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The impact of decentralization on the administrative service delivery speed in different fields

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Abstract

Using an analytical and documentary-based methodology, the objective of the study was to establish the relationship between the degree of decentralization and the speed of delivery of administrative services at the local level in different fields in European countries and Ukraine. The study involved indicators of the speed of delivery of administrative services (company registration, building permit and land registration) according to the World Bank's Doing Business methodology. The relationship identified between the degree of decentralization and the speed of administrative service delivery at the local level was the basis for establishing that the time to register a company and obtain a building permit decreases as a function of the higher degree of decentralization. The time to register property increases as the degree of decentralization increases, which is partly explained by the complexity of the administrative procedure models and their duration. It is concluded that, a comparison of the speed of providing administrative services (business registration, construction permit, land registration) in Ukraine with the average indicator of a group of countries revealed significantly better results in Ukraine.

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Keywords: public administration; decentralization of management; administrative services; local self-government bodies; impact of decentralization.

El impacto de la descentralización en la velocidad de prestación de servicios administrativos en diferentes campos

Resumen

Mediante una metodología de base analítica y documental, el objetivo del estudio fue establecer la relación entre el grado de descentralización y la velocidad de prestación de servicios administrativos a nivel local en diferentes campos en los países europeos y Ucrania. El estudio involucró indicadores de la velocidad de entrega de servicios administrativos (registro de empresa, permiso de construcción y registro de propiedad) de acuerdo con la metodología Doing Business del Banco Mundial. La relación identificada entre el grado de descentralización y la velocidad de prestación de servicios administrativos a nivel local fue la base para establecer que el tiempo para registrar una empresa y obtener un permiso de construcción disminuye en función del mayor grado de descentralización. El tiempo de registro de la propiedad aumenta a medida que aumenta el grado de descentralización, lo que se explica en parte por la complejidad de los modelos de procedimientos administrativos y su duración. Se concluye que, una comparación de la velocidad de prestación de servicios administrativos (registro de empresas, permiso de construcción, registro de propiedad) en Ucrania con el indicador promedio de un grupo de países reveló resultados significativamente mejores en Ucrania.

Palabras clave: administración pública; descentralización de la gestión; servicios administrativos; órganos de autogobierno local; impacto de la descentralización.

Introduction

The development of territorial communities is one of the key issues in the public administration system. The need to improve the effectiveness of the territorial entities, to ensure the ability to perform functions of the state at the local level require new approaches to the distribution of power at different hierarchical levels. The economic and social reform policy in the context of strengthening the regional and local capabilities of self-governing entities offers the concept of decentralization of power.

This model of the distribution of power is widely used both in the world as a whole (123 countries started administrative decentralization processes during 1970-2014 (Tester, 2021)) and in the European Union. Significant experience has been accumulated regarding different approaches to the organization of the distribution of resources and powers in view of the growing role of subnational levels of public administration in the EU countries. An important result of decentralization is an effective and open system of territorial organization of power in the country.

Decentralization involves strengthening the capabilities, responsibility and effectiveness of the public administration system at the local level, and improving the provision of public needs. In turn, these processes create problems related to the growth of territorial distinctions in terms of development, financial and administrative capacity, and the possibilities of providing administrative services by the public administration system. Balanced approaches to providing decentralization with a financial component can improve the efficiency of resource allocation and use, ensuring the territorial community's ability to fulfil spatial development tasks and expanding the opportunities of inclusive solutions. This is crucial for both European countries and Ukraine, which has recently implemented a decentralization reform.

The discussion on the construction of a centralized or decentralized system of public administration is quite old. Key political issues in the current debate on the development are reducing centralized control and delegating power to local authorities. Decentralization policies assign local self-government bodies an institutional role to implement the achievements of democracy through leadership training, political stability, local consultation and more effective public accountability.

The liberal approach emphasizes decentralization for better organizational efficiency in providing goods and services, for environmentally sustainable development, and in promoting local development through citizen participation. The researchers' interest in the consequences of decentralization for the economy focused mainly on economic growth, and some studies indicate that there is an optimal level of decentralization that maximizes the growth rate of the economy (Martinez-Vasquez *et al.*, 2017; Camões, 2022; Canare, 2022).

