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# Decentralization as a global trend of democracy development

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## Abstract

This research examines the process of decentralization of power as a global trend of democratization. The concept of decentralization of power is revealed and the process of implementation of the reform of decentralization of power in some European countries is highlighted. The relationship between the course of decentralization reform and the index of democracy in countries has been studied. The aim of the research is to identify and analyze the essence, features and experience of decentralization as a global trend of democratization. The realization of the goal requires the solution of the next task - to analyze the experience of decentralization in the context of the development of democracy in the European Union. The solution of research problems became possible due to the use of a complex of general scientific and special research methods. This analytical essay is based on documentary sources. Analyzing the principles and results of decentralization of power in European countries in the study we see the growth of democracy. Decentralization causes a global shift in power, as the distance between citizens and government institutions is reduced.

**Keywords:** decentralization; regional policy; democracy and citizenship; civil society; public administration.

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## La descentralización como tendencia global del desarrollo de la democracia

### Resumen

Este estudio examina el proceso de descentralización del poder como una tendencia global de democratización. Se revela el concepto de descentralización del poder y, al mismo tiempo, se destaca el proceso de implementación de la reforma de descentralización del poder en algunos países europeos. Se ha estudiado la relación entre el curso de la reforma de la descentralización y el índice de democracia en algunos países. Mas concretamente, el objetivo del estudio es identificar las características y la experiencia de la descentralización como una tendencia global de la democracia. La realización del objetivo implicó la solución de las siguientes tareas: analizar la experiencia de la descentralización en el contexto del desarrollo de la democracia en la Unión Europea. La solución de las tareas de la investigación se hizo posible gracias al uso de un conjunto de métodos de investigación científicos generales y especiales: sistémicos, estructural-funcionales, históricos, comparativos. Se concluye que analizando los principios y resultados de la descentralización del poder en los países europeos en el estudio vemos el crecimiento de la democracia. La descentralización provoca un cambio de poder global, ya que se reduce la distancia entre los ciudadanos y las instituciones gubernamentales.

**Palabras clave:** descentralización; política regional; democracia y ciudadanía; sociedad civil; administración pública.

### Introduction

Today, the process of spreading democracy in the world has spread to all continents and has become a global trend. The urgency of the formation and development of democracy is based on the growing popularity of democratic values, namely - civic consciousness, human and civil rights and freedoms, awareness, and protection of their own and public interests. Decentralization is an important component of the democratization of authority. At the same time, the processes of democratic transformation in European countries are quite heterogeneous.

If in Western Europe there are quite old and stable traditions of democratic governance, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe are characterized by heterogeneity and instability of these processes. At present, democracy is consolidating in most parts of the world, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

The urgent task for most countries of the world is the implementation of effective and efficient governance, which is able to bring together the government and ordinary citizens, contributes to meeting their needs at a better level and the realization of democratic values in full. The realization of democratic values is manifested in the conscious and active involvement of citizens in public life, the defense of rights and freedoms, the protection of their own interests, which ensure the viability and sustainability of democracy.

The experience of democratic countries of Europe shows that the introduction of alternative systems of providing quality services to the population in the context of decentralization of authority helps to solve this problem.

In many European countries, the need for decentralization has arisen in connection with large-scale democratization processes and the implementation of market reforms. The collapse of the bipolar system of international relations has led to the unification of approaches to effective governance. The transformation of the world from unipolar to bipolar has accelerated the process of decentralization, as the European Union has become one of the centers of global influence.

The principles of building civil society, efficiency, transparency, openness and accountability, flexibility and subsidiarity are mandatory, as they are the basis for all sectoral policies developed and implemented in the European Union. Reforms in different countries take place in different ways, but the common basis for all countries is the reason for the need for decentralization - to manage the provision of administrative services has the lowest level of government, which can bear the costs and dispose of the results.

In political science, the term “decentralization” (from the Latin “de ...” - a prefix meaning negation, and “centralis” - the middle) - a governing political system designed to implement meaningful practical decisions that are geographically or organizationally outside the direct influence of central government; a political process involving the delegation of certain powers by the central government to the local level in order to optimize the practical solution of issues of national importance, as well as the implementation of specific regional and local programs (Decentralization. A short dictionary of political science terms, Undated).

