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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL FREEDOM

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between local self-government and democracy, focusing on their significance for individual political freedom within the context of Ukraine's ongoing democratic reforms. The study highlights the theoretical foundations of this correlation, examining the impact of decentralization and governance at the local level on the country's political system. Despite Ukraine's substantial efforts toward democratization, significant challenges remain in effectively balancing the principles of local self-government with centralized state power. The article explores three primary theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding this relationship.

The first approach argues that local self-government and democracy are not necessarily interconnected, and self-governance can exist even under authoritarian regimes. This perspective is based on examples from states where self-governing structures function autonomously, without direct influence from democratic processes. The second approach emphasizes that local self-government acts as a precursor to democratization, serving as a «school of democracy» where citizens acquire participatory skills and foster political culture. This approach acknowledges the role of local institutions in developing civic responsibility and engagement in decision-making processes. The third approach asserts that democratization must first occur at the national level, creating favorable conditions for the development of autonomous local self-government systems.

The article concludes that a balanced approach to decentralization and centralization is crucial for the effective functioning of local governance. The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that decentralization can strengthen local

communities' capacity for self-organization and responsiveness to citizens' needs. However, excessive decentralization, in the absence of strong democratic traditions, risks consolidating power among local elites, which may hinder broader democratization efforts at the national level.

Keywords: local self-government, democracy, political freedom, decentralization, governance, civic participation, reform.

Introduction

The relationship between local self-government and democracy is a crucial topic in modern political theory, particularly in the context of Ukraine's efforts to democratize its society and transition from a centralized political system. Despite the progress made in the last few decades, challenges persist in defining the precise correlation between local self-governance and broader democratic structures. This article seeks to explore the theoretical foundations of this relationship, emphasizing its implications for political freedom and effective governance in Ukraine. Special attention is given to the relevance of these concepts in contemporary Ukrainian society, where efforts toward decentralization are often seen as key to achieving sustainable democratic governance.

A wide range of research has been devoted to exploring the connection between democracy and local self-government, particularly in the context of post-Soviet transitions. Scholars such as V. Dubinin, O. Holovko, and M. Baymuratov have contributed significantly to understanding the historical and legal foundations of local governance in Ukraine. Moreover, works by P. Andresyuk and S. Doroshenko have examined the practical application of local self-government in Ukrainian regions, while others, including I. Drobot and N. Moiseeva, have focused on the broader implications of decentralization for democratization. However, as decentralization reforms in Ukraine continue to evolve, many unresolved issues remain, particularly concerning the autonomy of local bodies and their capacity to serve as agents of political freedom.

Research methods

The methodological basis of this article involves a combination of general scientific and specialized approaches. Comparative and dialectical methods are primarily employed to analyze the theoretical correlation between local self-government and democracy. Comparative analysis is utilized to juxtapose different concepts regarding the role of self-government in democratic societies, while dialectical analysis helps to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of local self-government in the Ukrainian context. This methodological framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness between local governance and democracy in both theory and practice.

The purpose of the article is to investigate the relationship between local self-government and democracy in Ukraine, focusing on how these two phenomena

interact to shape individual political freedom. By analyzing different theoretical and methodological approaches, the article aims to clarify the role of local self-government in the democratization process, offering insights into the practical challenges of implementing effective governance at the local level in both democratic and non-democratic states.

Research results

In modern Ukraine, the ideas of political freedom have become especially urgent in connection with the aspiration for the democratization of society and the successful completion of transitional processes. At the same time, despite the fact that this aspiration was expressed as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s, there is still no clearly formulated strategy for building democracy, nor a comprehensive vision of the tactics to achieve this goal. The areas of public life that require priority reforms have not yet been identified, nor have concrete timelines been established, even approximately, for the completion of each stage.

However, one of the possible tasks in this context is evident to the majority of political actors in contemporary Ukraine. There is no doubt that the establishment of a democratic regime will entail the formation of a qualitatively new system of local self-government. Yet, there is no consensus on what is primary—democracy or self-government—or whether these processes are even connected at all. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish the main approaches to the correlation of both the concepts and phenomena of democracy and local self-government, which will be done in this section.

