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Decentralization in Ukraine and Bottom-Up European Integration

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Introduction

The ongoing decentralization process in Ukraine is considered one of the most successful reforms in the country so far. It started in 2014 with the Concept of the Reform of Local Self-Government and Territorial Organization of Power in Ukraine (Government of Ukraine 2014), adopted by the government in the wake of the Euromaidan protests. One of its main elements is the merging of smaller communities into so-called Amalgamated Territorial Communities (*Ob'yednana Terytorial'na Gromada*, abbreviated as ATC in the following). With their voluntary unification, these newly established communities obtain more authority and financial means (Rabinovych, Levitas, and Umland 2018).

Political scientists ascribe many positive aspects to decentralization, such as the high responsiveness of public services to peoples' needs, higher levels of citizen participation, and lower levels of corruption (Saito 2011: 486-487). Despite the young age of the decentralization reform in Ukraine, scholars and experts have thoroughly examined this process—with mixed results (Dudley 2019, OECD 2018, e.g. Aasland 2018, International Alert and UCIPR 2017). In all cases, the authors report positive developments, but they voice concerns, too. Overall, however, the decentralization reform seems to reinforce Ukraine's official goals of good governance, democratization and fighting corruption. The same is reflected in European statements. The EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee '[c]onsiders that the decentralization process has been and continues to be highly beneficial for Ukrainian citizens, in particular regarding improved quality of services, the reduction of corruption at local level and the increased ownership of local decision-making by citizens' (EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee 2019: 8).

Given this positive relationship between decentralization and other domestic reforms, the question arises whether and how the delegation of power contributes to Ukraine's strategic foreign policy goal of European integration. This question can be approached from different perspectives. Most generally, one can ask whether the successful implementation of the reform

would bring the country closer to EU membership, as recently codified in Ukraine's constitution. The answer, however, is clearly negative because membership is currently not offered by the EU. While there may be some form of future 'procedural entrapment' for the EU should Ukraine comply with all reform requirements (Sasse 2008), this corresponds more to a hypothetical than real scenario. There is currently no EU membership conditionality towards Ukraine. Alternatively, one can also approach the question by asking whether the successful implementation of the decentralization agenda could be seen as a sign of Ukraine's compliance with the EU-Ukrainian Association Agreement (EU/Ukraine 2014). However, the decentralization reform is not directly related to this agreement (Hanushchak, Sydoruk, and Umland 2017), and progress will not directly contribute to Ukraine's further inclusion into the EU market or agencies.

Against this background, this chapter follows a sociological approach and takes a different perspective on the question whether decentralization fosters Ukraine's European integration. In doing so, the European integration of Ukraine is not primarily understood in a formal-institutional way as the country's inclusion into the EU system of institutions or regulations. Instead, it draws on the conceptualization of integration in terms of transnational social relationships. As Langenohl summarizes: 'European integration can thus be understood as a political project with a sociological imagination that puts the broadening and deepening of "sociation" (*Vergesellschaftung*, Georg Simmel) at center stage' (2019: 78).

More specifically, the chapter looks at the transnational relations of the newly established ATCs, in particular at the existence of community twinning partnerships with counterparts abroad and membership in transnational European networks. In doing so, it builds on a literature that stresses the significance of transnational cooperation at local level for European integration. The following section presents some basic points about Ukraine's decentralization reform and reviews the literature on its relationship with the country's European integration. The subsequent part introduces a sociological perspective on European integration and takes a closer look at the role of community twinning and networks. It is followed by empirical findings from a survey conducted among the authorities of the 159 ATCs founded in 2015 and from the analysis of ATCs' participation in municipal networks. The chapter closes with some conclusions and prospects.

