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DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AT THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS IN THE CONTEXT OF DECENTRALIZATION: THE CASE OF FOUR UKRAINIAN REGIONS

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the democratization of the Ukrainian political system at the regional and local levels in the context of decentralization reform. The level of democratization is measured using the Tatu Vanhanen measurement method (Tatu Vanhanen Index), which is a mathematical formula for multiplying the percentage of votes not received by the ruling party (coalition of parties) in regional and local elections to representative bodies by the percentage of voter turnout. For the study, four regions of Ukraine were selected: Lviv region, Kharkiv region, Kherson region and Chernihiv region, as well as their administrative centres, meeting both the criteria of geographical location (north, south, west, east), population size (large regions, with a population of several million people, as well as small regions, with a population of less than 1 million people), as well as traditional political preferences of a significant part of citizens (relatively "pro-European" and relatively "pro-Russian"). The study showed that in most of the regions we studied, the democracy index decreased after the start of the reform, but then increased again after the next electoral cycle. Most of the regions we studied have similar dynamics of changes in the democracy index over three electoral cycles. Secondly, the study found that in most of the studied regions, the democracy index at the regional level as a whole is slightly higher than the democracy index at the level of their administrative centres. The exception, in both cases, is the Kharkiv region and Kharkiv, which have a trend directly opposite to other regions. The study concludes with a recommendation to re-evaluate the level of democracy at the regional and local levels after the next local elections, to gain a more objective dynamic picture.*

KEYWORDS: Decentralization; Democratization; Ukraine; Administrative reform; Local government.

1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries, which were part of it, began the process of democratization. In some countries, such as Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, the process was very successful. In other states, on the contrary, authoritarian regimes were established. The remaining states have intermediate success in terms of democratization, and their type of regime, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2024) classification (Ukraine is on 91-st place in 2022), can be classified as hybrid. On the one hand, these countries have some elements that allow them to be characterized as democracies: free elections, political competition, the alternation of power, freedom of the media, etc. But on the other hand, there are a complex of problems in these countries that hinder the process of democratization: a high level of corruption, the existence of problems with the rule of law, etc. Nevertheless, some of these countries are implementing changes aimed at democratic development.

In particular, Ukraine is implementing the reforms that can be described as a step toward democratization. One of these reforms is the decentralization reform, which started in 2014, after the collapse of Viktor Yanukovich's regime. Olga Oleinikova (2020, p. 313) notes that decentralization is an important aspect of political and administrative reform in many developing countries, based on the idea that local self-government promotes democracy, individual freedoms, and the rights of citizens to participate in local decision-making. At the same time, in Ukraine decentralization became a strategic goal for reorganization of state authorities after 2014 (Oleinikova, 2020, p. 313). Decentralization is also one of the most successful reforms of the Ukrainian leadership after 2014, according to the assessments of its population and civil society (Sydorchuk, 2017). In this regard, we believe that Ukraine and its experience of decentralization is interesting to study, as a rather unique phenomenon, in our opinion, in the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, there is insufficient information in the scientific literature on the mentioned problems about whether decentralization in Ukraine has influenced the democratization process at the regional and local levels in this country. Most relevant sources (Cheema, Rondinelli, 2007; Saito, 2008; Faguet, Pöschl, 2015), consider decentralization rather in terms of increasing (or decreasing) efficiency of public administration and local self-government, increasing local budgets, increasing (or decreasing) quality of life of local community, increasing (or decreasing) quality of public services provided by local authorities, etc.

Since we are not interested in other aspects of decentralization, particularly how it has affected the quality of public administration and local self-government, the quality of life of the local community, the accessibility of public services to the population, as well as changes in the volume of local budgets, as the main purpose of our study, we intend to determine only the extent to which decentralization has affected the democratization of the political system at the regional and local levels in Ukraine. Does decentralization

really increase the level of democracy, or is there no linkage between these phenomena? To achieve this purpose, we intend to solve the following tasks: (1) measure the level of democracy in four Ukrainian regions and their administrative centres in the period from 2010, when last regional and local elections were before start of decentralization reform, to 2020, where were the last regional and local elections in Ukraine were, and (2) to formulate conclusions about the connection between decentralization and democratization of the political system at the regional and local levels in four Ukrainian regions.

We assume that in post-Soviet and post-communist states, like Ukraine, decentralization contributes to democratizing the political system at the regional and local level (Illner & Wollmann, 2003; Bader, 2020). In particular, decentralization promotes political diversity and growth of political competition at the regional and local levels, but does not solve the problem of low involvement of population in political processes at the both levels (Andrews & De Vries, 2007; Spina, 2013; Aasland & Lyska, 2020; Bader, 2020), for example, does not increase participation of citizens in local elections. The subject of our study is the process of democratization of the political system at the regional and local levels in four regions of Ukraine, during the period before the start of the decentralization reform and after the completion of its active phase and the holding of the latest regional and local elections, which covers 2010-2020.

As the main method of research on measuring the level of democracy of the chosen regions and their administrative centres, we have chosen Tatu Vanhanen's (1990) method of democracy measurement, which is a mathematical formula that uses the data of electoral statistics. As the data of electoral statistics, this article will use the official results of regional and local elections in Ukraine in 2010, 2015 and 2020. Studies of many (mainly Ukrainian) authors (Romanova, Umland, 2019; Bader, 2020; Oleinikova, 2020; Aasland, Lyska, 2020; Pintsch, 2020) are devoted to the problem of decentralization and democratization in Ukraine, as well as their interrelation. However, these works do not measure the level of democracy at both the national and regional/local levels by any of the existing methods. In this regard, it remains unclear to what extent Ukraine's political system has become more (or less) democratic during the decentralization reform. In political science, there are different perspectives on the question of whether decentralization contributes to the development of democracy in general and at the local level in particular. Several scholars point to the close connection between decentralization and the development of democracy (Smith, 1985; Stoker, 1996; Panizza, 1999; Illner, 2003; Umland, Romanova, 2019). Other authors (Nordholt, 2005; Sidel, 2005; Grindle, 2007, Bader, 2020) note that decentralization of government does not always lead to democratization, and under its conditions, authoritarian practices and systems may well persist.