It is worth noting that defining these approaches has a purely theoretical and methodological value, as it allows for the structuring of the main views on the concepts of «democracy» and «local self-government.» Understanding the key perspectives on this issue enables a better grasp of the essence of both concepts and the development of a methodology for further research on any issues directly or indirectly related to these phenomena of social life.

Nevertheless, since the distinction between these approaches is purely conditional, it would be inappropriate to focus solely on the systematization of researchers' views, ascribing them to one approach or another. In the works of Western scholars from democratic countries, this issue is rarely raised. Ukrainian researchers either ignore it as well, moving directly to the analysis of the characteristics, functions, and models of local self-government, or present all three approaches without distinguishing them as different, thus not aligning themselves with any of them. At the same time, the starting thesis of most foreign and domestic scholars is the inseparability of local self-government and democracy [1, p.485].

For this reason, we categorize approaches to the correlation of the concepts of «democracy» and «local self-government» based on content, not the citizenship of the scholars, their affiliation with a particular school, or even their individual works. It is more important for us to understand which approach will

have theoretical, methodological, and practical significance for modern Ukraine, and which should serve as the foundation for the democratization of our state. In adhering to scientific objectivity, we do not seek to formalize knowledge but rather focus on the essence of these approaches, hoping that a discussion will arise and the academic community will independently structure itself according to these or any improved and modified approaches.

Overall, three main theoretical and methodological approaches to the correlation of local self-government and democracy can be found in contemporary Ukrainian political and legal science (as already noted, they are often encountered even within a single scientific study, with the contradictions between them either deliberately or unconsciously ignored). According to the first of these, the existence and functioning of local self-government and democracy are not interdependent or mutually conditioned. The primary purpose of local self-government, in this case, is to meet the needs of citizens at the basic level. Its foundation lies in ensuring individual and group interests, and political freedom is viewed solely as the right to participate in solving everyday issues through pre-established structures and institutions. As a result, local self-government can exist, and moreover, be effective, not only in democratic societies but also in totalitarian and authoritarian ones.

In contrast, proponents of the second and third theoretical-methodological approaches to the correlation between local self-government and democracy emphasize that the development of one of these phenomena in a state necessarily precedes the other. One perspective on this relationship suggests that local self-government precedes the democratization of the state, as it is inherently democratic and forms the corresponding traditions at the local level.

Adherents of this approach are based on the theory of A. de Tocqueville, who emphasized that local self-government serves as a kind of «school» of democracy. It is at the local level where practical participation skills are acquired, which fosters engagement at the national level. Naturally, this process occurs even in «peaceful» conditions. The presence of a well-developed local self-government positively influences the socialization of each individual, forming the necessary skills. In other words, political freedom «begins» locally, and after its traditions and corresponding political culture have fully developed, citizens start to assert their rights at the national level. This is one of the main methods and pathways of democratization, which contributes to the relatively swift completion of all stages and successful outcomes.

Ultimately, proponents of the third theoretical-methodological approach to the correlation between local self-government and democracy argue that it is the democratization of public life in a particular state that allows for the creation of an appropriate system of local self-government. In their view, participatory skills cannot emerge in a system where political freedom, in its traditional sense, is absent. If the state controls civil society and even personal life, the formation of civic consciousness in individuals, the desire to participate in decision-making, and

active involvement in political processes are impossible. Accordingly, the process of democratization must at least begin first, and only then can the establishment of local self-government occur, which will be genuinely based on the political freedom of individuals and citizens [2, p. 96].

Given that these approaches are distinguished based on content criteria, rather than the individual views of specific scholars, it is still possible to systematize the existing research on local self-government in Ukraine according to these criteria. For example, the belief in the necessity of separating local self-government from democracy has been found in the monographs and articles of the following scholars: V. Dubinin, O. Holovko, V. Kravchenko, M. Lendel, and O. Yarmysh. In contrast, the thesis on the interconnectedness of these two phenomena and the primacy of local self-government as the source of democracy has been expressed in the works of O. Yatsunskaya, P. Andresyuk, M. Baymuratov, K. Domashenko, S. Doroshenko, M. Hryshchuk, L. Lanovyuk, H. Lebedynska, V. Lebets, O. Moroz, V. Nakonechnyi, Z. Pechar, T. Tatarenko, A. Tkachuk, O. Vlasjuk, N. Prozorova, L. Yarichevska, and O. Zakharchenko.