Ukraine's decentralization reform

According to Saito, decentralization 'is a process through which subnational governments increasingly partake in deciding on and administering essential public policies' (2011: 484). Despite previous attempts to devolve power to local communities in Ukraine, serious and successful steps were taken only by the post-Maidan government in 2014. On 1 April 2014, it adopted the Concept of the Reform of Local Self-Government and Territorial Organization of Power in Ukraine and kicked off one of the most successful reforms (Sologoub, Shkarpova, and Batoh 2019). Since then, power has been transferred from the central authorities to the ATCs, among others in the fields of urban planning, education and public health (Government of Ukraine 2019, Rabinovych, Levitas, and Umland 2018). However, decentralization in Ukraine involves more than re-arranging competences between different levels of governance. On the one hand, political decentralization is matched by fiscal decentralization (Betliy 2018), the second pillar of the reform. On the other hand, decentralization is interwoven with a seemingly contradictory process of power concentration. Amalgamation, i.e. the merging of small communities into United Territorial Communities (ATCs), represents the third pillar of the reform. The amalgamation process started in 2015 on a voluntary basis. Today, there are 882 ATCs uniting 4,043 communities (villages, towns, etc.), which corresponds to 36.7 percent of the total number of local councils that existed at the beginning of 2015. Current ATCs account for 38 percent of Ukraine's territory and about 69 percent of the country's population (Government of Ukraine 2019). The rationale of this process is to create larger units that, in contrast to the former ones, are more capable of policy-making and service provision.

The Ukrainian Constitution is the most fundamental legal basis of decentralization. Local self-government is guaranteed by Chapter XI. Moreover, in 1997, the country signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which came into force in Ukraine on 1 January 1998. This document is remarkable because it states the right of local authorities to 'external relations'. According to Article 10 of the Charter, local authorities shall be entitled to co-operate, to belong to national or international associations, and 'to co-operate with their counterparts in other States' (Council of Europe 1985). As will become evident in more detail below, this right to independent transnational relations is at the basis of the relationship between decentralization and Ukraine's European integration.

Decentralization reform and Ukraine's European integration

Decentralization reform has a firm place in EU–Ukrainian relations. In Article 446, the Association Agreement provides that Ukraine and the EU ‘shall promote mutual understanding and bilateral cooperation in the field of regional policy, on methods of formulation and implementation of regional policies, including multi-level governance and partnership’ (EU/Ukraine 2014).

The 2015 Association Agenda, devised to prepare and facilitate the implementation of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, states that dialogue and cooperation should cover, among others, (EU/Ukraine 2015: 8)

strengthening of the functioning of local and regional self-government, and legal status of the service in local self-government bodies, including through a decentralization reform devolving substantial competences and related financial allocations to them, in line with the relevant standards contained in the European Charter on Local Self-Government

In order to substantiate its support of the reform, the EU has contributed to it both financially and with the expertise of its Support Group for Ukraine (European Commission 2014, 2019). Still, decentralization and Ukraine's European integration are related in an indirect rather than straightforward way. Although the EU supports and monitors the progress of decentralization in Ukraine (e.g. European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2018), it does not make its relationship to Ukraine conditional on it. In contrast to many other reforms in Ukraine, decentralization ‘plays a negligible role in the “conditionalities” that govern Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU and the strengthening of relations between them’ (Dudley 2019: 5). The Association Agreement does not include an obligation for Ukraine to take steps towards decentralization. Consequently, although successful, decentralization in Ukraine cannot be expected to be directly rewarded with closer relationships to the EU or even a membership perspective.¹

Against this background, scholars have outlined some potential indirect effects that decentralization may have on Ukraine's European integration. Andreas Umland (2019)

¹ While the EU has no common institutional model regarding the public administration of its member states, in 1995 it added an administrative criterion to the Copenhagen Criteria setting forth the conditions for accession. Furthermore, a regionalized system of administration is part of the EU's *Acquis Communautaire* on regional and cohesion policy, which had and still has to be adopted and implemented by candidate countries. The EU, however, does not prescribe a particular model of regional governance (LePlant et al. 2004).

describes two of them. On the one hand, he stresses that a successful reform enhances the compatibility of Ukraine's internal organization with existing forms of decentralization in EU member states. In particular, he points to the principle of subsidiarity as one of the EU's fundamental principles, based on Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and a principle implemented in the EU's member states. Shifting power from Ukraine's central government to local communities could therefore be seen as a prearrangement for future steps of further integration, up to EU membership: 'The more deconcentrated and subsidiary Ukraine becomes, the more similar it will thus look to other European nations, and the better she will later be prepared for full accession to the EU' (Umland 2019). This argument can be taken even further. In its present form, it presupposes an external integration impetus: while decentralization is valuable once Ukraine takes further steps towards integrating into the EU, it does not influence the probability that such steps would happen in the first place. One could, however, endogenize European integration in a rationalist argument stating that the progress of decentralization reform will have a positive effect on the cost-benefit analyses of EU member states with regard to closer EU-Ukrainian relations. While the state of decentralization would most likely be only one factor among many, the prospect of well-designed and well-implemented intra-Ukrainian governance arrangements between the central authorities and local communities could lower the expected future costs of integration and may even be considered a benefit. Thus, by influencing EU member states' cost-benefit calculations, decentralization reform could contribute to Ukraine's European integration, even if not exclusively.