The article consists of the following parts: literature review, where we review the main theoretical scientific papers devoted to the problem of decentralization in general, and decentralization in Ukraine in particular; methodology, where we describe our research approach, including Tatu Vanhanen Index; findings,

and discussion, where we present results of our calculations and key findings of our study.

2. Literature review

The concept of decentralization in political science has different interpretations. As a rule, this or that definition of this concept relates to the scientific interests of a particular author and the object of his research. Some authors (Conyers, 1981; Smith, 1985; Rondinelli, 1999; Pollitt, 2009) define state power decentralization as the redistribution of powers and financial resources from the central government to lower levels of territorial administration. Others (Ink, Dean, 1970, p. 61) understand decentralization as assigning responsibility for decision-making to the level closest to the public. The authors also emphasise that decentralization is divided into several types, each of which represents a 'special' form of decentralization. Some of them (Manor, 1999; Blair, 2000; Schneider, 2003; Treisman, 2007; Cheema, Rondinelli, 2007; Rajasekhar, Devendra Babu, Manjula, 2018) prefer to divide decentralization into 3 main types: deconcentration, fiscal decentralization and devolution. At the same time, among different authors there are other classifications of types of decentralization. Moreover, authors often use different terms to refer to the same phenomena, or they give these terms different meanings. For example, some authors (Manor, 1999; Blair, 2000; Rajasekhar, Devendra Babu, Manjula, 2018) prefer to use the term 'democratic decentralization', while other authors (Pollitt, Birchall, Putnam, 1998; Schneider, 2003; Illner, Wollmann, 2003; Treisman, 2007), instead of this term, use the term 'political decentralization'. However, for most authors, both terms generally mean 'devolution'. In this article, decentralization will be understood as the definition proposed by Brian Smith (1985; cited in Adams, 1986, p. 706), who defined it as the delegation of power to lower levels in the territorial hierarchy.

Regarding the definition of what is meant by the term "democratization," we will proceed from the definitions given by Patrick Bernhagen (2018, p. 53), as they seem to us to be the most concise and fully reflective of the essence of the term. He notes that the term can be understood (1) as the replacement of a nondemocratic political system with a democratic one or (2) as the process of transforming a political system into a more democratic one, regardless of whether the system in question can be classified as a democracy, an autocracy, or a hybrid regime. Since our research does not seek to determine whether Ukraine's political system at regional and local levels has transformed into a democratic system, but rather whether it has become more (or less) democratic during decentralization reform, this paper will use the second definition, which refers to democratization as the process of transforming a political system into a more democratic one. Furthermore, Bernhagen notes that this definition reflects a gradational concept of democracy, implying

that a political system can be ranked on a continuum from more democratic to less democratic countries.

In discussing the relationship between decentralization and democratization, Brian Smith (1985; cited in Kulipossa, 2004, p. 768) argues that decentralization increases the level of democracy at the local level. For his arguments, Smith uses the following theorems. First, he notes that decentralization distributes political power more broadly, thus becoming an instrument that can meet the needs of different segments of the population and forming political equality due to broad political participation. Second, decentralization provides a basis for future politicians to develop skills in public policy implementation, political party management, and budgeting, thus improving the quality of politicians. Third, decentralization ensures political stability through citizen participation in politics through elections and other practices, which in turn builds trust in government and ensures 'social harmony'. Fourth, decentralization increases the accountability of local government to the population, because local representatives are more accessible to the population than distant national leaders, and voting in local elections is a unique mechanism for the population to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with local government (Kulipossa, 2004, p. 769).

As mentioned earlier, James Manor (1999, p. 6), as well as other authors, identifies devolution or democratic decentralization as one of the types of decentralization, by which the author understands the transfer of resources, power, and tasks to the lower level of local government which has independence and autonomy from the central government. The author emphasizes that this type of decentralization allows regional and local governments to have more autonomy in decision-making, which is crucial for accountability, transparency, and citizen participation in the governance process. The author notes that democratic decentralization differs from other types of decentralization in that local government leaders and representatives of the population at the local and intermediate levels are elected through elections, which can be direct or indirect (Manor, 1999, p.8). The importance of democratic decentralization, according to the author, lies in its emphasis on accountability and representation at the local level. By allowing local "leaders" to be elected, democratic decentralization ensures that power is distributed among different levels of government, thus promoting transparency and responsiveness to the needs of local communities. In addition, according to the author, this type of decentralization helps stimulate citizen participation, promoting good governance, and increasing efficiency in the delivery of public services. At the same time, Manor argues that decentralization must entail a mixture of democratic, fiscal, and administrative elements to be effective. It states that democratic decentralization alone is likely to fail if it is not supported by fiscal decentralization and administrative decentralization (Manor, 1999, p. 7).

Michelle S. De Vries (2000, p. 202) identifies arguments for both decentralization and centralization. As one of the arguments in favour of decentralization, the author calls its democratic component. Decentralization is believed to enhance democratic decision-making by involving local stakeholders in the governance

process and increasing local community participation in decision-making, thereby allowing them to be directly involved in shaping policies that directly affect their communities (De Vries, 2000, p. 219).

Ugo Panizza (1999, p. 122) notes that the process of democratization in many states is often accompanied by decentralization (primarily fiscal). He cites as an example Spain after the fall of Francisco Franco, as well as post-communist states such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Ukraine. In addition, the author emphasizes that after the end of the Cold War, in some states that were de facto democratic but had a highly centralized political system during the global confrontation of the capitalist and socialist world, separatist political forces began to emerge that demanded greater decentralization.

Michal Illner (2003, p. 9) points out that decentralization brings authorities closer to citizens, creating conditions for democratization of governance and increasing its efficiency. He emphasises that decentralization contributes to the process of democratization in at least five different ways: (1) it allows broad segments of the population to participate in governing the territory through elected positions or through observing the work of state bodies, which also facilitates the spread and absorption of new political practices; (2) it enables the emergence of new political elites at the regional level, who can learn the political skills necessary to participate in politics at the national level; (3) regional and local authorities become a kind of "counterbalance" to the central government, i.e. they act as a restraining and balancing force against the central government; (4) decentralization activates regional actors to participate in regional economic and social development; (5) decentralization prevents the "overload" of the central government.

