ABSTRACT

of the dissertation by Omarov Madi
on the topic “Decentralization of Governance in Ukraine: a Political Analysis of Transformation Model”
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Relevance of the dissertation research. The relevance of the stated topic is determined by the large-scale transformations of the system of local self-government and decentralization of state power in Ukraine implemented since 2014. Ukraine is the only country in the post-Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic states) where a comprehensive reform of subnational governance has been carried out, affecting the administrative-territorial structure, the distribution of powers, the financial foundations of local budgets, and the mechanisms of interaction between the central government and local self-government bodies. The purpose of the reform was to increase the efficiency of public administration, the financial autonomy of territorial communities, the transparency and accountability of government, as well as to expand public participation in decision-making at the local level.

The decentralization reform was initiated under conditions of political crisis and armed conflict, which gave it special significance. Under these conditions, decentralization was considered not only as an administrative measure, but also as an instrument for increasing the resilience of public administration and national security. A key element of the reform was the creation of united territorial communities endowed with expanded powers in the field of resource management, strategic planning, and provision of public services. A significant expansion of the financial autonomy of local budgets, as well as changes in the electoral system, contributed to increased efficiency of governance and strengthening of political competition at the local level. A distinctive feature of the Ukrainian model was the high degree of openness of the reforms and the active participation of international organizations in their support.

At the same time, along with positive results, the decentralization reform revealed a number of systemic problems, including the failure of reform at the subregional and regional levels, the preservation of a dual model of governance, the risks of the formation of local clan structures, and uneven territorial development. These circumstances actualize the need for a comprehensive analysis of the Ukrainian model in order to identify its strengths and institutional vulnerabilities.

The study is of particular significance in the context of Kazakhstan, where similar problems of high centralization, limited autonomy of local authorities, and weak mechanisms of public participation in governance persist. The structural and historical-cultural proximity of Kazakhstan and Ukraine, including the Soviet institutional legacy and a three-tier administrative-territorial system, creates prerequisites for a correct comparative analysis and partial extrapolation of the Ukrainian experience. At the same time, a critical reflection on the results of the

Ukrainian reform makes it possible to avoid mechanical borrowing and to develop more balanced approaches to reforming the system of local self-government in Kazakhstan.

Thus, the topic of the dissertation research is relevant both from a scientific and a practical point of view, as it contributes to a deeper understanding of decentralization processes in post-Soviet countries and to the formation of well-grounded recommendations for the development of effective, sustainable, and democratic local self-government.

The purpose of this dissertation is to conduct a political analysis of the Ukrainian reform of local self-government (decentralization) and the territorial organization of power, with the identification of its strengths and weaknesses. The stated purpose is achieved through the solution of the following **tasks**:

— to examine the concept of decentralization of state power in contemporary political science;

— to identify the main advantages and disadvantages of decentralization processes in developing countries;

— to determine the relationship between the decentralization of state power and the democratization of political systems;

— to examine the stages of formation and development of the system of local self-government in Ukraine prior to the start of the 2014 reform; to analyze the legal foundations of the organization of local self-government in Ukraine;

— based on open data, to identify key changes in the system of subnational governance in Ukraine during the reform of local self-government and the territorial organization of power;

— to compare models of administrative-territorial structure and subnational governance in Ukraine and Kazakhstan;
to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the key changes implemented within the framework of the Ukrainian reform of local self-government and the territorial organization of power;

— to identify the main advantages and disadvantages of the reform implemented in Ukraine;

— to assess the impact of decentralization processes on the democratization of local-level power in Ukraine;

— to determine the expediency and possibilities of adapting individual elements of the Ukrainian model of decentralization and local self-government reform under the conditions of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The object of the research is the reform of local self-government and the territorial organization of power in Ukraine, which began in 2014 and continues to the present day. The choice of this period is due to the fact that it was precisely from 2014, after the approval of the state Concept, that reforming acquired an active and systemic character, which makes it possible to fully assess the changes taking place.