Apart from the practical benefits stemming from the compatibility of decentralised systems, Umland identifies a second, ideational contribution decentralization could make towards Ukraine's European integration. By decentralizing decision-making in Ukraine, the country does away with centralist traditions, originating in the Tsarist and Soviet past, and underlines its European character. In doing so, Ukraine 'demonstrates her belonging to the Western normative and cultural hemisphere. That in turn makes Ukraine's ambition to enter the EU and NATO a more natural affair than it may have otherwise been' (Umland 2019). This is an implicitly constructivist argument, according to which a country strives for membership in organizations that represent the international community it predominantly identifies with. From this constructivist perspective, it could be added to Umland's argument that the decentralization reform influences not only Ukraine's ambitions to EU membership, but also the perceptions of the recipients of a potential membership application and, consequently, the willingness to

accept Ukraine as an EU member. The more Ukraine is perceived to share the EU's fundamental norms, the more closely it will be integrated into the EU's structures.

A third potential effect decentralisation has on Ukraine's European integration is mentioned by Dudley, who points to the developmental agenda behind the policy (2019: 5-6). Faced with various socio-economic problems throughout the country, the government perceives local self-government as a tool to address these challenges. If successful, this would put Ukraine in a position to fulfil the obligations resulting from the Association Agreement. As Dudley reports, 'decentralization from the Ukrainian government's perspective is associated primarily with attaining the level of regional economic development and competitiveness required for alignment with European standards' (2019: 6). As discussed above, successful decentralization and, subsequently, successful implementation of the Association Agreement may have a positive impact on the EU member states' cost-benefit calculations with regard to the further integration of Ukraine.

What unites the three presented ideas—underlining anticipatory rule adoption and the resulting rule compatibility, ideational similarity, and enhanced compliance capability—is their focus on formal institutions. Umland explicitly speaks of Ukraine's 'accession to' or 'entering' the EU, whereas Dudley refers to the terms of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. This has two drawbacks: With fundamental reservations against further enlargement currently existing in the EU (e.g. Marciacq 2019), the mechanisms may be (partly) obsolete in practice. Furthermore, they neglect the societal basis of European integration, highlighted by sociological approaches. In a country in which 55 percent of the population has never been abroad and another 16 percent goes abroad every ten years or less (Interfax-Ukraine 2016), the fundament for European integration might be rather thin when attention is paid to formal institutions only.

Sociological perspectives on European integration

Sociological approaches to European integration have long led a shadowy existence. Recently, however, they have come to the fore again (see, e.g., the contributions in Saurugger and Mérand 2010b). In contrast to focussing on formal political institutions, they turn their attention to European integration as a societal process. Beyond this fundamental consensus, however, sociological perspectives on European integration are rather heterogeneous. While some studies attend to a 'European society' more broadly, others concentrate on individual EU officials and the decisions they take in Brussels, with particular attention to the decision-makers' social context (Saurugger and Mérand 2010a).

Sociological approaches furthermore differ with regard to epistemology and the use of qualitative vs. quantitative data. Favell and Guiraudon (2009) distinguish research that enquires the ‘social bases’ of European integration following a bottom-up perspective from research that identifies effects of European integration on European society in a top-down approach. With regard to the latter, they present examples of studies on social stratification, social class and identity. With regard to the former, they list studies on regional ties and social networks created through student exchanges, projects and town twinnings.

It is argued here that such bottom-up sociological approaches are worth extending to both Ukraine’s relationship with the EU in general and to the specific question regarding the relationship of the country’s decentralisation and European integration. As already pointed out above, political science approaches focusing on formal institutions are likely to face limitations when applied in the latter case. Furthermore, a sociological perspective would more closely reflect the opinion of Ukrainian citizens. For them, successful European integration is not primarily related to improved formal relations between the EU and Ukraine. According to polls, it is mainly connected with ‘improved service at social infrastructure facilities (hospitals, kindergartens, or schools)’ (38.72 percent), improving ‘transport infrastructure [...] (e.g. rebuilt roads or comfortable and safe public transportation)’ (33.36 percent), and ‘new jobs and foreign investors in my city or village’ (33.14 percent) (New Europe Center 2018). All these demands are closely related to the decentralization reform, which includes the shift of decision-making powers in the fields of healthcare and education to the community level (Rabinovych, Levitas, and Umland 2018). If decentralization entails significant socio-economic improvements for the inhabitants of the ATCs, we can expect an increase of positive attitudes towards Ukraine’s formal European integration. This in turn would give more legitimacy to Ukraine’s European agenda.