Public administration and fiscal decentralization reform increase the autonomy of territorial entities and reduce dependence on the state budget. Local self-government bodies improve public welfare and the service quality on the basis of expanded management of their own finances. In this connection, multi-level management models have gained key importance in the political mechanisms of European countries in recent decades, thereby strengthening the capabilities of local self-government bodies. The transition from the creation of facilities to service delivery sets up an

environment which provides citizens with an opportunity to choose service providers from the perspective of their own benefit and quality (Mihálik *et al.*, 2019).

Decentralization of administrative, fiscal and political powers has made local authorities able to provide the population with basic services that contribute to the quality of life and well-being in the community. Researchers of decentralization processes consider the importance of formal political institutions, which, by means of reform, change the approach to public services through institutional mechanisms associated with democratic development. There is an opinion that the quality of public services was influenced by the inadequate professional level of the employees, the lack of basic administrative infrastructure, etc. As a result, it can be difficult to meet public needs even with available resources and powers. At the same time, global experience shows that fair local elections, transparency, citizen participation, capacity of civil servants and existing basic infrastructure are key factors for effective decentralization in order to improve service delivery at the local level (Sujarwoto, 2017).

Decentralization has enhanced interest in local politics and public services, while local-level democratic processes have increased competition in local political struggle (Ziegenhain, 2015). It is important to have sufficient powers and financial resources in view of the possibility of decentralization to improve the work of local self-government bodies by responding to the direct citizens' participation requests. The institutional models of decentralization differ from country to country, but they are all based on the democratization of the effective public service delivery processes (Nishimura, 2022).

Decentralization can be considered as a process in which local political and institutional actors receive varying degrees of autonomy in relation to central public authorities. This implies a change in the relationship between the national and local levels in the field of rights and responsibilities and the expansion of the powers of authorities at the local level (Borrett *et al.*, 2021). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development considers the transfer of powers, responsibilities and resources from central authorities to subnational authorities with a certain degree of autonomy as an important aspect of decentralization (OECD, 2019).

The decentralization consists of political, administrative and fiscal aspects. The decentralization reform may be implemented at a different pace and depth in different countries in view of their launch at different time and established needs. The decentralization of the above three aspects will be asynchronous, but the interaction between them is important. So, attempts to measure decentralization will have certain limitations, as any approach to this issue must provide for the definitions, concepts and methods used by researchers, which will affect the results (Borrett *et al.*, 2021).

Administrative decentralization involves the transfer of responsibility for the provision of public services from central authorities to the territorial communities. Fiscal decentralization involves the transfer of authority over the revenues and expenditures of the budget to local self-government bodies (Chaudhary and Iyer, 2022). Political decentralization is based on the model of the exercise of power by autonomous local authorities elected directly by citizens. Administrative decentralization speeds up decision-making at the operational level, thereby preventing delays caused by the need to transfer issues to a higher level of the hierarchical authority structure (Gardi *et al.*, 2020).

The existing need to determine the degree of decentralization raises the issue of creating the required methodology. Approaches to the decentralization indices became clearer in the academic environment in the late 1990's. Decentralization indices are based on a ranking system that classifies sub-national entities based on their degree of territorial autonomy through evaluation. Researchers determine institutions and institutional resources, styles of intergovernmental relations, party ties, and political leadership as the main dimensions of territorial capacity (Harguindéguy *et al.*, 2021).

There are other approaches that, for example, demonstrate the degree of decentralization in the EU countries based on a special study of the distribution of powers, including on the legal basis for different governance structures in the EU Member States (Harguindéguy *et al.*, 2021; European Committee of the Regions, 2022). The general degree of decentralization in the EU country can be determined using the available data on the level (index) of fiscal, political and administrative decentralization.

The decentralization processes, providing for the autonomy of the territorial entity, contribute to the expansion of meeting the needs of individuals and legal entities. One of the important directions is the provision of administrative services by local self-government bodies. Studies show that local self-government bodies with a higher degree of financial (fiscal) decentralization reduce their own expenses and increase the number of public services.

Besides, increased accountability of local self-government bodies based on local tax transparency can improve local service delivery (Bianchi *et al.*, 2021). Delegating administrative powers to local authorities can improve public service delivery, taking into account the availability of information, understanding the needs of citizens or conducting monitoring at the local level (Chaudhary and Iyer, 2022).