The transition to decentralization - is a global shift in authority that frees the individual from state care and allows democracy to be built from the bottom up. Democracy presupposes the existence of feedback between the government and the citizen. Citizens should be informed about all actions and decisions of the government, and the government - about the real needs of specific citizens. Only under such conditions will its actions and

decisions be determined by the interests of citizens, social groups and it will be able to adequately respond to their requests (Boryslavs'ka *et al.*, 2012).

Decentralization reduces the distance between citizens and government institutions, allows citizens to influence government more effectively. It is one of the arguments for the transfer.

## **1. Objectives**

The aim of the article is to identify and analyze the essence, features, and experience of decentralization as a global trend of democratization. The realization of the aim requires the solution of the next task - to analyze the experience of decentralization in the context of the development of democracy of European Union countries. The object of study is decentralization in the modern political process. The subject - decentralization as a global trend of the development of democracy.

## **2. Materials and methods**

The solution of the research tasks became possible due to the use of a set of general scientific and special research methods: systemic, structural-functional, historical, comparative. The systematic method was used during the structuring and generalization of research papers devoted to the study of the concept and phenomenon of decentralization, its essence, as well as in the process of analysis of decentralization through the prism of democracy.

The structural-functional method was used to differentiate the effects of decentralization on political institutions, political relations, political culture, and consciousness, as well as to define it as a global trend of democratization. The historical method made it possible to show the development of decentralization through the prism of time in different countries. The comparative method was used when comparing the processes of decentralization reform in European countries.

The issue of decentralization in the context of democratization in the field of political science is not new, but it is becoming increasingly important. This issue was devoted to the work of Ukrainian and international scholars and practitioners such as - M. Baymuratov, Ye. Borodin, O. Gulac, V. Zubchenko, I. Koliushko, S. Kvitka, M. Lend'el, B. Malchev, M. Moskalets, R. Oleksenko, T. Sergiienko, A. Tkachuk, O. Venger, V. Yemelyanov and others.

### 3. Results and discussion

Decentralization of power contributes to the democratic development of the state by strengthening the influence of territorial gromadas, social groups and the general public on matters of public importance. A democratic state involves the public in public governance in order to optimally meet the needs of society and the citizen. As part of the general trend, each country has the features, forms and results of decentralization, the genesis and evolution of relations between central and local government, basic social values.

The implementation of decentralization reforms in the world has various consequences. High-quality reform programs have been well developed and successfully implemented in such democratic countries as Denmark, Finland, Italy, France, Poland, and others. Their results are democratization of society by involving citizens in decision-making, intensification of the political process, improving the quality of public services and functions, more rational use of budget funds, promoting regional development and regional policy, increasing public confidence in government.

The experience of development of foreign countries shows that optimization of territorial organization of authority, strengthening local self-government, formation of self-sufficient territorial gromadas, development of democracy is impossible without decentralization of power, which is the basis for ensuring a high standard of living, providing quality services at the local level.

Decentralization is a necessary condition for a democratization of state power and society, as it contributes to increasing the efficiency of central and local authorities, favorable conditions for the development of the region, the development of local democracy. In European countries, the government is defined as a set of rules and regulations for the exercise of power with respect to and ensuring their openness, public participation, accountability, coordination.

A fundamental aspect of decentralization reforms in EU countries is the active involvement of civil society in order to improve governance and strengthen democratic principles. Among the basic conditions that cause the trend of decentralization as a tendency to delegate powers and responsibilities to local governments, we see – increasing the efficiency of local governments, the introduction of democracy and protection of citizens' rights, increasing the legitimacy of the state (Zhalilo *et al.*, 2019).

The research of the successful experience of decentralization reforms in different countries of the world demonstrates the global trend towards the development of the foundations of democracy. Western European countries have succeeded in creating a viable structure through decentralization to

support the development of democracy and a stable dialogue between the state and civil society.