Community twinning, networks and European integration

According to sociological approaches, there are various ways to advance European integration ‘from below’. This section presents two mechanisms that help extend and strengthen regional ties as fundamentals of integration: community twinning and transnational municipal networks. The former refers to cross-border partnerships between communities, which rely on formal agreements. These relationships are meant to last for an unlimited period of time and do not

focus on a single, specific objective (cf. Tausendpfund and Schäfer: 1-2).² The link between cross-border community or town twinning and European unification was established already in the 1950s (Bock 1994: 13) and has been confirmed until today. When asked about the value and benefit of community twinning with a French or German counterpart, the French and German respondents most often referred to its contribution to a united Europe (Keller 2018: 35).

While the integration potential of twinning was initially seen in the framework of German–French reconciliation, it was later related to functional cooperation, too. Bernhard Köhle detects a shift in Europe from ‘partnerships of reconciliation’ to ‘partnerships of integration’ (cited in Joenniemi and Jańczak 2017: 424). This could be observed when ties between the EU and Central and Eastern Europe mushroomed and a lot of administrative know-how was transferred from West to East, not least with a view to EU enlargement (Köhn 2006: 467-469, Woesler 2006: 423-425). As Richter summarizes, such a functionalist approach is no less conducive to European integration: ‘Problem-oriented cooperation is the impulse that sets processes of integration into motion’ (Richter 1994: 49; own translation). This optimistic view, however, stands in contrast to more sceptical voices regarding such instrumentalist developments. As critics warn, there is a danger that this new direction replaces the intrinsic value of community twinning and squeezes laypersons out of the twinning exchange (Langenohl 2019: 94). The active involvement of citizens, however, is essential for the affective identification of Europeans with Europe and the EU’s cohesion. Twinning has been found to contribute to pro-European attitudes (Fiedler 2006: 398). In a recent empirical study, Tausendpfund and Schäfer (2018) show that town twinning promotes citizens’ specific and diffuse support of the EU. More specifically, they maintain that an individual’s engagement in town twinning activities correlates with a positive attitude towards the EU.

The EU itself has financially supported town twinning since 1989 (European Commission 1997). This move was justified with a reference to European integration: ‘The Community action in favour of town-twinning aims to encourage the involvement of ordinary people and their elected representatives in European integration and to promote their sense of belonging to the European Union’ (European Commission 1997: 12). Without explicitly referring to sociological approaches to European integration, the EU seems to expect the same dynamics: ‘The events organized by towns and their inhabitants through twinning schemes are a reproduction in miniature of the process of integration pursued by the Member States. Each

² In order to get a more comprehensive picture, the chapter will deal with informal twinning, too. In this case, cross-border cooperation between communities takes place in the absence of a formal agreement.

twinning is a mini-Europe in itself [...]. Our towns really are building an integrated Europe' (European Commission 1997: 11). Interestingly, from the outset, the programme was not only open to towns located within the EU member states but deliberately included town-twinning schemes with partner communities in 'other European countries' (European Commission 1997: 13).

Around the mid-1980s, an additional process connecting municipalities in Europe started. In the wake of the Single European Act, Transnational Municipal Networks (TMN) began to emerge (Kern and Bulkeley 2009: 312). The EU has actively initiated or supported these networks with a view to transnational knowledge transfer in many cases, among others on environmental issues (Giest and Howlett 2013: 341). The EU's system of 'de-centralization and de-concentration of powers' (Giest and Howlett 2013: 342) has been particularly conducive to the growth of TMNs, even beyond the EU's borders. As Kern and Bulkeley outline, these networks foster communication and cooperation among municipalities. Among others, they facilitate exchange on best practices, organize study tours, provide funding for joint projects, and encourage joint bids. Thus, beyond working towards their particular policy goal, the internal governing of those networks 'serves to tie member municipalities more closely together through day-to-day dealings on projects and to enhance these cities' connection to the network' (Kern and Bulkeley 2009: 321).