Some authors, however, note that decentralization does not always have positive consequences for states and does not necessarily lead to democratization (or at least is not related to it). The previously mentioned Michal Illner (2003, p. 10), while acknowledging the positive influence of decentralization on democratization, notes that decentralization is not equivalent to democratization. In his opinion, while the two concepts often go hand in hand, there are still situations where decentralization can slow down the process of democratization, particularly when it preserves, or even strengthens, the positions of authoritarian regional elites. Moreover, Illner emphasises that decentralization is not a value in itself and only acts as an institutional prerequisite for democratic and effective government and is justified only to the extent that it serves this purpose.

Henk Schulte Nordholt (2005, pp. 36-42), examining the case of decentralization and democratization in Indonesia, argued that the transition to a decentralized government is not synonymous with the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime and does not automatically mean a transition from a strong state to a strong civil society. In turn, weakening the central government does not lead to the development and strengthening of local democracy. He notes that, under certain conditions, decentralization can on the contrary be accompanied by authoritarian rule.

John Sidel (2005, pp. 67-68) points to another phenomenon that decentralization can entail, and which also negatively affects the process of democratization, the local mafia. As the author notes, decentralization provides the local mafia with unprecedented opportunities to "take over" state institutions. As an example, he cites the Indonesian province of Aceh, where decentralization has resulted in the entrenchment of the "forest mafia," which enjoys considerable influence in the local assembly and various local government bodies. Moreover, in many cases, local business elites, who have influence in local assemblies, have pushed for decentralized regional administrations to adopt new resource management decisions that are in the interests of these elites. Sidel stresses that local elites (mostly from the Alas clan) have constructed a patron-client type of governance in the province. Key figures in the province are woven into a social structure whose members include forestry officials, police, soldiers, local government officials, the judiciary, and even local religious leaders (imams). All relationships of the patron-client type lie outside the formal structure of state bodies. The author notes that the emergence of this kind of "local mafia" is not uncommon in many rural areas. In particular, in the city of Medan, the municipal assembly is dominated by various gangster groups associated with retired army and police officers, and the mayor of the city is a businessman who obtained his position mainly through vote buying and violence.

Merilee Grindle (2007, pp. 2-3) notes that the rhetoric and theory of decentralization "promotes" better territorial governance and increased democracy, as officials take more direct responsibility for their actions and citizens become more involved in local affairs. However, practice shows that experiments with decentralization can lead to unrealistic expectations and unforeseen problems. The author emphasises that by the early 1980s, many political scientists became advocates of decentralization and found important reasons for citizen participation in regional and local elections and public decision-making as a counterbalance to over-centralised and authoritarian governments. In their view, more effective democracies need the active participation of the local community in the political process. Because citizens have opportunities to participate in the process, they become more effective in monitoring the activities of local officials, who, in turn, have an incentive to respond to local problems and demands. Moreover, such participation becomes an effective "school" for democracy, providing an opportunity to learn new discussion skills and rules that can resolve conflicts in democracies. Other advocates of decentralization, for similar reasons, included individual political activists, nongovernmental organizations, and human rights organizations. They have actively argued that decentralization increases the ability of citizens to choose responsible public officials and hold them accountable for their performance, as well as to make public management decisions more effectively (Grindle, 2007, p. 4). However, the author notes that practice rarely justifies theory. In some cases, evidence has emerged that regional and local elites may benefit excessively from decentralization. Scholars have found evidence of significant potential for capturing interest groups in small electoral arenas and have raised the

issue of the emergence of "authoritarian enclaves" at the regional and local levels. Some scholars have concluded that there is no intrinsic reason why decentralised governments should be more democratic than centralised ones and no a priori reason why local elections should guarantee the emergence of more effective leadership (Grindle, 2007, p. 5).

In discussing the relationship between decentralization and citizen participation, Christina W. Andrews and Michelle S. De Vries (2007, p. 428) show that the main argument behind decentralization indicators is the position that a decentralised environment is most conducive to citizen participation. In addition, they note that decentralization can be seen as facilitating citizen participation in the decision-making process, as the process moves from the central to the local level. This step makes participation in the decision-making process more realistic and accessible to citizens. In addition, the authors point out that decentralization can lead to increased citizen participation in the decision-making process because local officials, who receive more energy and resources, can be involved by citizens in the decision-making process. However, the authors conclude that the impact of decentralization on citizen participation in decision-making varies from country to country. The level of local government autonomy has different effects on local officials and their willingness to involve citizens in the policy-making process. Using the examples of Sweden, Brazil, Russia and Japan, the authors show that only in Sweden does the level of local government autonomy have a positive impact on the willingness of local politicians to involve citizens in the process of shaping global policy. In Brazil, the situation depends on the leaders. While in Japan the effect was negligible, in Russia it was exactly the opposite (Andrews & De Vries, 2007, p. 446).

In turn, Daniel Treisman (2007, p. 13) points out that there is no clear reason why citizens should be more active in the decision-making process by signing petitions, voting, or demonstrating in a decentralized system than in a centralised one. He also notes that it is unclear why voters would be better informed about the performance of local governments than about the performance of central government. In addition, the author emphasises that in decentralized systems the lines of responsibility between different levels of government are "blurred", which often makes it impossible to determine the merits or blame of authorities for certain actions. This, in turn, can lead to manipulation by officials at any level of government, contributing to pitting citizens against each other and preventing effective coordination of citizens' actions.

Nicholas Spina (2013, p. 11) also notes that decentralization is often seen as a way to bring government closer to the population, potentially increasing the opportunity and frequency of citizen participation in the policy-making process. However, his empirical analysis does not support the generally accepted view that decentralization increases political participation. Although there may be improvements in some aspects of political participation, decentralization does not have a significant impact on other types of political activity.

The author's research shows that the relationship between decentralization and political participation is complex and ambiguous. The author's findings suggest that decentralization alone may not be sufficient to increase citizen participation in the political process.