The emphasis on the need for at least the formal proclamation of democracy as a prerequisite for the development of local self-government in the state is characteristic of the works of M. Baymuratov, O. Batanov, V. Demydov, I. Drobot, S. Filchashkin, V. Martynenko, N. Moiseeva, A. Nekryach, S. Sakhanenko, L. Savenko, and V. Tkachenko. Finally, in the works of many scholars, at least two of the identified approaches are presented without absolute conviction in the correctness of one of them. These include A. Achkasov, H. Chapala, P. Liubchenko, and N. Proniuk.

Let us consider each of these theoretical-methodological approaches in more detail, starting with the first one, which differentiates local self-government from democracy, arguing that these phenomena should not be equated, as there are democracies without local self-government, and local self-government, in turn, can exist under totalitarian or authoritarian regimes.

One of the main arguments in favor of the view that local self-government and democracy are not interdependent is the fact that local self-government emerged in the pre-state period of societal development [3, p. 8]. At that time, self-governance was the only form of social management. With the rise of state formations equipped with specific governmental apparatuses, the self-governance of individual communities gradually transformed into local self-government in its modern form. Regardless of the political regime established in a particular territory, self-governance persisted, and participation in it only required one to be a free member of the community.

Furthermore, proponents of this theoretical-methodological approach argue that self-government is a social, rather than a state phenomenon [4, p. 71]. An attributive characteristic of local self-government is the combination of the object and subject of governance, and this is possible not only in democracies but also in other political regimes. Drawing a parallel, for instance, with the economic sphere, one can find many examples of enterprises governed by rather strict and

authoritarian methods, but where individual departments have mechanisms of self-organization to solve local problems. Similar processes occur at the level of the political system. Thus, it is not appropriate to equate the state phenomenon—democracy as a political regime—with the social phenomenon of self-government.

Another important theoretical issue in this context is determining what social-legal institution can be considered local self-government [3, p. 5]. In modern political science, this term is often used rather narrowly, characterizing only democratic systems of local self-government that exist and function in organic connection with civil society and the rule of law. According to the supporters of this approach, this leads to many absurd claims, such as the notion that local self-government in Ukraine was revived after the declaration of independence, while prior to that, it existed only in the pre-Soviet period. This claim was even made in a 1993 address by President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma to the Verkhovna Rada, when he spoke about the initiation of local self-government [3, p. 5].

Undoubtedly, democratic political regimes do indeed promote the active and comprehensive development of local self-government. Under such conditions, local self-government brings power closer to each citizen, creating additional opportunities for participation in decision-making processes and in the management of public affairs. In Western states today, local self-government is based on the rule of law and has a clearly defined social character, as it is grounded in the needs of the community as a whole and of the individual. To reach this state, it has undergone a long process of evolution and refinement. Accordingly, Ukraine aspires to build this type of democratic local self-government [3, p. 7].

At the same time, local self-government, as a social-legal institution, exists under other political regimes as well. In world history, of course, exceptions can be found, where certain authoritarian or totalitarian regimes do not even attempt to maintain the semblance of local self-government, instead establishing their own rules and appointing bureaucrats from the lowest to the highest levels, even in small towns or villages. However, this is indeed an exceptional case, as even dictatorships do not seek to etatize societies to such an extent that they completely abandon self-governing structures [3, p. 8].

Local self-government is necessary for any modern state, regardless of the form of its political regime. In today's conditions, where political life is extraordinarily complex and dynamic, central authorities are physically incapable of controlling all aspects and effectively resolving all issues, the spectrum of which may encompass diverse manifestations of historical development, economic potential, social sphere, political culture, and so forth. It is precisely the local self-government bodies, serving as primary governance units, that possess sufficient information and resources (including human and time resources) to act as quickly and efficiently as possible, not only to solve problems but, more importantly, to prevent their occurrence.