It should be noted that despite the different algorithms of decentralization in different countries of the European Union, the consolidating elements include the desire to make the public administration system more efficient by bringing citizens and key decision-making centers closer to the interests of gromadas.

The experience of decentralization reforms in the Baltic countries is interesting, where decentralization reform covered legal, administrative-territorial, and fiscal areas, which were implemented autonomously. In the Scandinavian countries, decentralization reform has helped to organize modern local self-government on an agency principle.

In Denmark, the search for the optimal level of decentralization began in 1958 and continued until 2007, when a new division of powers entered into force in the new structure and identified areas for further improvement of decentralized management along with stimulating integration processes for municipal consolidation. As a result, Denmark has become one of the most decentralized countries in Europe.

Expenditures of local self-government after the reform of the consolidation of municipalities, when the average population of municipalities increased from 20 to 55 thousand inhabitants, became stable, and before they were constantly growing. Denmark is one of the countries with the largest municipalities with the largest powers. Most European countries first encouraged the consolidation of small communities and then forcibly united them (Experience of Decentralization in European Countries, 2015).

In Finland, a feature of governance reforms in the 1990s was the implementation of large-scale transformations at the local level. Agency relations between levels of government with broad autonomy, the introduction of market principles in the provision of public services, etc. However, the commercialization and transit of public services to the local level has had a negative impact on the social sphere, which has traditionally been characterized by a high level and quality of service delivery. Later, the Finnish governance reform began to focus on the German experience of gradual transformation using pilot projects (Experience of Decentralization In European Countries, 2015).

In Italy, the result of the reform of decentralization of power was the formation of a three-tier system of organization of power in the country: region – province – commune. The organization of power and the division of powers were introduced with the adoption of the Constitution of the Italian Republic in 1948. In the early 2000s, a thorough reform of decentralization and reorganization of power was carried out.

Expenditures on education, health care, transport networks, civil aviation, and administrative services for industry and business were concentrated in regional budgets. The competence of the regions also includes issues of spatial planning and development. In order to exercise their powers effectively, the regions must be provided with sufficient resources, which include both their own resources and funds within the equal distribution of funds provided by the state to support economic development and reduce social and economic unrest (*Experience of Decentralization in European Countries, 2015*).

The competencies of the Italian provinces include the support and development of public transport, authorization and control of private transport, roads within the provinces and related infrastructure, care for secondary education infrastructure, economic development, including employment centers, social service centers, cultural promotion, tourism, and sports. A separate task of the province is to support and develop cooperation and partnership between communes.

The tasks of the communes are the introduction and accumulation of local taxes, regulation of local police, health care, primary and secondary education, public transport, provision of social services at the local level, trade permits, garbage collection and disposal, local transport infrastructure and street lighting, social housing (*Boryslavs'ka et al., 2012*).

Let us dwell on the analysis of the experience of decentralization reform in France. It is one of the countries in Europe where decentralization movements arose in the post-bourgeois revolutions. The experience of decentralization of French power has been used by many European countries. The beginning of the largest in the XX century reform of the administrative-territorial system of France, which took place in the 1980s, date back to the beginning of the presidency of Charles de Gaulle. He proposed a fundamentally new approach to the development of the state and the relationship between the central administration and territorial units (*Khrebtiiy, 2018*).

In 1982, under the Law on the Rights and Freedoms of Communes, Departments and Regions of March 2, 1982, the process of decentralization of government in France began, according to which the regions became an administrative-territorial unit with all necessary powers and headed by a governing council, which is elected by direct universal voting (*Experience of Decentralization In European Countries, 2015*).

During the 1982 reform, agglomeration communities were created, and commune communities were created for smaller cities. There is also an association of communes to solve a specific problem. There are now 18,000 different commune associations in France, which is also a problem, so the government aims to reduce the number of communes to at least

5,000, although this is considered too much for France (Experience of Decentralization In European Countries, 2015).

In total, between 1982 and 1986, an additional 25 laws and about 200 decrees were passed. New local taxes (in addition to the four main ones) and a global subsidy for decentralization from the state budget have been introduced to compensate for the costs of local governments in exercising their expanded powers. However, it soon became clear that such compensation was not enough.