When considering the issue of satisfaction with the administrative services by local self-government bodies, one of the key parameters is their delivery speed in different fields, which may indicate a certain administrative

capacity of the authorities at the local level. Based on the foregoing, the aim of the study is to find out the degree of influence of decentralization processes on the speed and quality of administrative services provided at the local level in different fields in European countries and Ukraine. The aim involved the following research objectives:

1. Define of the degree of decentralization;
2. Identify the terms of the main widespread administrative services in different fields;
3. Determine the correlation between the degree of decentralization and the administrative service delivery speed;
4. Comparison of the time of administrative service delivery in Ukraine with certain global indicators.

1. Methods

The methodological approach of the research is divided into several stages: making a list of countries to be analysed; determination of the administrative service delivery speed; determination of the degree of decentralization; finding a relationship between the degree of decentralization and the administrative service delivery speed; comparison of average European indicators of the administrative service delivery with Ukrainian ones.

It is proposed to include the EU countries in the sample to be analysed (Belgium, Latvia, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovenia, France, Italy, Portugal, Croatia, Estonia, Austria, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovakia, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta).

The time of administrative service delivery to the customer (consumer) is determined in accordance with the following services: company registration, construction permit and property registration. These types of administrative services are selected as one of the most widespread, sufficiently complex in terms of registration procedures and the availability of relevant data.

Separate indicators of the World Bank's Doing Business methodological approach assessment were used to obtain data on the time of administrative service delivery. Doing Business indicators include sections that directly address the time of the relevant administrative service delivery (World Bank, 2020a; World Bank, 2020b). The Decentralization Index of EU countries (European Committee of the Regions, 2022; Harguindéguy *et al.*, 2021) was used as an indicator of the degree of decentralization. Possible

dependencies of the administrative service delivery speed on the degree of decentralization of the country are determined based on the selected indicators using a graphic method (scatter diagram).

The comparative analysis determined the level of administrative services in Ukraine relative to the EU high income countries and OECD.

2. Results

It should be noted when analysing such administrative services as company registration, construction permit and property registration in the EU countries that the processes of execution of individual documents will take into account certain features. The specified features include the work regulations of public authorities authorized to deliver a particular service, and the number of procedures provided for by the regulations of a particular country, which must be carried out for obtaining this administrative permit/service.

Data on the time of administrative service delivery are provided in the World Bank's Doing Business report (World Bank, 2020a; World Bank, 2020b) as separate indicators that characterize the state of the provision of administrative services in 190 countries of the world in 2020. A graphic analysis will be conducted on the basis of available data on the time for company registration, obtaining construction permits and property registration in individual countries of the European Union and the number of administrative procedures provided for by the current legal acts of each country (Figure 1).

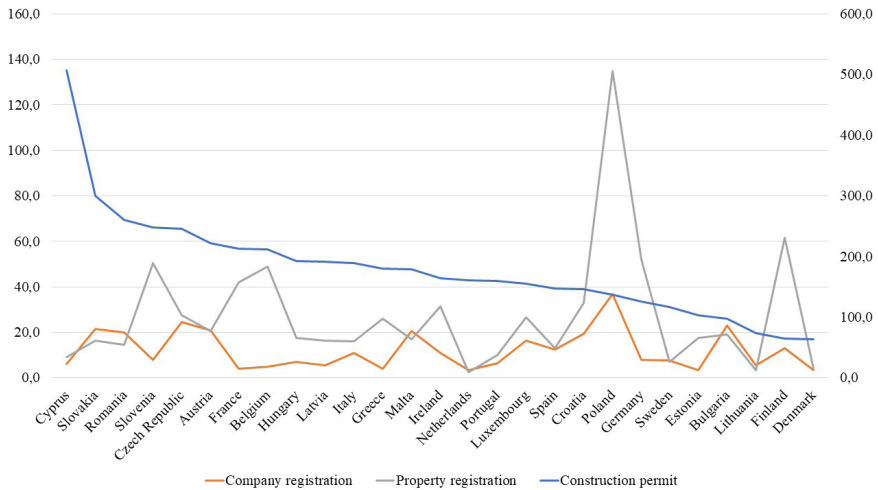


Figure 1. Speed of administrative service delivery in selected EU countries, days (World Bank, 2020b).

