

The Concept of Decentralization: Modern Challenges for the EU Countries, Prospects for Further Implementation in Ukraine

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Abstract—The tendency of globalization, challenges to democracy and peace caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and other global conflicts require searching general orientations of governmental development, including local government. The formation of a common theoretical framework for local government guarantees not only of harmonisation of European legislation but also creates prerequisites for the integration of new members into the European Union. One of the most important milestones of such a theoretical framework is the concept of decentralization. Decentralization as a phenomenon is characteristic of most European Union countries at different historical stages. For Ukraine, as a country that has clearly defined a European integration vector of development, understanding not only the legal but also the theoretical basis of decentralization processes in European countries is an important prerequisite for further reforms. Decentralization takes different forms, which leads to a variety of understandings in doctrine and, consequently, different interpretations in national legislation. Despite this, decentralization is based on common ideas and values such as democracy, participation, the rule of law, and proximity government that are shared by all EU member states. Nevertheless, not all EU countries are currently implementing broad decentralization in their political and legal practices. Some countries are gradually moving in this direction, while others remain quite centralised. There is also a new, insufficiently studied trend today – recentralisation, which can be broadly defined as the strengthening of centralization tendencies in countries that were considered to be decentralized. Consequently, an exploratory theoretical study is needed to identify how the concept of decentralization is combined with the recentralization tendency in EU member states. The purpose of this study is to empirically analyse scientific approaches to the concept of “decentralization”, to highlight the tendency of recentralisation and its consequences, to analyse Ukraine's experience in the field of decentralization of public power, and to outline the prospects for further development of Ukrainian legislation in this area.

Keywords—Centralization, decentralization, local government, recentralization, reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

TODAY modern humanity is challenged by global conflicts all over the world. According to the Global Conflict Tracker set up by the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) [1] there are more than 20 global conflicts, including War in Ukraine as the biggest crises in Europe since World War II. These crises make countries unit around common values even more. One of them is democracy, which implies, among other

things, the greatest possible involvement of the population in public affairs at both the national and local levels. The need to implement this idea has contributed to work on the European Charter of Local Self-Government creation.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government embodies the values common to European countries. That is why according to the preamble of the Charter signatory confirm their readiness to implement the provision “Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage” [2].

Developed under the auspices of the Council of Europe, this charter has undoubtedly become the most important act that has significantly influenced the establishment and development of local self-government in European countries. It was an illustration of European legal systems harmonisation and a political commitment to create standards of local self-government acceptable to European democracies.

One of the main ideas of the European Charter of Local Self-Government considered to be the decentralization of authority which is supplemented by the subsidiarity principle. According to this principle “Public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen” [2]. However, the notion “decentralization” is used in many meanings. Moreover, the process of decentralization is not uniform. The changes entailed by decentralization varies for different countries and different legal systems. These facts require to consider the issue of doctrinal approaches to the definition of the decentralization.

II. THE CONCEPT OF DECENTRALIZATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As noted above, the European Charter of Local Self-Government of 1985 had a significant impact on the development of the concept of decentralization of public power and its practical implementation in many countries. However, scholars believe that decentralization of public governance emerged in the 1950s-60s, when British and French colonial administrations were prepared for independence by transferring the responsibilities for certain programmes to local governments [3, p.49]. Being a long-term process, the decentralization took different forms and as consequence got a

This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement № S-PD-22-65

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variety of definitions.

Some notions emphasized on transfer of power. According to this approach “decentralization entails the transfer of power, responsibilities and finance from central government to sub-national levels of government at provincial and or local levels” [4, p.2]. Or “decentralization is the act or process of assigning the decision-making authority to lower levels of an organizational hierarchy” [5]. This group includes definitions that focus on the transfer of functions: “Decentralization is a process associated with the transference of functions, i.e. the functions of central government are executed by lower forms of government which are on the sub-national level” [6, p.130]. It should be noted that the concept of decentralization initially focused on the redistribution of functions. However, since the 80s of the last century the concept of decentralization also included not only distribution of functions, but also of political power between governance levels, democratisation, liberalisation of market [7, p.132].