The subject of the research is the advantages and disadvantages of the Ukrainian model of reform of local self-government and the territorial organization

of power (decentralization). Within the framework of the subject of the research, political, administrative, fiscal-budgetary, and social aspects of the reform are studied, such as the redistribution of powers between the center and the regions, the introduction of financial autonomy of local budgets, changes in the administrative-territorial structure, and an increase in the level of accountability and responsibility of local authorities to the population, as well as political participation at the local level.

Methodological basis of the research.

Within the framework of the declared theoretical approaches, the dissertation uses quantitative and qualitative research methods, the key ones being the following.

1. Document analysis is used to study the regulatory and legal framework governing the functioning of local self-government and decentralization processes in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Constitutions, laws, by-laws, state strategies, and program documents regulating the administrative-territorial structure, the distribution of powers, and budgetary and financial relations are used as sources. This method makes it possible to identify the formal institutional frameworks of the reforms and to conduct a comparative analysis of the legislative models of the two countries.

2. Comparative analysis is used to compare the pre-reform and post-reform models of local self-government in Ukraine, as well as the Ukrainian and Kazakhstani models of subnational governance. The analysis is conducted through the prism of administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization and makes it possible to identify institutional changes, the degree of autonomy of local authorities, and the features of the territorial organization of governance in the post-Soviet context.

3. The T. Vanhanen Democracy Index is used for a quantitative assessment of the level of democracy at the subnational level in Ukraine and for analyzing its dynamics during the implementation of the decentralization reform. The use of this indicator makes it possible to assess changes in electoral participation and political competition in a regional dimension and to identify local effects of institutional transformations.

4. The method of directed expert interviews is used to analyze the practical aspects of the implementation of the decentralization reform and to identify its strengths and weaknesses, including informal factors. Ten interviews were conducted with representatives of the academic community, state authorities and local self-government bodies, as well as non-profit organizations. The interviews were conducted using a structured guide and were transcribed using the Vosk software.

7. Directed qualitative content analysis is used to systematize and interpret the data from expert interviews. The analysis is based on predefined theoretical categories of administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization, as well as additional analytical categories. Coding was carried out in the MAXQDA24 software, which ensured methodological rigor and reproducibility of the results.

6. SWOT analysis is used to summarize and structure the results of expert interviews and content analysis. The method made it possible to classify the identified factors of the reform into categories of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, as well as to present the Ukrainian model of decentralization as an integral analytical construct with the identification of its achievements and institutional risks.

The theoretical significance of the dissertation lies in advancing political science analysis of decentralization as a complex institutional and political process in post-Soviet countries. The study conceptualizes decentralization not merely as an administrative and managerial reform, but also as a factor of democratization and subnational political transformation, thereby expanding the analytical scope of traditional institutional approaches. The application of a three-dimensional analytical model—administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization—combined with both quantitative and qualitative methods, deepens the understanding of the relationship between the redistribution of powers, transformations in the system of local self-government, and the dynamics of democratic processes. The findings contribute to comparative studies of decentralization and democratization by providing an empirically grounded analysis of the Ukrainian case in comparison with Kazakhstan.

The practical significance of the research is determined by the possibility of applying its findings and recommendations in the process of reforming the system of local self-government and territorial organization of power in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The analysis of the Ukrainian decentralization model, including its identified advantages, institutional constraints, and risks, may be utilized by public authorities, as well as by the expert and academic community, in the development and adjustment of decentralization policies, budgetary reforms, and mechanisms of accountability of local authorities. The dissertation materials may also be used in analytical reports, expert assessments, and in the educational process for training specialists in political science, public administration, and public policy, including courses on comparative politics, local self-government, and democratization.

Scientific novelty of the research consists in the following.

1. A holistic analytical framework for the study of decentralization in a post-Soviet country has been developed, allowing the Ukrainian reform to be considered not only as a managerial transformation, but also as a factor of political transformation at the subnational level. Decentralization is operationalized through three interrelated dimensions — administrative, fiscal, and political — which expands the possibilities for a comprehensive assessment of the reform in the context of democratization.

2. An interdisciplinary research design combining institutional and comparative approaches, as well as quantitative and qualitative methods, has been theoretically and methodologically substantiated. The novelty lies in the use for Kazakhstani political science of a combined analysis of documents, the Democracy Index of T. Vanhanen at the regional level, and directed qualitative content analysis

of expert interviews, which made it possible to simultaneously take into account formal and informal mechanisms of the reform.