Analysis of time for administrative service delivery (Figure 1) shows significant differences between countries. For example, the company registration in the studied countries ranges from 3.5 (Denmark, Estonia, Netherlands) to 37 days (Poland). At the same time, property registration takes from 2.5 (Netherlands) to 135 days (Poland). A construction permit service takes much longer to complete: from 64 days (Denmark) to 507 days (Cyprus).

For a better understanding of effective service provision, it is possible to determine the conditional speed of one administrative procedure as an illustrative example with a view to different approaches to the company registration processes determined by the national legislation of each country (Figure 2).

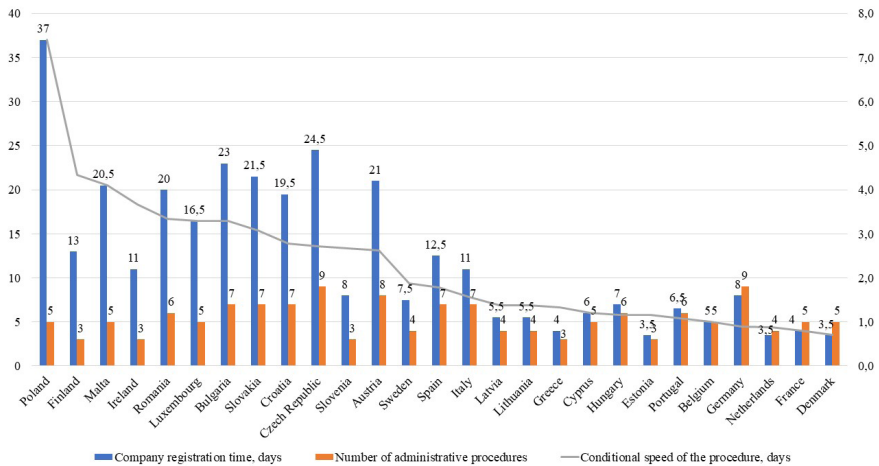


Figure 2. The time of company registration, the number of administrative procedures and the conditional speed of the administrative procedure (World Bank, 2020b).

The study of the degree of decentralization of selected EU countries, carried out in accordance with the existing methodical approach, showed that the indices of general decentralization range from 0.8 (Ireland, Malta) to 2.5 (Latvia, Germany). As noted above, the general Decentralization Index consists of the indices of fiscal, political and administrative decentralization. It should be noted on the basis of these directions that the countries are in the range from 0 (Malta) to 3 (Germany, Sweden) according to the Fiscal Decentralization Index. Ireland (1.2) obtained the minimum index of political decentralization, while Latvia, Germany obtained the maximum – 2.5. The Administrative Decentralization Index was the lowest level in Ireland (0.6) and the highest in Denmark (2.5) (European Committee of the Regions, 2022; Harguindéguy *et al.*, 2021).

The dependence of the speed (time) of obtaining a building permit on the degree of decentralization can be identified in Gretl using graphical analysis. The conducted analysis based on the scatter diagram demonstrates the general trend of most of the studied countries (Figure 3). The trend proves that when the degree of decentralization increases, the time of providing an administrative service (a construction permit) decrease. The indicators of Cyprus, where the time-of-service provision – 507 days – was recorded, can be considered the most significant deviation.

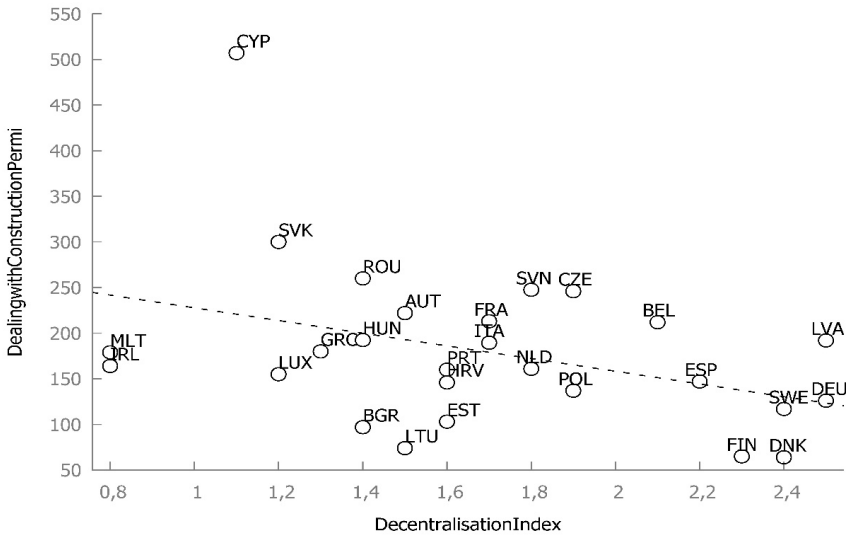


Figure 3. The relationship between the time of obtaining a construction permit (days) and the degree of decentralization.