Other approach stressed on *transfer of finances*. This approach considers that decentralization of public governance encompasses the consolidation of the self-management of sub-national levels of government and the distribution of public spending and income between the different levels of government [3, p.48].

The third approach stressed not only on transfer of power, but also transfer of authority and responsibility. It defines decentralization as “the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations and/or the private sector” [8]. Similarly, the decentralization is defined by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): “decentralisation is measures that transfer a range of powers, responsibilities and resources from central government to subnational governments, defined as legal entities elected by universal suffrage and having some degree of autonomy” [9].

Some scientists emphasized that the transfer of authority excludes the responsibility to state power bodies. According to this opinion “decentralization implies the transfer of powers of national government or its agents to the representatives of local territorial collectivities, whereby the latter are not directly responsible either to the national government or to its agents” [10, p.30]. However, we consider that the transfer of power entails a complication of the institution of responsibility. Local governments become responsible to the territorial community, which is embodied in the institution of municipal responsibility. At the same time, they must remain accountable to the central government through administrative supervision. Such dual responsibility is intended to ensure the constitutionality and legitimacy of local self-government.

It should be mentioned that decentralization takes different form that influenced greatly on the notions of this phenomenon. Although this is not the subject of this study, it is worth noting that in the scientific literature there are such types of decentralization as administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization, political decentralization, decision-making decentralization, appointment decentralization etc. Also, scientists stressed on the necessity of decentralization division

into three notions: devolution, deconcentration and delegation [7, p.133]. Each of these terms brings its own peculiarities to the complex concept of decentralization, enhancing its content.

The possibility of a positive impact of decentralization on public administration is hardly disputed in the literature. For instance, decentralization is seen as an indispensable result of democracy, being as important for the organization of public administration as the representative democracy for constitutional organization [11, p.12]. Decentralization is also considered to be a significant tool to increase the innovations, to ensure the efficiency and transparency of public governance, to increase the participation of citizens in governance.

Some scholars numbered among the advantages of decentralization its ability of being the way of avoiding the potential abuse of power by “coercive intermediaries” [12], more freedom for transacting parties. However, such intermediaries can play very important role of coordination, law and order enforcement, failures corrections. The possibility of discretionary interpretation of certain legislative provisions and the lack of coordination can lead to arbitrariness of local governments, strengthening of separatist tendencies and imbalance of the mechanism of state power. It is precisely to avoid such consequences that such “coercive intermediaries” are needed.

Political and economic factors have also stimulated some European countries to reconsider their approaches to the organisation of public authorities at the local level, to strengthen the tendencies of centralisation and control over local self-government. As a result, the concept of “recentralisation” has emerged and has been applied to some European countries in recent years.

III. RECENTRALIZATION AS A NEW PHENOMENON: THE FIRST APPROXIMATION

The concept of decentralization considered to be widely implemented in European countries in the 1990s – early twentieth century. However, despite of its popularity the decentralization is not the absolute benefit. For instance, one of the main positive impacts of decentralization is increasing transparency and efficiency and reduced corruption. In practice as it is stressed by the scientists decentralization merely changes the location of corruption, the amounts involved and the identity of the perpetrators and the beneficiaries [13, p.172]. To be really effective the process of decentralization needs to involve additional remedies such as administrative supervision, rational legislation, readiness of political elites to live according new rules. Other factors such as the influence of the global economic and migration crises and growing tensions in the world since 2008-2009 also influence the decentralization. As a consequence, this process has gradually been replaced by the recentralization of power.

In general, the recentralization means increasing organisational centralisation in place of active decentralization processes. Organizational centralization is explained as “the degree to which the right to make decisions and evaluate activities is concentrated; while decentralization of decision-making is a consequence of the distribution of authority among

the different structural components” [14, p.105]. The implementation of the idea of recentralization can be observed in modern Hungary.

The early 2000s Hungary considered to be one of the most decentralized countries of Central and Eastern Europe [13, p.165]. The Law on Local Self Government adopted in 1990s reduced the responsibilities of the nineteen regional bodies granted the citizen's right to create autonomous self-governments and determined the local governments as autonomous public service entities with assigned tasks and taxing powers. So, such bodies no longer considered to be agents of the centre.