Community twinning in Ukraine

Even though the city of Odessa was the first in Europe to be paired with a transatlantic partner, namely with Vancouver in Canada in 1944 (Brkusanin and Ellwood 2011: 12), there is no deeply rooted tradition of town twinning in Ukraine. Reflecting the generally weak role local communities have long had in the division of powers between the territorial levels of government, it was described as 'a vodka drinking occasion for respective mayors' (Bartlett and Popovski 2013: 13). In 2010, Ukraine counted 799 town twinnings, more than half of which with communities in Poland. The latter in turn—although comparable in size of the population and composed of significantly fewer local municipalities—counted 3,508 town twinnings. On the other hand, Slovakia—with a population of ca. 5.4 million—counted a comparable number of 801 twinnings (CEMR 2010).³ While the reasons for the comparatively low number of

³ Number of local municipalities in 2012: Ukraine: 11,517; Poland 2012: 2,479; Slovakia: 2,930. Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), Members map, <https://www.ccre.org/pays/map/id:16>, 8 November 2019.

Ukrainian communities involved in town twinning are certainly manifold, decentralization reform, and in particular the amalgamation process, may contribute to increasing the ties between Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian communities. A too small size of communities has long been known to be an obstacle to twinning (European Commission 1997: 12). In the past, many Ukrainian communities were too small to provide adequate public services to the residents (Romanova and Umland 2019: 6). In 2014, Ukraine was ranked 32 among 40 European countries with regard to the mean population size of its municipalities, with higher ranks indicating larger average population sizes (Swianiewicz, Gendźwił, and Zardi 2017: 10). It can thus be expected that the creation of larger ATCs through amalgamation enhances the capacities of Ukrainian communities and, in combination with fiscal decentralization, gives them sufficient resources to participate in community twinning.

The external relations of Ukrainian ATCs

The Survey

In order to study the external relations, and in particular the twinning of ATCs with counterparts outside Ukraine, a survey among all ATCs founded in 2015 was conducted in spring 2019. The decision to restrict the study to ATCs amalgamated during the first year of the reform was made under the assumption that it would take some time to establish contacts abroad and set up partnerships. ATCs founded in 2015 are most likely to have developed a working routine and have potentially built relationships with communities outside Ukraine. The restriction could lead to slightly biased findings. Given that the process of amalgamation is voluntary, it may be the case that communities created early on in the reform process are generally more open to reforms (e.g. by having more reform-minded leaders), external cooperation and innovation. Consequently, the findings may be more optimistic for these communities than for latecomers. On the other hand, ATCs founded after 2015 may find it easier to set up international contacts because they can draw on the experiences of older ATCs. As elaborated in more detail below, the membership data of 38 ATCs in the transnational Covenant of Mayors network show that age of an ATC is not correlated with its network activity.⁴ Thus no excessive bias is expected overall.

⁴ Among the 38 ATCs that are members of the network, ten were founded in 2015, 13 in 2016, 14 in 2017, and one in 2018 (Covenant of Mayors, 2019).

Based on recommendations by the methodological literature (Kirchhoff et al. 2010, Porst 2014), the questionnaire and the letter of invitation were developed by the author in German and translated to both Ukrainian and Russian by a student assistant enrolled in political science studies at the University of Mannheim and originally coming from Ukraine.⁵ While the German version of both documents was checked and commented on by a survey specialist⁶, the Russian version was pre-tested by a Russian native speaker with a political science background.⁷ Starting on 19 March 2019, the survey was sent to the e-mail addresses given on the ATC's websites. It was addressed to the heads of the respective ATCs (*golova gromady*), indicated on their websites.⁸ The e-mail contained two versions of the questionnaire. First, as word documents in both Ukrainian and Russian. These could either be downloaded, filled in and returned by e-mail or printed, filled in, scanned and returned as an e-mail attachment. The second option was to follow a link to an online survey set up under Unipark⁹. Users could choose between a Ukrainian and a Russian version at the start of the survey.

After a couple of days, reminders were sent to the ATCs that had not responded (or preferred not to indicate their name). In addition, the author called the ATCs that had not responded after the reminder in order to ask whether the e-mail was received.¹⁰

By 31 May 2019, 66 ATC representatives had completed the survey and returned the questionnaire. 10 ATCs returned the files by e-mail (two of them in a scanned version, one was a duplicate of the online survey), whereas 57 ATCs used the online version. In 50 cases, the survey was started but quit before the end. Since many of these dropouts happened early on in the survey, too many answers were missing and the data could not be used. Still, the overall response rate can be considered quite satisfactory. The following table summarizes the number of ATCs per region (*oblast*)¹¹ and thus the maximum number of questionnaires that could be returned from there and the number of actually completed surveys. Returned questionnaires came from almost all relevant oblasts. Twelve respondents decided to reveal neither the name of their ATC nor the *oblast* in which the ATC is located.