We can see a similar situation in the analysis of the dependence of the time of company registration on the degree of decentralization (Figure 4). The indicators of Poland (37 days) can be distinguished, which are significantly different from the general trend.

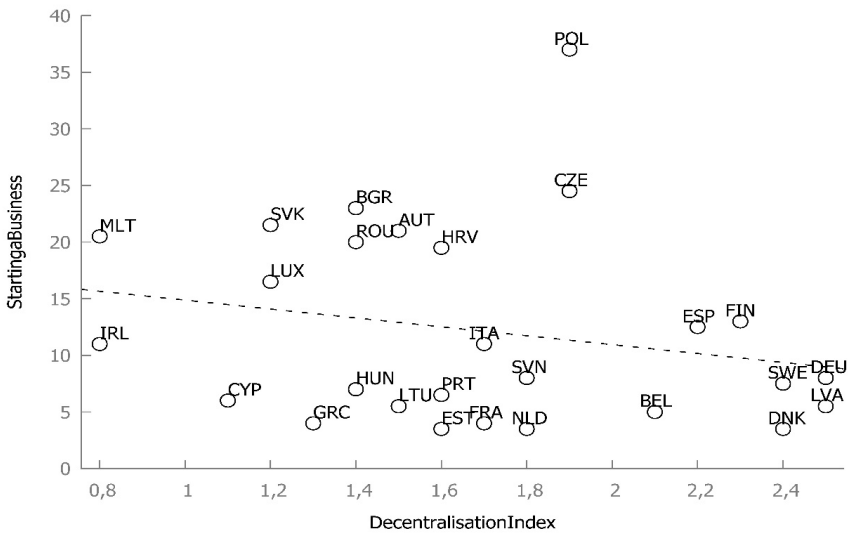


Figure 4. The relationship between the time of company registration and the degree of decentralization.

The situation is the opposite when the dependence of the time of property registration on the degree of decentralization is analysed (Figure 5). A certain increase in the time of obtaining an administrative service is noticeable with an increase in the degree of decentralization in the country. Poland's indicators (135 days) differ significantly from the general trend.

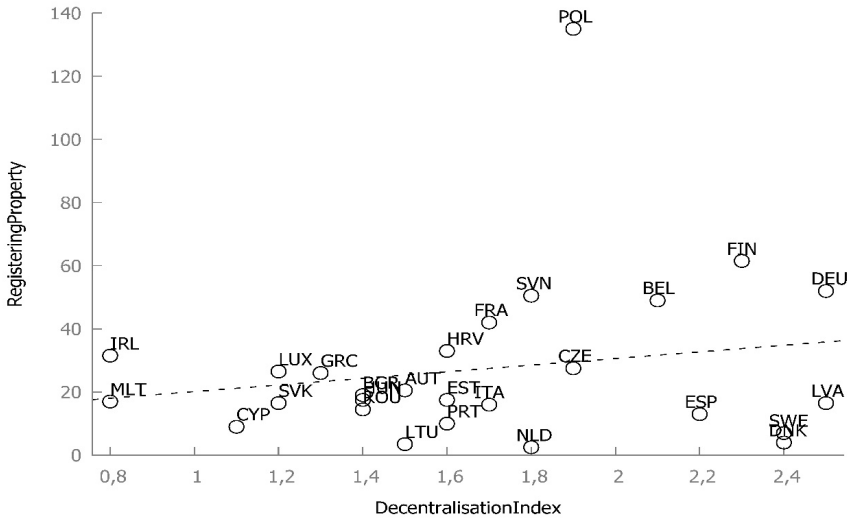


Figure 5. The relationship between the time of property registration and the degree of decentralization.

In general, it should be noted that the property registration and the company registration procedures take significantly less time (with the exception of Poland) than obtaining a construction permit in the EU countries.