Thus, proponents of this approach argue that local self-government can function in both democratic and non-democratic states, differing only in the principles of power organization at the local level [5, p. 7]. In a democracy, local self-government enjoys a certain degree of autonomy from state power, and the two are clearly distinguished. The state apparatus includes central authorities (the president, parliament, government) and their representatives at the local level, who are appointed «from above.» In contrast, local self-government is elected by the population and is not necessarily confirmed by the central authorities. Elected local bodies (mayor, local deputies) are seen primarily as representatives of a particular territorial community, rather than as representatives of state interests at the local level. For this reason, there is no hierarchy of local self-government bodies, and they are not vertically subordinated to one another.

In contrast, in authoritarian and totalitarian states, the concept of unity between state power and local self-government is affirmed and implemented. Typically, there is no (or a destroyed) natural division of the state into natural territorial communities. Instead, an artificial division into administrative-territorial units (districts, regions, counties, provinces, etc., established by state authority acts) is introduced [5, p. 7]. This is done to dismantle the historically formed traditions of self-governance and create an entirely new system of local self-government.

Thus, local self-government is viewed differently—elected local bodies are now confirmed by higher authorities and primarily represent the interests of the state at the local level. However, this usually does not mean that local self-government ceases to exist. The interests of the state become a priority, and their realization becomes the primary task for any local official. Nevertheless, in areas that are not of significant importance to the state, while the local community requires the resolution of certain issues, there remains autonomy and the possibility of procedures characteristic of democratic regimes: public hearings, public initiatives, general meetings, etc.

Therefore, it becomes clear that no political system can ignore the interests of the people if it wants to continue existing. There are two possible solutions to such a situation—either the state independently satisfies all needs and realizes the interests that arise in all corners and at all levels of society, or it creates other bodies with a certain degree of autonomy that will oversee resolving these issues. Even a totalitarian political system cannot entirely ignore the interests of the people, as it fears social unrest [6, p. 121]. Consequently, the second option is the best, which involves creating a system of local authorities with certain powers and autonomy.

Moreover, non-democratic political systems especially need such «assistance,» as they typically rely on myths of caring for the population, providing full protection, and meeting its needs to the maximum extent possible. Even systems that come to power by force will sooner or later lose control over society if they do not employ other mechanisms of legitimization and establish relationships of trust with the population. The simplest way to do this is through populist promises of

achieving a certain ideal order, which, regardless of ideological foundation, typically implies the absence of unmet needs.

Accordingly, in order to meet the people's interests in areas where state intervention and total control over all details and processes (housing and communal affairs, education, healthcare) is impossible for certain reasons (too burdensome for the state apparatus, too costly, etc.), even a totalitarian political system allows for the existence and functioning of local self-government. However, it imposes strict limitations on the autonomy and powers of these institutions and mandates the clear and unconditional subordination of local and individual interests to national interests.

The level of democracy in a political system is not always directly related to the level of decentralization and the development of local self-government [7, p. 124]. Many democratic states prefer maximum centralization of governmental powers, which means that in such cases, local self-government does not meet the criteria set by those who argue that democracy and local self-government are clearly interconnected. Therefore, it is incorrect to claim that the full autonomy of local self-government bodies is an absolute good. Centralization allows for more efficient problem-solving, better coordination of local services' activities, and even the reduction of costs for services provided by local public services [7, p. 124].

These views are typical of Continental European states, particularly France, where the structural organization of the entire political system is based on the belief in the primacy of popular sovereignty, which delegates power to the state. The state, in turn, distributes powers between central and local authorities. As a result, there is no separate local legitimacy; instead, the people, as the sole source of power, authorize the state to act at its discretion to fulfill its primary function—realizing political interests and guaranteeing the political freedom of citizens—and the division of state institutions into different levels is merely a technical detail, not an essential attribute.

On the other hand, in countries where established democratic traditions are lacking, an excessive emphasis on decentralization can hinder democratization and lower the overall level of democracy. Since the system of local authorities often exists only formally and does not yet conform to the declared principles and ideals, the powers transferred to the local level may be used to serve the corporate interests of local elites, who are minimally controlled by the central government [7, p. 124].