The situation changed dramatically in 2010s when Hungary became one of the first countries where the trend of power recentralisation became noticeable. Scholars [13] emphasize that the Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Self-Government of Hungary limited a list of local government tasks, and the central government chose a model of reducing the competence of local self-government in favour of state executive authorities and strengthening control over the activities of local self-government bodies. Today, at least one other country in the European Union demonstrates a tendency towards recentralisation. We are talking about Poland.

After the monitoring visit to the country in 2019 Congress of Local and Regional Authorities stressed on “relatively alarming trends” [15] of recentralization in Poland. As the reasons of this tendency were named interferences by central authorities in local functions (that caused the conflict between the central power and local authorities), lack of consultations and deterioration of the status of local elected representatives.

The report “Local and regional democracy in Poland” [16] prepared the 36th session by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities described in details the consequences of recentralization such as:

- the pressure of supervisory authorities;
- the usage of anticorruption charges as a political tool;
- the distrust in judicial remedies etc.

The result of such processes was characterised as “domestic democratic “retrogression”” [16]. It is worth mentioning that a similar assessment was made of the recentralisation process in Hungary.

The analysis of the reaction of European institutions to the recentralisation demonstrates a negative assessment of this process. In the above-mentioned report, the Council of Europe called on Poland to take measures to change the situation: “National authorities are called to return to the path of decentralization and genuine local and regional democracy by ensuring that the subsidiarity principle is applied in practice and that the supervision over the activity of local authorities is proportional or by reinstating a fair consultation process with local authorities” [16]. This provides objective grounds to argue that recentralisation, while being an objectively existing phenomenon in some European countries, is unlikely to be approved and become a coherent concept.

However, the process of recentralization of power may have complex reasons that make it difficult to define it as a good or bad phenomenon. The trend towards recentralization can have

a positive impact on the functioning of public authorities. The scientific literature provides an example of centrally financed pension and unemployment insurance system that considered to be “recentralization” move. Despite this, such centrally financed systems remove a constraint on local governments enabling these to more effectively provide public services, including health and education [13, p.220]. The war in Ukraine also raises the question of the objective need to strengthen the “recentralisation” movement, but it does not give grounds to assume that this trend is exclusively negative or that the achievements of the decentralization reform are being destroyed.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF DECENTRALIZATION IMPLEMENTATION IN UKRAINE

After declaring its independence in 1991, Ukraine began to build its own statehood on a different basis from the former Soviet Union. One of these principles is the decentralization of public power. In 1996 the Constitution of Ukraine was adopted. Article 132 of the Constitution proclaimed: “The territorial structure of Ukraine is based on the principles of unity and integrity of the state territory, a combination of centralization and decentralization in the exercise of state power...” [17]. However, the influence of the organisation of state power in the former Soviet Union did not allow for the rapid implementation of the constitutional principles. Some scholars stress: “In the former Soviet Union a special set of circumstances constrain the possible forms of decentralization reform” [17]. Despite of this fact, Ukraine started and continued to make progress on decentralization reform.

In 2014, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved a decree “On Approval of the Concept of Reforming Local Self-Government and Territorial Organisation of Power in Ukraine”. This decree introduced a major transformation in the public administration system. The approval of this Concept on 1 April 2014 and the preliminary approval of the draft law on amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine on decentralization of power by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on 31 August 2015 set the stage for a comprehensive reform of local self-government and the creation of an effective system at all levels of the administrative and territorial structure.

The most general definition of decentralization in Ukrainian legal science and political practice is the transfer of powers and finances from the state authorities to local self-government bodies as close as possible to the people. In fact, the main focus of Ukrainian decentralization reform was on the transfer of powers and finances. For instance, during the first stage of decentralization reform package of laws to empower local governments and optimize the delivery of administrative services was passed. This step allowed delegating to local governments several authorities to provide basic administrative services: registration of residence, passports issuance, legal entities registration, property rights registration, land issues and others specified in Ukrainian legislation.