The reform of the system of local self-government and territorial organization of power in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014. This provides for complex reforms in key areas aimed at establishing democratic institutions, ensuring coordination of the interests of the state and territorial communities, improving the quality of life through decentralization (Siryk *et al.*, 2021).

The indicators of the number of procedures required to obtain an administrative service (company registration, construction permit, property registration) in Ukraine and the average indicator for a group of countries (Europe and Central Asia; high income OECD countries) (Table 1) are compared below.

Table 1. Number of procedures in the provision of administrative services, 2020 (World Bank, 2020c).

Indicator	Ukraine	Europe and Central Asia	High income OECD countries
Company registration procedures (number)	6	5.2	4.9
Construction permit procedures (number)	10	16.2	12.7
Property registration procedures (number)	7	5.5	4.7

Table 1 shows that the indicators of Ukraine slightly exceed the average data for the group of countries “Europe and Central Asia” and “the OECD”, and, for example, the indicator for a construction permit turned out to be better in Ukraine.

The speed of administrative service delivery (enterprise registration, construction permit, property registration) in Ukraine and the average indicator for a group of countries (Europe and Central Asia; high income OECD countries) will be analysed in the same way (Figure 6). The obtained results show that these indicators are significantly better in Ukraine: the time spent on obtaining an administrative permit is almost 2 times less than the maximum value in the “company registration” group, 1.5 times less than the maximum value in the “property registration” group, and 2.3 times less in the “construction permit” group.

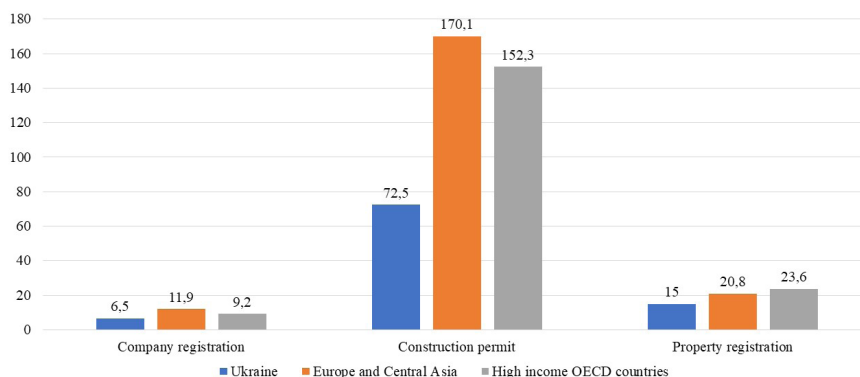


Figure 6. Time of administrative service delivery (days), 2020 (World Bank, 2020c).

In September 2022, a survey was conducted among employees of local self-government bodies (442 respondents) as part of the PROSTO Project “Support to Services Accessibility in Ukraine” in partnership with the All-Ukrainian Association of United Territorial Communities (Prosto, 2022). The purpose of the survey was to find out the level of basic administrative services in Ukraine by various entities of government bodies authorized to provide relevant services. Figure 7 illustrates the results of the assessment of administrative procedures.

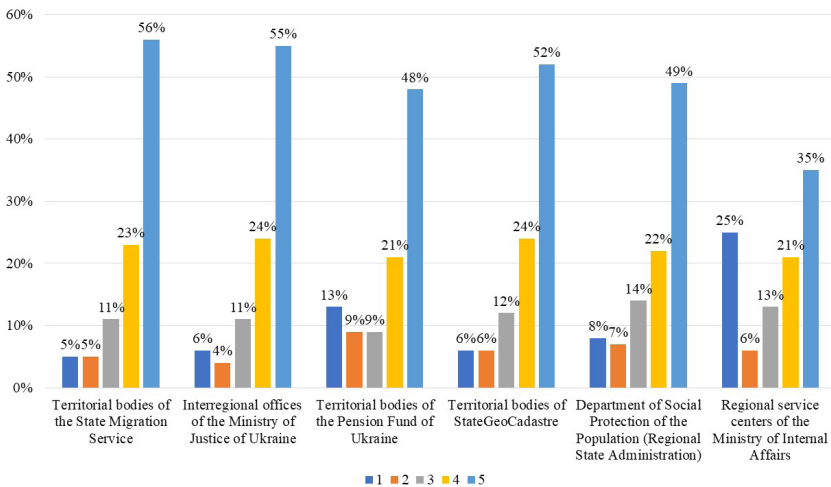


Figure 7. Assessment of the provision of the most requested administrative services in Ukraine in 2022, points (Prosto, 2022).