The works of authors studying the Ukrainian decentralization reform contain both positive and negative features about the influence of this reform on the process of democratization.

Aadne Aasland and Oleksii Lyska (2020, p. 307) in their research point to a progressive dynamic in the positive perception of the reform among the Ukrainian population. As the researchers note, between 2014 and 2017, there was progress among the urban population of Ukraine both in citizens' perception of the responsiveness of local authorities and in the growth of citizens' political participation at the local level. At the same time, the authors emphasise that despite the positive dynamics in the above-mentioned aspects, as well as in terms of support for the decentralization reform, most citizens have a negative rather than positive attitude towards local authorities.

Valentyna Romanova and Andreas Umland (2023, pp. 384-385) note that the decentralization process is seen as an important aspect of the country's gradual approach to the general norms and principles of the European Union following the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. The authors emphasise that decentralization serves as a practical demonstration of Ukraine's departure from centralist traditions towards a more pluralistic and open political culture in line with European democratic values. Decentralization plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values and increasing citizen participation, thereby facilitating the country's democratization process and potentially influencing democratic transitions in other post-communist states. In addition, the authors emphasise that local democracy has become the biggest winner of the decentralization reform, as the unification of territorial communities was initially voluntary. Local authorities and active citizens of the communities took an active part in the debate on the formation of new territorial communities. Participatory budgeting was also introduced at the local level in 2015. As a result, residents of an increasing number of municipalities were able to participate in local government decisions on the use of public funds (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 369). At the same time, the authors also point to some problems associated with the reform that still exist in Ukraine, such as a blurred division of responsibilities between executive and representative bodies (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 389), excessive regionalisation that hinders effective governance and democratic processes (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 377), as well as corruption, lack of transparency and inefficiency of local authorities (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 385).

In turn, Max Bader (2020, p. 278), considering the Ukrainian decentralization reform, notes that since the start of the decentralization reform, the Ukrainian media have published numerous reports on its positive results, which mainly concerned the increase in local budgets and the increase in the financial autonomy of territorial communities. While these are indeed important achievements, as the author notes, the reform has

also had several drawbacks. For example, the amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine necessary for the full implementation of the reform were never adopted. The formation of unified territorial communities in many regions has been slower than expected, and there have been conflicts between residents of territorial communities and local authorities. Nevertheless, the author emphasises that the reform has provided many opportunities for regional elites to seize power at the local level. In the romantic notion, as the author notes, the formation of united territorial communities, where citizens come together to make decisions through a deliberative process, was in fact influenced by regional elites. In most cases, these were the incumbent leaders of the then existing municipalities, acting either autonomously or in conjunction with other influential actors, such as local businessmen or politicians at higher levels of government. Instead of renewing the cadre of local authorities in Ukraine, the formation of united territorial communities led to the consolidation of those who already held positions of power at the local level. Over time, the old and new leaders of municipalities have established a patron-client type of administration in their territories and are virtually unopposed. This is reflected in the lack of competition in the election of the heads of the unified territorial communities, as well as in the lack of political pluralism among the members of the local councils.

Oleksandra Keudel (2023, p. 373) points out that patronage democracy in Ukraine allowed local elites in large cities to enjoy relative autonomy from national patronage structures. Before the decentralization reform, regional centres had political and financial autonomy, which allowed local elites to coordinate their activities independently of the central government. At the same time, the author emphasises that despite the prevalence of patronage democracy, there is evidence of a shift towards non-patronage coordination at the local level in Ukraine. This alternative social logic, characterised by cooperation and a focus on societal interests, challenges traditional patronage practices and promotes more transparent and inclusive governance structures. The emergence of non-patronage coordination at the local level suggests the possibility of a bottom-up anti-patronage transformation in Ukraine. This transformation involves replacing patronage logic with a collaborative approach that aims to reduce rent-seeking opportunities, increase transparency, and promote anti-corruption measures (Keudel, 2023, p. 385).

It is worth noting that the assessments of the decentralization reform in Ukraine by different authors are quite different. Some authors emphasise the positive results of this reform in terms of democratization. For example, they note that decentralization promotes the growth of local authorities' accountability and citizens' participation in the political process at the local level, but some authors also note, that citizens' participation in local decision-making is still low, despite of increasing. They highlight the mechanism of voluntary association of territorial communities as an institution that promotes local democracy. At the same time, other authors point out that in several regions, decentralization has been used by regional elites to consolidate and strengthen their own power in certain areas. Thus, most authors focus on certain advantages or disadvantages

of the Ukrainian decentralization reform for democratic development. Furthermore, most of the works on the subject do not contain direct measurements of the level of democracy in Ukrainian regions by any of the existing methods of measuring democracy, especially during the period of decentralization reform.

3. Methodology

The state and development of the level of democracy of the political system at the regional and local levels can only be assessed by measuring it. In this context, there is the problem of choosing the most appropriate and optimal methods of measurement. There are several methods for measuring the state of democracy. Patrick Bernhagen (2018, pp. 54-56) divides the methods of measuring democracy into gradational and dichotomous methods. He categorises as gradational those methods that do not allow one or the other political regime to be classified as a democracy or an autocracy, but which allow one or the other political regime to be distinguished according to its degree of democracy or authoritarianism with the help of certain indicators. In this way, gradation methods make it possible not only to understand what a political regime is, but also to compare the political regimes in question in terms of their degree of democracy. According to Bernhagen, gradational methods of measuring democracy include the Kenneth Bollen Index, the Tatu Vanhanen Index, the Freedom House Index, the Polity IV Index, and others. Bernhagen refers to dichotomous methods as those that unambiguously classify a political regime as either a democracy or an autocracy, excluding any intermediate options, as well as other aspects. Proponents of the dichotomous approach, such as Giovanni Sartori (1987; cited in Bernhagen, 2018, p. 54), argue that political regimes should only be divided into democratic and non-democratic, excluding any intermediate categories, just as a person can be said to be either alive or dead.