⁵ I thank Nataliia Larina for her help with the translations.

⁶ I thank Christiane Grill for many helpful recommendations with regard to this project.

⁷ I thank Timur Koroliuk for his help with the pre-test.

⁸ However, it is not possible to ascertain that it was the heads of the ATCs who filled in the questionnaires. Given the rather hierarchical administrative culture in Ukraine, it can yet be assumed that the heads were at least informed about the survey.

⁹ <https://www.unipark.com/>

¹⁰ It turned out, however, that calls were often not answered or only busy signals were reached.

¹¹ Since the survey participants were assured of the anonymous presentation of results, only the *oblasts* in which the respective ATCs are located are mentioned here. To guarantee the anonymity of respondents in oblasts where only one ATC was founded in 2015, the results were aggregated.

Name of <i>oblast</i>	Number of ATCs founded in the <i>oblast(s)</i> in 2015	Completed questionnaires from ATCs located in the <i>oblast(s)</i>
Vinnitska oblast	2	2
Volynska oblast	5	3
Dnipropetrovska oblast	15	5
Donetska oblast	3	1
Zhytomyrska oblast	9	2
Zakarpatska oblast	2	1
Zaporizka oblast	6	3
Ivano-Frankivska oblast	3	2
Kirovohradska oblast	2	1
Luhanska oblast	2	1
Lvivska oblast	15	2
Odeska oblast	8	3
Poltavska oblast	12	5
Rivnenska oblast	5	0
Ternopilska oblast	26	6
Kharkivska oblast	0	---
Khmelnytska oblast	22	9
Cherkaska oblast	3	1
Chernivetska oblast	10	6
Chernihivska oblast	5	0
Oblasts with only one ATC founded in 2015: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Kyivska oblast ○ Mykolaivska oblast ○ Sumska oblast ○ Khersonska oblast 	4	1
Anonymous	---	12
Total	159	66

Table 1: Number and origin of replies (by 31 May 2019)

Community Twinning

When asked how they generally assess the value of international cooperation for the work of the newly founded ATCs, a large majority of 53 respondents replied with ‘very important’, and six more found it ‘important’. Figure 1 shows all replies.