The above assessment indicates a significantly high level of administrative services in the field of land resources, social services, obtaining permits and certificates, etc. in Ukraine. Most of the entities authorized for the provision of administrative services received the highest score from half of the respondents for the quality of services, and one entity received the highest score from more than a third of the respondents. In general, the decentralization processes in Ukraine enabled reducing the time of providing administrative services at the local level and the quality of these services improved.

3. Discussion

So, the public administration decentralization processes, which transfer the state functions from the central to the local level, have a positive effect on the organization of administrative services and can influence social results through the simplification of approaches, social responsibility, meeting the needs of individuals and legal entities.

A review of academic approaches to assessing the degree of decentralization showed that there is no single best approach. The research involved an approach based on the methodology of determining the general Decentralization Index, which is based on a combination of administrative, fiscal and political decentralization. An important methodological limitation is that the definition, with the exception of the fiscal dimension, of indicators that measure decentralization depends on researchers and experts collecting and evaluating reliable information (Borrett *et al.*, 2021).

The limitations of the study are the use of data only for the selected European countries, as there are no methodologically similar decentralization indexes for a larger number of countries, where a comprehensive index based on political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization is used. It is appropriate to use countries of the world with different levels of economic development and degree of decentralization for further extended analysis.

The conducted research demonstrates that feedback reveals the dependence of the speed of obtaining a construction permit and company registration on the degree of decentralization. An increased degree of decentralization, i.e., an increased political, administrative and fiscal capacity of local authorities, enables to reduce the administrative service delivery time. This is implemented mainly by reducing the number of administrative procedures or speeding up certain procedures.

The issues related to urban planning documents, land use, compliance with the current fire prevention, sanitary and epidemiological, construction legislation in the course of obtaining a construction permit fall under the powers of the territorial community. Coordination, transfer of documents between authorized government bodies takes place in a short period of time, thereby increasing the speed of providing administrative services while expanding administrative functions of local self-government bodies.

The same applies to company registration, the procedure of which remains shorter and more simplified compared to all the studied administrative services. In this case, the simplification is enhanced by the aspiration of local self-government bodies for stimulating the environment for the development of entrepreneurial initiative and operation of companies that pay taxes to the local budget, through administrative law mechanisms (World Bank, 2020d; World Bank, 2020e; World Bank, 2020f).

The dependence of the time of property registration on the degree of decentralization can be distinguished in the general understanding of the state of affairs regarding the administrative service delivery speed. In this case, there is (mostly) a noticeable increase in the time of administrative service delivery with increased degree of decentralization. The countries in which property registration procedure is quite quickly: the Netherlands (2.5 days), Lithuania (3.5 days), Denmark (4 days), Sweden (7 days) should be single out here. Although these countries have a different Decentralization Index, all of them are characterized by a fairly prompt certification of ownership — no more than a week.

At the same time, countries with a high degree of decentralization (Germany, Finland) have indicators of administrative service delivery speed of 52 and 61.5 days, respectively, which are almost comparable to countries with average values of the Decentralization Index (Slovenia, property registration time — 50.5 days; France, property registration time — 42 days).

In our opinion, some procedures that involve preliminary property registration (verification of collateral, sales agreement certification) and post-registration procedures provided by local self-government bodies increase the time the said administrative service delivery. For example, in Latvia, property registration procedures include verification of ownership rights in the Land Cadastre, denial of the local self-government body regarding immovable property, entry of information into the Land Cadastre.

The expansion of the powers of the local self-government body in Latvia in the property registration process includes the denial to use the property for the performance of municipal functions. In the event that the local self-government body does not provide an answer within the period specified by law, the ownership may be transferred to the applicant after 27 days (World Bank, 2020e).

The practice of registering ownership rights to real estate in Germany also has national features related to the expansion of the powers of local authorities. The applicant must obtain a waiver of pre-emptive rights from the municipality within 14 days. Besides, 20 days are allocated for the procedures related to the entry of relevant data into the land cadastre (notification, cancellation of encumbrances).