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, we believe that the gradation approach to measuring democracy is the only acceptable one for the subject of our study. Since our task is to show the extent to which decentralization has affected the democratization of the political system of Ukraine at the regional and local levels in the period from 2010 to 2020, it is necessary in our study to pay attention to those indicators that allow assessing this aspect in a comparative perspective. Such a possibility gives us only a gradational approach, which allows us to express the degree of democratic development in the form of certain numerical values. Moreover, the dichotomous approach, which classifies political regimes as either democracies or autocracies, is, in our opinion, not entirely appropriate for the study of regional and local democracy, because when studying different regions and municipalities, and determining their degree of democracy, within the framework of a state with a single political and legal system, we cannot classify some

regions and municipalities as democracies and others as autocracies.

Based on the gradation approach, it is necessary to choose the most appropriate methods to obtain the necessary data, given limited resources. The variety of methods used in the gradational approach to measuring democracy allows many of them to be applied to our study. However, having defined the logical structure of the concept and its key aspects, researchers face the problem that many of these aspects are very difficult to measure, and some of them are not directly measurable at all. One might well agree with this statement since many indices measuring democracy emphasise aspects such as freedom of the press and the rule of law. At the same time, freedom of the press and the rule of law are rather multidimensional concepts that cannot be expressed in numerical terms. Therefore, in our study, when choosing a method to measure democracy, we will assume that the data we examine and the results we obtain should be expressed in concrete numerical terms.

In this regard, we should pay attention to the two main aspects of democracy highlighted by Robert Dahl (1971, pp. 267-287), namely citizen participation in the political process and competition between political groups for office. Some methods of measuring democracy, such as the Tatu Vanhanen Index, which is directly based on Dahl's concept, fit well with Dahl's concept. Tatu Vanhanen's method is described in detail in his paper "The process of democratization: a comparative study of 147 states, 1980-88" (1990, p. 64). Vanhanen's democracy index is calculated according to the formula he developed: ID = xy/100, where 'x' is the proportion of votes that the ruling party (or coalition of parties) did not receive in the elections, and 'y' is the level of citizen participation in the elections (voter turnout). From this point of view, Tatu Vanhanen's method makes it possible to measure the level of democracy based on electoral statistics, which makes it a convenient means of measurement. Talking about the advantages of his method, Vanhanen emphasises that (1) this method uses only two indicators, (2) both indicators are based on electoral statistics. In addition, Vanhanen emphasises that his data are more accurate than the expert estimates used in most other indices, which he believes may be biased and erroneous (Vanhanen, 1990, p. 64). In this respect, Tatu Vanhanen's method seems to us to be the most acceptable and rational for carrying out our study, since it allows us to make all the necessary calculations based on the official results of the local elections. We are aware that the method proposed by Tatu Vanhanen is not ideal and has some objective disadvantages. Some researchers have criticised the method. For example, the aforementioned Petrov and Titkov (2013, p. 15) argue that the method is not very logical for post-communist countries and regions because (1) it underestimates the performance of the "most democratic" regions compared to expert estimates, (2) it gives more favourable estimates to smaller regions with traditionally more competitive political environments, and (3) it leads to inevitable deviations if the elections included in the calculation were for some reason atypical for the region. Another Russian researcher, Vladimir Nechayev, who used Tatu Vanhanen's method to measure the level of

democracy in Russian regions, while acknowledging the advantages of the method, such as the availability of data and the simplicity of the calculation, argued that this method should be used with reservations, in particular because high values of the index were obtained by those regions which, according to most researchers, are considered to be authoritarian. Also, it should be noted that Tatu Vanhanen himself did not use this index in relation to the regional and local levels, since this was not the subject of his research. However, we believe that the formula itself can be used at the regional and local levels, since the data required to calculate this index is available at the regional and local levels, albeit on a smaller scale. In addition, the experience of using this index from other authors (Petrov & Titkov, 2013) at the regional level allows us to also use it in our paper.

Nevertheless, in our opinion, this method can be used in our study, as it is appropriate not only because of the above-mentioned advantages, but also because in the conditions of the ongoing war in Ukraine it becomes very difficult to use expert assessment methods for objective reasons. Furthermore, other methods of measuring democracy, such as those used in the Freedom in the World Index, The Economist Democracy Index and Polity IV, are more suitable for measuring the level of democracy at the national level, whereas we examine the regional and local levels.

Since we set the purpose to study the democratization of the political system of Ukraine at the regional and local levels in conditions of decentralization, we chose the time interval from 2010 to 2020. The 2010 local elections occurred before the decentralization reform began, while the 2015 local elections took place one year after the start of the reform. The 2020 local elections occurred after the active phase of the reform had been completed. This time interval is considered optimal for the study.

To clarify our reasoning for future actions, we need to provide more detailed explanations. Tatu Vanhanen's method employs an indicator that measures the percentage of votes not received by the ruling party or coalition in elections. It may be unclear which party should be considered ruling in the context of regional and local elections. The ruling party or parties should be considered as the party or parties that control central power in the entire country, meaning the party or parties that have a majority in the national parliament. We decided to focus on the national level because, as Bader (2020, 275-276) notes, regional and local politicians are highly dependent on the central government and the largest political parties that have power at the national level. Regional and local elections in Ukraine are participated in by both regional and local parties, which operate within a single region, and major national parties. The local government's dependence on the central government is directly influenced by the party or parties in power in a region. The Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine, which were part of the ruling coalition during the 2010 local elections, are considered the ruling parties in this regard. For the 2015 local elections, the ruling parties were the Petro Poroshenko Bloc 'Solidarity', Batkivshchyna, and Samopomich. In the 2020 local

elections, the ruling party was Servant of the People.