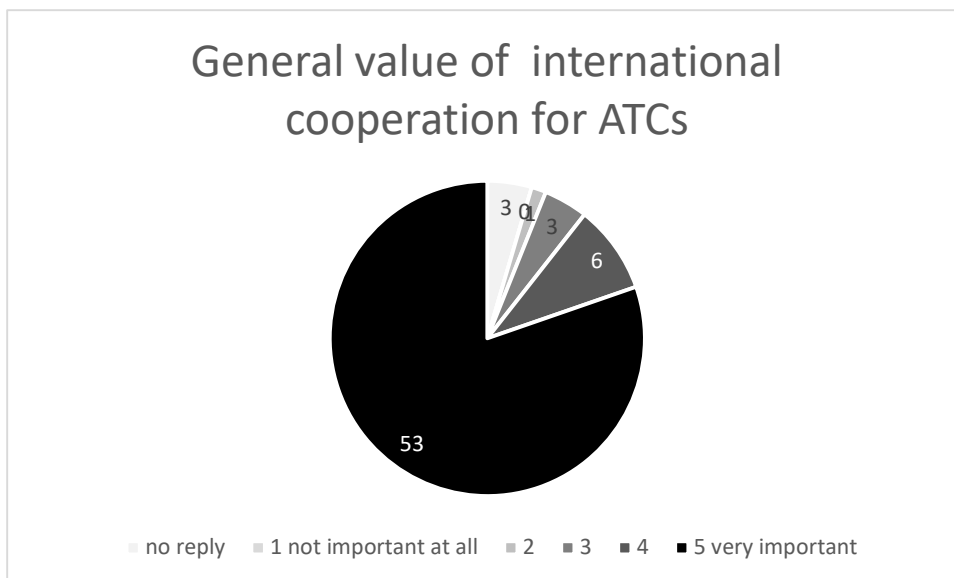


Figure 1. General value of international cooperation for ATCs

Experience with international cooperation is spread widely among the ATCs. 51 out of 66 replied that they had taken part in some kind of internationally funded programme or project. Many referred to the EU’s U-LEAD programme.¹² Eleven ATCs, however, did not report any involvement in such activities. Four did not reply to the question. Given the high level of ATCs’ participation in international programmes and projects, it is surprising to see a general lack of staff responsible for EU or foreign affairs. Only a few ATCs reported to have such specialists. 51 out of 66 ATCs have neither an EU nor a foreign relations–responsible employee. Eleven ATCs have at least one of the two, four did not reply. Staff responsible for general foreign relations are slightly more widespread, with ten positions. Five ATCs employ personnel who deals with EU affairs. Only four ATCs have both an EU and a foreign relations officer. Whereas ATCs’ participation in externally funded assistance programmes is quite high, the same cannot be said for ATCs’ involvement in formal or informal twinning of cities/communities beyond Ukraine.¹³ Only a few reported such partnerships. 17 ATCs have established at least one formal partnership with a community located outside Ukraine. 45 ATCs, however, do not have formally established partnerships with communities abroad, and four did not reply. 13 ATCs have partnerships not formalized by a written document and 49 do not. Four did not reply. Eight communities turned out to be very active networkers with both formal and

¹² U-LEAD with Europe: Ukraine Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/27392/u-lead-europe-ukraine-local-empowerment-accountability-and-development-programme_en

¹³ Please note that this is not identical with the EU’s technical assistance twinning programme: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/twinning_en

informal partnerships abroad. 22 ATCs have at least one formal or informal external twinning partnership. The flipside of this number is represented by those 39 communities that are involved in neither formal nor informal twinning exchange. For five communities the result cannot be established due to missing data.

Further analysis demonstrates that eleven of the 17 communities with formal ties have a twinning relationship with just one foreign community. Three ATCs have two partner communities each. Finally, there is one community each with three, five and nine formal partnerships. Thus, all in all, 34 formal partnerships were reported. One community mentioned a formal trilateral twinning relationship, which was counted as two formal partnerships. The oldest of these partnerships was established in 2006, the most recent in 2019. 24 of those twinning partnerships were concluded after the start of the decentralization reform and three before. For seven, the founding date was not mentioned. The first group includes at least three communities that mentioned a recent founding date of their twinning partnerships but, in fact, look back on a previous partnership that was confirmed and extended to the newly founded ATC. Within the second group, all previously existing twinning partnerships have been extended to the whole ATC. There is one case in which a previously established twinning relation of one of the entities that united to form the ATC remained intact after the amalgamation and was not extended to the ATC. Four communities mentioned previous partnerships that do not exist anymore. These partnerships concern counterparts in Germany, Poland, Romania, and the Russian Federation.

By far the most twinning relationships were established with communities in Poland: the country was named 20 times. Other formal partnerships exist with communities in Belarus (2), Georgia (2), Romania (2), Slovakia (2), Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova and Slovenia, with one reply missing. Given the chapter's focus on Ukraine's European integration, it should be noted that the large majority of all partnerships involves communities in EU member states, with the exception of Belarus, Georgia and Moldova.

Regarding informal twinning partnerships of 13 ATCs, seven ATCs have just one partner community, one has two, two have three, one has at least two, and two did not reply. Overall, there are at least 17 informal partnerships in place. Given the informal nature of the relationships, only four communities indicated a date when the partnership started. All of these four partnerships commenced after the launch of the decentralization reform. As with the formal community twinnings, Poland emerged as the country with most mentions. At least ten partner communities are located there. The other informal partnerships include communities in Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary and Romania, with one partnership

each. Again, the majority of partners are located in EU member states. However, as in the case of the formal partnerships, there is a very strong orientation towards the Central-/Eastern European countries that acceded to the EU in 2004 and 2007. The only partnership with a community in an EU founding member state is the one to Germany.