And this has led to a growing mismatch between the expanded powers of the communes and the insufficient financial, material, human and other resources available to them. Measures were needed to address the problem. As a result, the task of consolidating lower-level administrative units through the development of inter-municipal cooperation has become a priority in further reforms (Hanuschak, 2015).

Assessing the experience of self-government reform accumulated in France over more than thirty years, it should be noted that despite the undoubted positive results (for example, in the field of local government development, inter-municipal cooperation, etc.), many important issues remain unresolved. Contrary to the expectations of the reformers, the administrative-territorial structure of the country has not become simpler and clearer, on the contrary - the number of levels and types of territorial units has increased. Regions and numerous inter-communal associations were added to the three historical levels (communes, departments, and states).

It should be noted and another direction of reform in France. It is about increasing the role of cities in local development through the creation of inter-municipal associations, including cities and adjacent territories. Such a complex way of reform is associated with the lack of public consultation, the application of a purely administrative principle of reform demonstrates the low efficiency and slowness of decentralization reform.

In our opinion, it is appropriate to study the practice of reform in Poland. It was the experience of decentralization in France that formed the basis of the decentralization reform in Poland. In turn, Ukraine is actively borrowing the Polish experience of decentralization. This is due to several reasons: first, Poland is a neighboring state that has common factors with Ukraine – the former post-communist state; a similar chronological framework for the beginning of state-building and problems with finding a model of public administration; secondly, a unitary state with a republican form of government, a democratic political regime, but a parliamentary form of government. It should be noted that the experience of implementing decentralization reform in Poland is successful.

The decentralization reform in Poland contributed to the rapid development of local self-government, improved the quality of life of its citizens, and after the country's accession to the European Union enabled the newly created administrative units to act as equal partners in international cooperation.

According to the Constitution, Poland is a unitary state. In the context of the reform of decentralization of power and the introduction of autonomous units in the administrative division of the country, the Constitution states that the principle of a unitary state is not an obstacle to decentralization of power and is guaranteed by the territorial structure of Poland.

The concept of decentralization is closely related to the concept of subsidiarity, which implies the existence of local self-government, whose functions include addressing issues at the local and regional levels. The essence of the governance mechanism is that local issues are decided by the local community, not by public authorities. The basis of administrative-territorial reform was the principle of decentralization of power in Poland (Tkachuk, 2018).

The reform of decentralization of power and the development of local self-government in Poland began with the adoption of the Law of March 8, 1990 "On Commune Self-Government", which established the basis of local self-government – the commune. The changes came amid the collapse of the pro-Soviet system of "people's democracy." The main task of the commune was to meet the most important human needs. For this purpose, the appropriate infrastructure was created, budget reform was carried out.

With the formation of the administrative-territorial division in Poland, first, the formation of the basic territorial level of government at the gmina level was ensured. The financial component and the distribution of communal property at the basic level were of key importance for the successful implementation of the administrative-territorial reform.

At the legislative level in Poland, a clear mechanism was introduced for the distribution of the revenue side of the budget between the state budget and local budgets, which allowed territorial authorities to form their own budgets and forecast further development of the administrative-territorial unit (Decentralization of Power On The Basis Of Best Foreign Practices And Ukrainian Legislative Initiatives, 2015).

In Poland, the legislative implementation of administrative-territorial reform began with the adoption of the Law "On the Establishment of a Basic Three-Level Territorial Division of the State" of July 24, 1998 (Experience of Decentralization In European Countries, 2015), according to which a three-level territorial division was introduced on January 1, 1999. Poland was divided into gminas (a basic territorial unit), districts and provinces (regions). A new three-tier administrative-territorial division, according to

which the state began to be divided into voivodships, counties and gminas. The state is headed by the president, the voivodships by the voivode, the county by the headman, and the gminas by the voiv, the mayor, or the president of the city (Decentralization: World Overview, 2018).

Management at the level of the administrative-territorial division was regulated by the relevant legislation. They identify management and control for each level. Thus, the gmina is governed by the commune council, the district by the district council, and the voivodship by the sejm. The term of office of these bodies is four years.