The data for our calculations, based on Tatu Vanhanen's formula, come from the official results of the 2010, 2015, and 2020 regional and local elections. However, while searching for these data, we encountered a problem with their absence on the official websites of Ukrainian state bodies. On the website of the Central Election Commission, the data is not presented in its entirety (for example, for the 2015 local elections, there is data on voter turnout, but no data on the percentage of votes received by a party during the election). The official letter we emailed to the Central Election Commission of Ukraine remained unanswered. In this context, we had to use materials published in the mass media of Ukraine, including regional ones, to get the necessary information. That is why, the sources we used to collect data on election results include official election commissions, established news agencies, and credible regional media outlets. The results of regional and local elections and electoral turnout are available here (RBC-Ukraine, 2010; Vysokyi Val, 2010; Kohut & Sidash, 2011; Vysokyi Val, 2015; Lvivskyi portal, 2015; Kherson. Hromada. Initsiatyva, 2015; Chernihiv city territorial election commission, 2020; Zaxid, 2020; Suspilne Novyny, 2020; Zerkalo Nedeli, 2020). Each source was carefully cross-checked for accuracy and consistency to ensure that the data reflects the official results reported during the respective electoral cycles. This comprehensive approach guarantees that our findings are based on reliable and authentic information.

Also, it is necessary to mention that in the regional and local elections to representative bodies in 2015 and 2020, a proportional electoral system was used, while in 2010 a mixed, proportional-majority system was used. We must make the caveat that in our study, changing the electoral system is not significant since we are only calculating proportional elections. That is why, for us, only the results of the elections under the proportional system are important, and not the distribution of deputy mandates based on their results.

The lack of the necessary information to study each region of Ukraine forced us to limit the number of regions for which we conduct research. In addition, for objective reasons it is impossible to study absolutely all regions of Ukraine. For example, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol have been annexed by Russia since 2014, so regional and local elections were not held there in 2015 and 2020 in accordance with Ukrainian legislation. In the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, due to the armed conflict, local elections were held only at the local level, excluding the regional level. We therefore decided to select four regions of Ukraine as well as their administrative centres: Lviv Region, Kharkiv Region, Chernihiv Region and Kherson Region. We believe that some trends in these regions can be extrapolated to other regions of Ukraine. In selecting the regions for the study, we were guided by the following principles:

- the principle of geographical location. We used this principle to select regions in terms of their location. It was decided to take one region each from the east (Kharkiv region), west (Lviv region), north (Chernihiv region) and south (Kherson region);

- the principle of political preferences of the regions' population. This principle is based on political preferences of the population of different regions of Ukraine. Starting from the Presidential elections of 2004, the Ukrainian regions are divided into "north-west", the population of which prefers to vote for conditionally pro-European parties and candidates, and "south-east", the population of which prefers to vote for conditionally pro-Russian parties and candidates. In this regard, the two regions we selected (Lviv and Chernihiv regions) belong to the "north-west," while two more (Kharkiv and Kherson regions) belong to the "southeast";

- the principle of population size. Among the four regions we studied, two regions (Lviv and Kharkiv regions) are quite large in terms of population (over 2.5 million people), and the other two regions (Chernihiv and Kherson regions) are quite sparsely populated (about 1 million people). The same principle also applies to the administrative centres of these regions: Lviv and Kharkiv are large megalopolises, with an average population close to 1 million people, and Chernihiv and Kherson are small towns, with a population of just over 200 thousand people.

The above principles, which we outlined for the selection of regions in respect of which the study was conducted, allow, from our point of view, albeit with reservations, to extrapolate the results of the study to the entire territory of Ukraine, since the remaining regions, to one degree or another, correspond to these principles. Of course, we do not deny that each region of Ukraine has its own specifics and may have its own characteristics that stand out from the general logic, as well as the fact that study on all regions of Ukraine would be better and more representative. However, the lack of data for many regions forces us to limit ourselves to these four regions.

As for the object of our research, we studied the elections to regional representative bodies, as well as representative bodies of their administrative centres. Thus, the results of the study reflect the level of democracy not only at the regional level, but also at the local level of their administrative centres.

4. Findings and discussion

Our calculations using Tatu Vanhanen's formula yielded some interesting results. After analysing the results of the elections to the regional councils of Lviv, Kharkiv, Kherson and Chernihiv regions and making the necessary calculations, it was found that the level of democracy in some regions changed depending on the electoral cycle and the presence of one or another party (coalition of parties) in power. The results of the calculations are presented in Table 1. For the sake of a more convenient presentation of the results, we will not provide detailed calculations here, nor data on voter turnout and the results of regional and local elections.

Table 1: Democracy index of regions of Ukraine for 2010-2020, calculated by Tatu Vanhanen's formula

Region	2010	2015	2020
Kharkiv region	22,02	32,05	27,74
Kherson region	24,35	22,62	27,43
Lviv region	49,80	30,82	39,66
Chernihiv region	36,80	32,85	36,43

