or modified due to wartime governance needs, the institutional framework of decentralization formally remains in place. The long-term direction of reform will largely depend on constitutional amendments, reconstruction policy and integration with European Union governance standards. In addition, given the patron-client model of governance existing in Ukraine and the existence of many patronage networks, decentralization in many cases strengthens representatives of local political elites, giving them, among other things, more powers and resources. There are also shortcomings in the budget process, such as the deduction of individual income tax at the place of registration of the employer,

and not the employee, which leads to economic disproportion in the development of territorial communities.

If we consider the Ukrainian reform of local self-government and decentralization as a model for Kazakhstan, then it should be noted that Kazakhstan could take a lot from the Ukrainian experience. In particular, the experience of creating self-sufficient and stable territorial units of the basic level, as well as the transfer of powers to provide administrative services to the basic level, could significantly improve the situation in the regions, especially in rural areas, which would meet the principle of subsidiarity and relieve the population from the need to travel to district center. However, for this, it is necessary to consolidate rural districts, cities of regional significance, villages and towns. In addition, the Ukrainian experience should also be considered from the point of view of transferring certain types of taxes (in particular, individual income tax) to local authorities at the basic level, in order for them to more effectively implement their functions and powers. The establishment of direct inter-budgetary relations between the republican budget and local budgets of all levels can also improve the quality of the budget policy, since it eliminates many unnecessary bureaucratic functions.

At the same time, the transfer of administrative service provision to the basic level in Ukraine should not be mechanically replicated in Kazakhstan. Unlike Ukraine, Kazakhstan has already developed an extensive network of Public Service Centers (PSCs) and digital platforms providing online and mobile services. Therefore, the Ukrainian model of creating Centers for Administrative Services at the community level is not directly transferable. For Kazakhstan, the more relevant element is not the physical relocation of services, but the fiscal and political empowerment of local authorities, combined with digital integration of local governance into existing national service infrastructure.

Acknowledgments

The authors of the article express gratitude to all experts who agreed to give in-depth interviews on this topic. The authors of the article did not attract additional funding for this study.

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