The reform of decentralization of power in Poland has caused the biggest changes at the lowest level – the level of communes. Local self-government thus gained a real right to manage and dispose of its own resources, gained additional powers and greater responsibility.

An analysis of decentralization reform in Denmark, Finland, Italy, France, and Poland shows that decentralization is the key to increasing the efficiency of public administration. Therefore, the general principles of effective administrative reform in any European country are quite similar. We are talking about the active transfer of powers from top to bottom, compliance with and promotion of the principle of subsidiarity, active involvement of the public in decision-making. Decentralization causes an increase in the role and importance of democratic values in society.

The level of development of democracy in the country is determined by determining the index of democracy. The methodology for determining the democracy index is based on data collection through a survey of expert and public opinion. There is a list of methods that study the level of development of democracy in the world, for example – the method of Tatu Vanhanen, Freedom house, Economist Intelligence Unit. However, the methods are united by the classification of democracy – full, incomplete, transitional (hybrid) and authoritarian regime.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the classification of democracy \***

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Scores</b>	<b>Characteristic</b>
Full-fledged democracy	8-10	A country where civil liberties and basic political freedoms are respected, high political culture, developed democratic principles. There is a functioning system of government, the independence of the judiciary, whose decisions are binding, and the independent media. The country may have very minor problems in its democratic functioning.

Incomplete democracy	6-7.9	Countries where elections are fair and free, but problems may arise (for example, violations of media freedom), although fundamental civil liberties are respected. Countries have shortcomings in some democratic aspects (underdeveloped political culture, low level of participation in politics, problems in the functioning of the governance system).
Transitional (hybrid) democracy	4-5.9	Countries where there are regular indirect election irregularities that prevent them from being recognized as fair and free. These states often have a government that puts pressure on political opponents, no independent judiciary, widespread corruption, harassment and pressure on the media, no full rule of law, and more pronounced shortcomings than in incomplete democracies in the development of political culture, level of participation in policy, and problems in the functioning of the management system.
Authoritarian regime	less than 4	In countries where there is no political pluralism and free elections, there is absolute dictatorship, violations and oppression of civil liberties, there may be traditional institutions of democracy of insignificant importance. The media are subordinate to the state, the judiciary is not independent, there is censorship and suppression of government criticism.

\* Compiled by the authors on the basis of materials of the Democracy Index (2020).

Let's turn to the results of a study of the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2020. We have the following figures for the democracy index and the category of democracy of the countries from the list we have considered above in relation to the process of decentralization reforms, namely: Denmark – 9.15; Finland – 9.20; Italy – 7.74; France – 7.99; Poland – 6.85; Ukraine – 5.81 (Democracy Index, 2020). Thus, the category of full-fledged democracy includes Denmark and Finland, the category of imperfect – Italy, France, Poland, the category of countries with a transitional, hybrid regime includes Ukraine. There is a certain correlation between the beginning of the decentralization reform process in the country and the indicator of the democracy index in it.

**Table 2. Comparison of decentralization reform and democracy index \***

Country	The beginning of decentralization	Democracy Index
Denmark	1958	9.15
Finland	1990	9.20

Italy	2000	7.74
France	1982	7.99
Poland	1990	6.85
Ukraine	2014	5.81

\* Own elaboration.

## Conclusion

Analyzing the regulatory principles and the results of decentralization of power in European countries in the form of statistical indicators of economic and democratic development, the level of citizen involvement and the impact of information and communication technologies on democracy, we see a tendency to strengthen democracy and sustainable development.

This trend is stable and systemic. Foreign positive experience clearly demonstrates the importance of decentralization for countries that are in the process of profound changes in the system of public administration and regulation of socio-economic relations. It should be noted that for countries in transition, decentralization is an effective way to change the essential characteristics of society and has significant potential and prospects for the development of full democracy.

For Ukraine today, the issue of decentralization seems to be key in the transition from the status of a country in transition to high-quality integration into the EU. That is why it is necessary to study the experience of the members of the European Union, to comprehend it and use it for the sake of democratization and increasing the efficiency of government in Ukraine.

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