Decentralization of power does not always promote democratization. The transfer of powers to the local level can sometimes lead to opposite outcomes. Renowned American journalist and political researcher Richard Minter provides numerous examples of how local authorities, once empowered, began to create senseless obstacles and regulations, forcing citizens to constantly seek permits [8]. And this happened in the United States—a country with well-established democratic values and traditions of civic participation.

This contradicts the widely held view that decentralization of governance is the best way to meet all citizens' needs and satisfy their political interests. In new democracies, this process often takes the opposite direction. At the regional and local levels, especially in areas identifiable as «outsiders,» there are tendencies for power to concentrate in the hands of a closed, immobile traditional elite or a coalition of elites, which, as a result, gain significant political, institutional, and financial resources [9, p. 69]. Since this elite has the ability to control the region at its discretion, it tends to preserve the existing decision-making system and reproduce the current type of leadership, which does not contribute to the democratization of that particular region, and ultimately affects the state as a whole.

Conclusions

The study of the relationship between local self-government and democracy provides several important conclusions for contemporary Ukraine. Firstly, local self-government is not only a mechanism of political governance but also a foundation for the development of political freedom and civic participation. It can function both in democratic and non-democratic regimes, yet in democratic societies, self-government attains greater autonomy and a stronger capacity to meet the needs of local communities. Secondly, the democratization process is critical for the successful functioning of local self-government, as political freedom is a prerequisite for citizens to fully exercise their rights to participate in public decision-making. Thirdly, it is essential to recognize that excessive centralization, even in democratic states, can hinder the development of local self-government, while decentralization must be balanced and effective. The reform of local self-government in Ukraine should take into account both national conditions and international experience, particularly the need for a clear distribution of powers and strengthening the capacity of local authorities.

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ВЗАЄМОЗВ'ЯЗОК МІЖ МІСЦЕВИМ САМОВРЯДУВАННЯМ І ДЕМОКРАТІЄЮ В КОНТЕКСТІ ІНДИВІДУАЛЬНОЇ ПОЛІТИЧНОЇ СВОБОДИ

Резюме

У статті аналізується взаємозв'язок між місцевим самоврядуванням і демократією, зосереджуючи увагу на їхньому значенні для політичної свободи особистості в контексті поточних демократичних реформ в Україні. Дослідження висвітлює теоретичні основи цієї кореляції, розглядаючи вплив децентралізації та управління на місцевому рівні на політичну систему країни. Незважаючи на значні зусилля України на шляху до демократизації, залишається низка викликів, пов'язаних з ефективним балансуванням принципів місцевого самоврядування та централізованої державної влади.

У статті розглядаються три основні теоретичні та методологічні підходи до розуміння цього взаємозв'язку. Перший підхід стверджує, що місцеве самоврядування та демократія не обов'язково є взаємопов'язаними, і самоврядування може існувати навіть в умовах авторитарних режимів. Ця думка базується на прикладах таких держав, де самоврядні структури не зазнають прямого впливу демократичних процесів, але функціонують автономно. Другий підхід робить акцент на тому, що місцеве самоврядування є попередником демократизації, виступаючи своєрідною "школою демократії", де громадяни набувають навичок участі в політичних процесах. Такий підхід визнає важливість локальних інституцій у формуванні політичної культури та навичок відповідальної участі у прийнятті рішень. Третій підхід вважає, що спершу має відбутися демократизація на загальнодержавному рівні,

що створить сприятливі умови для розвитку автономних систем місцевого самоврядування.

У висновку статті робиться наголос на тому, що для ефективного функціонування місцевого управління необхідний збалансований підхід до децентралізації та централізації. Український досвід демонструє, що децентралізація може зміцнити здатність місцевих громад до самоорганізації та забезпечення потреб громадян. Проте надмірна децентралізація, за відсутності стійких демократичних традицій, може призвести до концентрації влади серед місцевих еліт, що потенційно загрожує подальшій демократизації національної політичної системи.

Ключові слова: місцеве самоврядування, демократія, політична свобода, децентралізація, управління, громадська участь, реформа.

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