3. A comprehensive empirical picture of the reform of local self-government in Ukraine has been formed, integrating administrative, fiscal, and political changes. It is shown how the redistribution of powers, the transformation of the budget system, electoral reform, and the enlargement of territorial units increased the managerial and financial sustainability of communities, while at the same time generating risks of institutional incompleteness and strengthening of local elites.

4.For the first time in Kazakhstani scientific literature, for the Ukrainian case, an assessment of the impact of decentralization on democratization at the regional and local levels was carried out using the Democracy Index of T. Vanhanen adapted for subnational analysis. Regional heterogeneity of the democratic effects of the reform and their connection with institutional parameters of local governance were identified.

5. A comparative analysis of the systems of subnational governance of Ukraine and Kazakhstan was conducted on the basis of unified criteria, showing that, despite a similar Soviet legacy, Ukraine implemented a deeper and more consistent decentralization, while Kazakhstan retains the dominance of a centralized model. This made it possible to identify key institutional constraints and potential directions for the modernization of the Kazakhstani system.

7. Applied conclusions and recommendations on the use of the Ukrainian experience of decentralization in Kazakhstan were developed on the basis of a critical analysis of the conditions of its applicability. Based on expert interviews and SWOT analysis, the key advantages and risks of the reform were identified and conceptual guidelines for the development of subnational governance in Kazakhstan were formulated, including the completion of decentralization at the regional level and the creation of mechanisms of checks and balances for local elites.

Approbation of research results: the main results of the dissertation research were presented in six scientific publications by the author, including one article in a scientific journal indexed in the Scopus database, two articles in scientific journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in the Field of Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and three articles in the proceedings of international conferences, one of which was published abroad.

Provisions submitted for defense:

1. Administrative decentralization in Ukraine strengthened the institutional and managerial capacity of local self-government bodies by transferring a significant part of powers to the level of territorial communities, which brought decision-making closer to citizens and improved the quality of public services. At the same time, problems of clear delineation of competencies and the incompleteness of the reform at the oblast and district levels persist, where local state administrations continue to function and councils do not have executive bodies.

2. Fiscal decentralization strengthened the budgetary autonomy of communities and increased the sustainability of their financing, but at the same time led to the growth of interterritorial imbalances. More developed communities gained significant advantages, while poor territories faced risks of lagging behind; additional factors of imbalance included the concentration of excess resources in certain communities, corrupt practices, and errors in the allocation of personal income tax.

3. Political decentralization contributed to the development of political competition, local democracy, and civic participation, including the emergence of local activists and regional parties. At the same time, in a number of regions, practices of "elite capture," fragmentation of the party field, and restrictions on the participation of non-party candidates were recorded, while accountability mechanisms remain institutionally weak.

4. The impact of decentralization on democratization is ambivalent in nature: with an increase in civic activity, the level of democracy at the subnational level, measured by the Tatu Vanhanen Index, did not change significantly, since low turnout in local elections is combined with an increase in the level of political competition.

5. In the context of territorial integrity, decentralization played a stabilizing role, reducing the potential of separatist sentiments. The strengthening of local self-government became a factor of state resilience and a counterbalance to external aggression, which was especially evident in the context of the Russian invasion.

6. The enlargement of the basic level through the formation of territorial communities increased the viability of administrative-territorial units and the rationality of the territorial structure, but revealed problems in determining the optimal size of communities and the unevenness of resource provision. The voluntary nature of amalgamation at the early stages was replaced by a compulsory one in 2020.

7. Russian aggression became a critical test for the reform: on the one hand, it led to partial recentralization and a halt to reforms at the regional level, on the other hand, it demonstrated the resilience of local self-government, confirming its key role in ensuring the functioning of territories under conditions of war.

The structure of the dissertation work is determined in accordance with the purpose and objectives, as well as the logic of their solution. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three sections (each section includes three subsections), a conclusion, a list of references, and appendices. The volume of the dissertation amounts to 188 pages of typewritten text, excluding appendices. The list of references used includes 187 titles.