Source: Compiled by authors

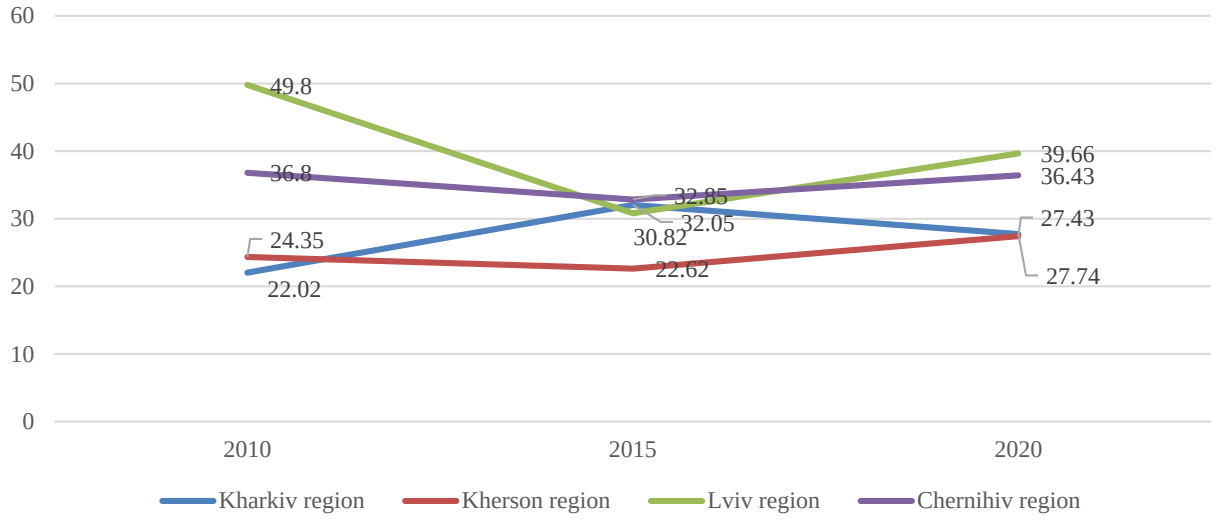
As can be seen from Table 1, the democracy indices of the studied Ukrainian regions change after each electoral cycle. The greatest changes are observed in the Lviv region, whose democracy index changed dramatically after each election. The democracy index of the Kharkov region was also subject to quite strong changes after each election, but these changes were not as strong as in the Lviv region. In turn, the democracy indices of the Kherson and Chernigov regions remain relatively stable. The unusually high index of Lviv region in 2010 is due to the fact that the majority of its population almost never voted for conditionally 'pro-Russian' parties and candidates in any election cycle. In 2010, Ukraine was governed by the Party of Regions and its junior coalition partner, the Communist Party of Ukraine. Both parties had a reputation for being conditionally 'pro-Russian' and were therefore unpopular with voters in some western regions of Ukraine. In the Lviv Regional Council elections, the Party of Regions received 6.56% of the vote (Kohut, Sidash, 2011), placing it in fourth place. The Communist Party of Ukraine did not nominate any candidates for the Lviv Regional Council. Moreover, in the 2010 local elections, Lviv region had the highest turnout among the regions we studied, which amounted to 53.3% of the total number of voters, while in Kharkiv and Kherson regions it was less than 50%, and in Chernihiv region - 50.5%. Thus, in 2010 the Lviv region's democracy index was the exception rather than the rule, due to the political peculiarities of the region. In 2010, Kharkiv Region has the lowest index of democracy. Kherson region has a slightly higher index, but it is lower than in Chernihiv region. In general, we can conclude that Lviv Region was the most democratic region in Ukraine at the time of the 2010 regional elections out of all the regions we surveyed.

The 2015 regional and local elections took place one year after the start of the decentralization reform. In addition, prior to these elections, amendments were made to the legislation on regional and local elections, which abolished the mixed system for forming regional and local representative bodies. As a result, the 2015 elections were held under the proportional system only. Accordingly, the role of political parties, especially

the so-called "regional parties", increased significantly during these elections. As can be seen from Table 1, the index of democracy in 2015 was almost the same in three of four regions we studied. The exception is the Kherson region, where the index is much lower than in the other regions studied. Moreover, in Kherson region the value of the Democracy Index has slightly decreased compared to 2010. This is largely due to the extremely low voter turnout of 37.41%, which was the lowest among all regions surveyed (in the Lviv region the turnout was 56.31%, in the Kharkiv region - 44.43%, in the Chernihiv region - 48.76%). In addition, turnout in the Kherson region decreased compared to 2010, when it was 42.7%. However, in 2010 the turnout in this region was also the lowest of all the regions we studied. In general, the disparity in the 'democracy' of the regions, based on the results of the 2010 elections, has started to decrease. Thus, the abnormally high indicator of the Lviv region became normal and amounted to 30.82, which is lower than in the Kharkiv and Chernihiv regions. The Chernihiv region's indicator decreased slightly in comparison with 2010, but this decrease is not significant. On the contrary, the Kharkiv region's indicator increased quite significantly, by more than 10 points. In general, we can assume that the index of democracy of around 30 was also characteristic of other regions, with a few exceptions.

The results of the 2020 regional and local elections present a different and interesting picture. They were characterised by a significant decrease in voter turnout in all the regions studied. Thus, in Kharkiv region it was 32.33% (44.43% in 2015), in Kherson region 32.39% (37.41% in 2015), in Lviv region 43.82% (56.31% in 2015), in Chernihiv region 41.64% (48.76% in 2015). However, despite this, the index of democracy increased in most of the regions studied, except for Kharkiv region. In the Kherson region it was 27.43, in the Lviv region 39.66 and in the Chernihiv region 36.43. In the Kharkiv region, on the other hand, the index fell. And although the index for 2020 in the region is still higher than the index for 2010 (before the decentralization reform), it has fallen quite significantly compared to 2015. Another peculiarity of the 2020 elections is that in three of four regions the index of democracy has increased quite significantly, while in Kharkiv region it has either decreased. Although the index of democracy in the Kherson region has increased in 2020, it is still significantly lower than in the "north-west" regions and is below 30. The dynamics of changes in the index of democracy in the regions of Ukraine is presented in Graph1.

Graph 1: Dynamics of change in the democracy index in the regions of Ukraine for 2010-2020



As can be seen from Graph 1, the dynamics of changes in the index in almost all the regions we studied were similar: a decrease in 2015 and a repeated increase in 2020. In the Kharkiv region the situation was exactly the opposite, since in 2015 there was an increase in the index, and in 2020 a decrease.

As for the elections to the local representative bodies of the administrative centres of these regions, their democracy index indices roughly correspond to the index of democracy on the regional level (see Table 2).

Table 2: Democracy index of administrative centres of regions of Ukraine for 2010-2020, calculated by Tatu Vanhanen's formula

City	2010	2015	2020
Kharkiv	23,26	35,48	28,55
Kherson	22,69	20,89	25,00
Lviv	45,80	24,51	37,26
Chernihiv	29,97	25,87	33,60