The second main direction of the reform, namely the redistribution of finances between subsystems and levels of public authorities, is called “budget decentralization”, or the

reform of intergovernmental relations. The adoption of the Laws of Ukraine "On Amendments to the Budget Code of Ukraine on the Reform of Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations" No. 79-VIII, "On Amendments to the Tax Code of Ukraine and Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Tax Reform" No. 71-VIII of 28 December 2014 and "On Amendments to the Budget Code of Ukraine on the Peculiarities of Formation and Execution of Budgets of Amalgamated Territorial Communities" No. 837-VIII of 26 November 2015 became the basis for a qualitative revision of the country's budget and tax policy. These acts significantly expanded the range of sources of local budget revenues by securing more tax revenues; new types of subventions (educational and medical) were introduced. The number of local budgets that have direct relations with the state budget has increased significantly (over 1,000 in 2018). At the same time, we emphasise that this transfer was in fact pointless without solving the problem of small administrative-territorial units.

The problem of a large number of small communes with a small degree of their capacity is relevant both for countries with a stable system of local self-government and those that have recently started to develop this form of public authority [18, p. 15]. The processes of consolidation of basic administrative-territorial units in the former socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe were particularly noticeable. Ukraine also faced this problem. In order to solve it in 2015 the Law "On voluntary association of territorial communities" was adopted.

The positive effect of the legislative framework for the implementation of this aspect of the reform was reflected in the formation of a significant number of united territorial communities. As of the beginning of June 2018, more than 700 amalgamated territorial communities had been formed. According to the official statistics of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, in 2020, 1,070 amalgamated territorial communities were formed, with 4,882 communities voluntarily associating [19].

For 5 years, the state created economic incentives for the voluntary association of communities, introduced only certain administrative levers, but in general, the process of association was voluntary. At the time, scholars noted that allowing amalgamation to take place exclusively on a voluntary basis caused not only different intensities of amalgamation in different regions, but also disproportions in the number of amalgamated rural communities in terms of population and the number of amalgamated communities [20, p.14]. In the future, this situation may raise questions about the capacity of these communities.

In December 2019 the Electoral Code of Ukraine was finally adopted. Therefore, in autumn 2020, Ukraine was to hold regular elections under the new rules. At the same time, the ongoing reform of voluntary association of territorial communities demonstrated a number of problems. The first problem is the aforementioned disproportionality. Secondly, there was a large number of cases where the territory of the united territorial communities overlapped with the territory of the rayon. This had led to the need to differentiate between the competence of rayon councils and councils of voluntarily

united territorial communities. The third problem is the ability of the united territorial communities to exercise the powers that were redistributed to the basic level as part of the decentralization reform. It is for these reasons that in 2020 the issue of administrative enlargement of administrative units was raised.

To implement this stage of the reform, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted two important acts: the resolution "On the formation and liquidation of rayons" №807-IX and amendments to the final and transitional provisions of the Law of Ukraine "On Local Self-Government in Ukraine" of 21.05.1997 № 280/97-BP. The first regulatory act was aimed at solving the problem of coincidence between the boundaries of rayons and the boundaries of united territorial communities. The second allowed the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine to radically change the basic level of the administrative and territorial structure of Ukraine by its orders without amending the Constitution or laws of Ukraine.

Despite the positive response that this reform has received in the political circles of Ukraine, we believe it is necessary to emphasise that the process of association of territorial communities and changes in the administrative and territorial structure should be properly constitutionally regulated. Being regulated only by law, the relations related to the formation of capable territorial communities will not be able to be characterised by the stability and independence from the political situation in the country.

24 February 2022 divided not only the lives of the population, but also the life of the country into "before" and "after". The full-scale invasion to Ukraine and active military actions has certainly postponed further implementation of the decentralization reform. Moreover, some recentralization has become an objective consequence of the war. After all, in a crisis, efficiency and promptness of decision-making can be put above democracy.

The Law of Ukraine "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" provides for the possibility of establishing temporary state bodies - military administrations - in the event of martial law in Ukraine. They can be established at any level of the administrative and territorial structure, including the basic level. In the case of administrations established at the level of districts or regions, they can function simultaneously with local self-government bodies. However, the situation is different when military administrations of settlements are introduced. According to this law, "military administrations of settlements are formed within the territories of territorial communities where village, town, city councils and/or their executive bodies and/or village, town, city mayors do not exercise the powers assigned to them by the Constitution and laws of Ukraine, as well as in other cases provided for by this law" (part 3, Art. 4) [21]. These cases may include facts of violation of the Constitution or laws of Ukraine by village, town or city mayors in the exercise of additional powers granted by the Law of Ukraine "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" (part 4-6, Art. 9).