It takes 15 days to pay the real estate transfer tax and receive a notice from the tax authority, and the directly final stage of registering the new owner in the land register takes the same 15 days (World Bank, 2020f). Therefore, it can be argued that excessive coordination of procedures at the local level complicates the provision of an administrative service (property rights registration) and increases the overall time of the procedure.

An important limitation is the need to understand the differences in the decentralization systems of Ukraine and European countries. Governing bodies in the EU Member States at the regional and local levels can receive common EU resources that enable strengthening local development and the distribution of powers between the state and sub-national components. For countries with significant budget constraints, this allows co-financing of development projects and improving the ability to provide high-quality administrative services.

Besides, the direction of decentralization in the EU Member States is more related to the regional level, and current social issues are focused on the level of territorial communities. Transfer of the focus of management decision-making and administration to the community level enables minimizing the costs of providing public goods and stimulating their provision, which implies further improvement of the institutional environment.

The issue of providing services in decentralized management systems is actively discussed in the academic literature. The problem of the quality of serviced provided by local self-government bodies and its inequality within the country is discussed. Some researchers are uncertain about the above issue, because the capabilities of local authorities are influenced by many factors: local taxation conditions, lack of accountability mechanisms, targeted transfers, equalization models, infrastructure provision needs, etc. (Arends, 2020).

Local authorities should apply different technologies, methods, systems and strategies to solve service delivery problems, taking into account the complexity of criteria that affect management and decision-making to improve the quality of life (Bostanci and Erdem, 2020). The impact and results of the models used by local self-government bodies to provide services at the local level (self-provision, use of municipal enterprises, use of private enterprises, inter-municipal cooperation) are also important (Schoute *et al.*, 2018).

The successful implementation of local self-government reforms requires institutional and administrative capacity, as well as the use of innovative approaches and tools. It should be added that decentralized governance for effective service delivery requires professional and qualified personnel in local self-government bodies; further improvement of the legislative framework of decentralized governance systems; acceleration and economic efficiency of the administrative services (Sabir *et al.*, 2021).

The specified terms for the provision of administrative services, which were used in the study, may be shorter in practice than those determined according to the applied methodology. This may be influenced by the expanded use of electronic governance, the submission of most documents in electronic form, changes in the legal framework regarding the reduction

of certain terms, the transition to the implementation of a single registration body.

The fairly good results obtained for Ukraine may be adjusted for the worse, because the study did not take into account the effects of possible corruption factors and the specifics of the human factor. Although it should be noted that in recent years, Ukraine has taken significant steps to shorten the terms of providing administrative services and minimized bureaucratic and corruption factors in many areas of public services. Further studies should include the indicators of a larger number of countries that have actively implemented the decentralization reform, and an expanded list of administrative services provided at the local level.

Conclusion

Therefore, the state mainly tries to solve organizational, administrative and financial issues in the process of providing administrative services. It tries to attract the necessary resources in order to strengthen its own capacity, including the provision of services, to speed up administrative procedures, to improve quality of services provided at the local level. The decentralization reform provided for the transfer of certain functions of the state to the subnational level, which expanded the capabilities of local self-government bodies in terms of administrative, political and fiscal areas. But the degree of decentralization of different countries is different.

This study involved a methodological approach based on the Decentralization Index of the EU member states. This enabled clarifying certain regularities of the impact of the degree of decentralization on the administrative service delivery speed. The study found that the time of a construction permit and company registration procedures decreases with increased degree of decentralization. At the same time, a slight increase in property registration time is noticeable with a higher degree of decentralization.

The analysis of property registration systems and procedures in the selected countries demonstrates the legislative and procedural complexity of property registration processes and the rather long terms of coordination of some issues by local self-government bodies, which partially explains the obtained result. A comparison of the terms of the provision of administrative services in Ukraine with the average indicators of certain groups of countries demonstrates a greater efficiency of the provision of services in Ukraine than in the countries selecting for the comparison.

The study proves that the further implementation of the decentralization reform provides the results of improving the quality of local services in

the future in view of the current changes in the legislative framework, strengthening of fiscal capacity, creation of innovative mechanisms of interaction with local self-government bodies. But it is also important to take into account the peculiarities of each particular country, which are determined by the general level of economic development, the peculiarities of economic activity, the institutional environment, the development of the electronic government system, the transparency and accountability of the public administration system, the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy, etc.

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