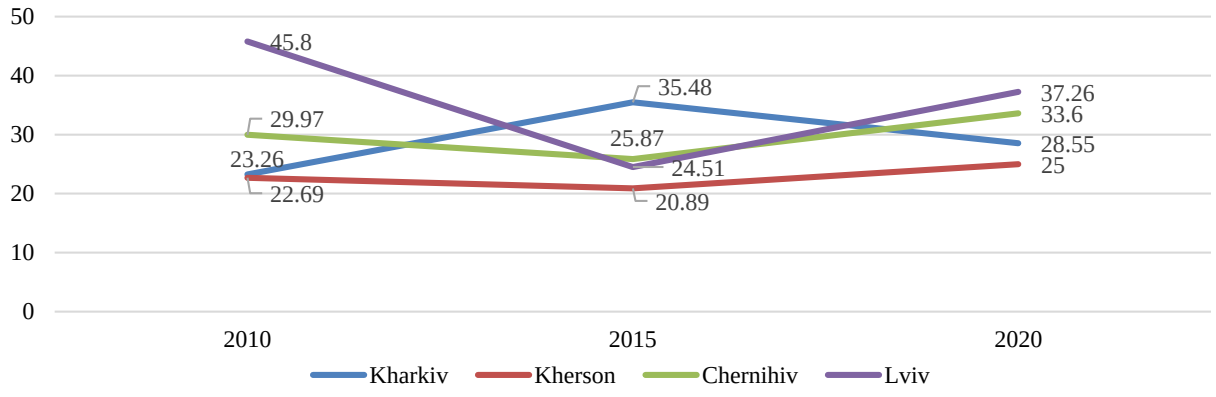
One of the main features of these indicators is that the index of democracy at the level of regional centres is lower than the regional average, because at the level of regional administrative centers, voter turn-out is on average lower than for the region as a whole. The only exception is Kharkiv, where the administrative centre's democracy index is higher than the regional average. Moreover, this peculiarity is characteristic

of Kharkiv in all three electoral cycles. However, the other administrative centres have lower values in comparison with the indicators of the region and for the whole period under study. In 2010, this difference was most pronounced in the city of Chernihiv. While the index of democracy in the Chernihiv region in 2010 was 36.80, the index of democracy in Chernihiv was 29.97. The average voter turnout in the Chernihiv region in 2010 was 50.50%, while in Chernihiv itself it was only 39.60%. In Lviv and Lviv region there is an unusually high indicator, but it is also lower than the regional average.

In 2015, there was a decrease in the index of democracy in all regional centres, except for Kharkiv, where this index increased significantly. The index of Lviv also returned to normal in 2015 and was even lower than in Kharkiv and Chernihiv. In general, the decrease in indicators in 2015 is also due to the decrease in turnout compared to 2010. In Kharkiv, turnout increased significantly, which is associated with an increase in the index in 2015. Turnout also increased slightly in Chernihiv, but the index still fell.

In 2020, on the other hand, the index increased in practically all the regional centres of Ukraine that we studied. At the same time, the index fell in Kharkiv. It should be noted that the turnout at the local elections in 2020 was even lower than in 2015 (for example, in Kherson it was a record low 28.75%). However, the growth of the index of democracy despite the decline in turnout could be due to the rather weak result of the ruling party Servant of the People, which failed to win in any of the regions and regional centres we studied. The dynamics of changes in the index of democracy in the administrative centres of the regions is presented in Graph 2.

Graph 2: Dynamics of change in the index of democracy in the administrative centres of the regions of Ukraine for 2010-2020



Thus, we can conclude that in half of the regions that we studied, the democracy index increased during

the decentralization reform, while in the other half, it either did not change or remained at the same level as before the reform. The greatest increase was observed in those regions that had rather low scores before the start of the reform. As for the regions where the index values were at a relatively high level, they have not changed significantly, or have not changed at all. This is probably because these regions already had a relatively high level of democracy before the start of the decentralization reform. In this respect, decentralization has only consolidated the situation that already existed in these regions, while in the regions with relatively low values of the democracy index, decentralization has promoted greater democratization.

However, one cannot claim that the impact of decentralization on the process of democratization of the Ukrainian political system at the regional level is so great. Even though in some regions the values of the democracy index increased, we cannot say that this growth was cardinal. In our opinion, a more realistic picture can be observed after additional measurements, which can be made after several future election cycles.

5. Conclusions

Our study allowed us to measure the level of 'democracy' in some Ukrainian regions. The use of Tatu Vanhanen's index made it possible to express this level in specific numerical indicators. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study.

Decentralization did not influence the increase of "democratization" of Ukrainian regions and democratization at the regional and local levels in general at the initial stage. On the contrary, in 2015 the indicators of some regions decreased compared to 2010. Despite ongoing reforms to increase the powers and financial resources of regional and local authorities, Ukrainians showed less interest in participating in regional and local elections, as evidenced by low voter turnout. In 2020, however, the index began to rise again in most Ukrainian regions, which we observed, that is a direct result of decentralization. Although voter turnout in 2020 was even lower than in 2015, index scores still increased. In 2020, the active phase of reform was already over, whereas in 2015 it had just begun. Moreover, in 2015 regional parties operating in a specific region had not yet emerged, whereas in 2020 the role of regional parties in elections had increased significantly, with many of them even taking the top positions in their region. In this respect, the decline in the index indicators in 2015 was because the reform has not yet entered an active phase. Local authorities have not yet been given the necessary degree of authority and financial independence from the central government. The exceptions may be Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region, which do not fit into the general trend of other regions. If the index fell in other regions in 2015, it rose in Kharkiv and Kharkiv region. However, in 2020,

when the index indicators in other regions increased again, they decreased in Kharkiv and Kharkiv region (although they remained higher than in 2010, before the start of the decentralization reform).

The index of democracy at the level of regions is on average higher than at the level of the administrative centres of these regions. Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region do not fit into the general trend either. At the level of regional centres, turnout is on average lower than at the level of the region as a whole, which suggests that the population of large cities is less interested in regional politics than the population of other settlements in the region.

The contribution of this study to existing knowledge is the use of the Tatu Vanhanen Index specifically to measure the level of democracy at the local level using data from local elections, as previously this index was usually applied to national elections.

In any case, it is necessary to study these dynamics further in order to get a more objective picture. Since the beginning of the decentralization reform, Ukraine has had only two electoral cycles at the local level, which does not allow us to make any far-reaching predictions. In our opinion, it is necessary to repeat the calculations using this formula after the next local elections, which are scheduled for 2025, in order to understand the direction in which these regions are moving. It is also useful to use other methods of measuring democracy based on expert assessments, as their results may differ from those based on electoral statistics.

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