At the basic level, military administrations are established in case of failure of village, town and city councils and/or their

executive bodies to perform their duties. In other words, the simultaneous existence of local councils and military administrations at this level is not allowed, and the creation of the latter indicates the impossibility of the functioning of the institution of local self-government. It is also confirmed by the geography of the formation of village, town and city military administrations - they are mainly established in the areas of active hostilities. For example, Presidential Decree No. 406/2022 of 11.06.2022 established the Lysychansk City Military Administration, Presidential Decree No. 387/2022 of 03.06.2022 established the Genichesk City Military Administration etc.

Thus, the main idea behind the creation of military administrations of settlements is to ensure the exercise of public authority where local self-government is unable to fulfil its tasks. In all other cases, local self-government should continue to function normally being a very important institution of a democratic state. At the same time, over the past year, Ukraine has seen a tendency towards the recentralization of public power through the introduction of military administrations of settlements without sufficient grounds.

On 7 February 2023, Presidential Decree No. 69/2023 established the Chernihiv City Military Administration without sufficient objective grounds. The inability of the city council or its executive committee to perform its duties was not proven. The only formal reason for this decision was the removal from office of the Chernihiv city head. However, it should be noted that according to the Law of Ukraine "On Local Self-Government in Ukraine", the powers of the head in this case should have been exercised by the secretary of the local council. In other words, Ukrainian legislation has mechanisms to preserve the full functioning of local self-government without state interference.

The case of Chernihiv is seen as a threat to the existence of local self-government if it becomes a precedent. Since any kind of election is prohibited during martial law, the establishment of military administrations may be a way to strengthen state power and de facto recentralisation of power. Ukraine has a unique experience in this regard, as decentralization is not carried out by transferring powers from local self-government to the state authorities through legislative changes, but by temporarily removing local self-government from the exercise of public power and fully transferring powers to state bodies.

The second evidence of the outlined tendency of recentralisation of power in Ukraine is the recent announcement by the head of the Servant of the People parliamentary faction, Davyd Arakhamia. He expressed the intention of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to deprive local budgets of such a source of revenue as personal income taxes [22]. The reason for this step is the scandalous spending of local budgets on secondary procurement instead of strengthening the country's defence potential. If parliamentarians make the appropriate changes to the financial legislation, we can talk about the established trend of recentralisation of power during martial law in Ukraine.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above mentioned one might conclude that tendencies in the development of local self-government in European countries are gradually changing. For a long time, decentralization has been the main vector of local government development. National approaches to the implementation of the decentralization idea have led to the multiple definitions of this phenomenon. Therefore, decentralization is considered to be a complex phenomenon. However, in the context of global crises, decentralization is no longer unanimously seen as the optimal direction of public authorities' development in any country. Some European countries are increasing the influence of the central government, which is called "recentralization".

Ukraine has also experienced large-scale changes related to the revision of the legal framework and practice of local self-government. Since the adoption of the Concept of Reforming Local Self-Government and Territorial Organisation of Power in Ukraine, a number of legislative and regulatory acts have been developed to implement it. However, the decentralization reform launched in Ukraine, despite its significant positive effect, leaves insufficiently resolved the issues of clear delineation of competence between subsystems and levels of public authorities, and modernisation of the outdated territorial basis for the organisation and functioning of government institutions.

In the context of a full-scale invasion and martial law in Ukraine, decentralization reform is not a priority. On the contrary, some factors point to the process of recentralization. This is due to the need to concentrate power at higher levels for operational management of the economy, the military sector and the social sphere, especially in the areas of hostilities or frontline areas. At the same time, decentralization of power has not been neglected as one of the ideas for Ukraine's further development. In the course of post-war recovery, Ukraine will also face an urgent need for constitutional reform that would make it possible to qualitatively transform the local government system, bring it closer to European standards and create conditions for the establishment and development of the rule of law.

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