Given the relatively low number of partnerships in general, it is not surprising that only 13 ATCs have designated an official for the relationships with foreign communities. 48 ATCs do not have such a contact person, and five did not reply. This may be connected to the lack of specialists some ATCs mentioned when asked about problems in establishing twinning partnerships. Of the 39 ATCs without any formal or informal partner communities abroad, 18 replied to the question why they have not established any such ties (yet). In addition to the lack of specialized personnel, several ATCs referred to a lack of experience with such partnerships and general problems in finding a partner community. The latter may be caused by various reasons, such as scarcity of information, a lack of responsiveness from potential partner communities, and long preparatory phases. Several answers created the impression that the lack of an initial twinning partnership represents a rather high hurdle for establishing (further) partnerships. Other ATCs noted to bear in mind that the administrative reform in the ATCs was still going on. One respondent pointed to unresolved issues of competences in this regard, and another one stated that there were (more) urgent problem to solve in the communities at this stage. In one community, establishing links with neighbouring ATCs was given priority over external partnerships. One respondent traced the lack of partnerships back to the limited knowledge of foreign languages, while another one referred to the geographical distance between the respective community and Ukraine's western border. In one ATC, missing awareness of the opportunity to twin was seen as the main factor impeding such partnerships. Another respondent saw missing support as a barrier to new partnerships. All these reasons could be seen as being at the root of the ATCs' inactivity with regard to twinning relationships.

Transnational Municipal Networks

Exchange between European communities is possible through not only twinning but also participating in international associations and transnational municipal networks. However, only three instances were mentioned in the survey: the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR, indirect membership through national association), the Mayors for Economic Growth (M4EG) Initiative, and the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. The analysis of their membership lists revealed that more ATCs are involved in the networks than had stated

in the questionnaire. The following section presents the three mentioned networks in more detail.

As the oldest and broadest European association of local and regional governments, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) brings together the national associations from 41 countries. Founded in 1951, the CEMR ‘promotes the construction of a united, peaceful and democratic Europe founded on local self-government, respect for the principle of subsidiarity and the participation of citizens’ (CEMR 2019). It is currently active in five issue areas, such as ‘Governance, democracy and citizenship’, ‘Environment, climate and energy’, and ‘International engagement and cooperation’. Ukrainian communities are represented through two different associations: the Association of Ukrainian Cities (*Asociaciya Mist Ukrayiny; AUC*) and the Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils (*Ukrayinska Asociaciya Rayonnykh ta Oblasnykh Rad*), both based in Kyiv. The latter is not of direct relevance to ATCs, because it represents councils at higher (*rayon* and *oblast*) levels. The former has 339 ATCs among its 781 members (AUC 2019). Of the 159 ATCs formed in 2015, 67 are organized in the AUC (September 2019), which corresponds to 42 percent. Of the 54 ATCs that completed the survey in a non-anonymous way, 28 are members, i.e. approx. 52 percent. Interestingly, however, when asked about relationships with international associations, only one of them referred to the AUC.

One ATC mentioned the Mayors for Economic Growth (M4EG) Initiative when asked about participation in international networks. This EU initiative was launched in 2016 and is targeted specifically to local authorities in Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Once communities have become members of the ‘M4EG Club’, they receive support for improving the local business environment in a sustainable and social way. While much of the support comes from the initiative’s secretariat, the network also aims at ‘cross-country cooperation between local authorities in the EaP region’ (Mayors for Economic Growth 2017: 9). According to the initiative’s website, 108 ATCs have become members by September 2019 (Mayors for Economic Growth 2019). Among them, at least ten were founded in 2015. When considering only the communities that returned the survey questionnaire, the amount shrinks to five.

Finally, another ATC mentioned its accession to the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. This initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2008. It aims at local communities that voluntarily agree to implement EU climate and energy objectives. With the ‘Covenant of Mayors East’ initiative, the EU has particularly supported the participation of Eastern Partnership countries from 2011 onwards. After the merger with the ‘Compact of Mayors’ in 2016, the original initiative became part of the ‘Global Covenant of Mayors for

Climate and Energy'. Until September 2019, 270 Ukrainian municipalities joined the 'Covenant community' (Covenant of Mayors 2019). There are 38 ATCs among the signatories, including ten founded in 2015. Of these, five returned the survey questionnaire.

Future prospects

Five years into decentralization reform, the newly founded ATCs have developed manifold ties to international projects, transnational municipal networks, and communities beyond Ukraine. A vast majority of ATCs acknowledge the value these forms of cooperation have for their work. However, the chapter also reveals some contradictions. The bulk of exchange takes place in technical assistance projects, involving partners from the EU, EU member states, the United States or Switzerland. Yet, only few ATCs have officials who are explicitly responsible for relations with the EU or other international actors.

61 of 66 ATCs agree that twinning partnerships could make an important or very important contribution to Ukraine's European integration. However, only 22 ATCs have at least one formal or informal twinning partner abroad. At the moment, it is difficult to assess whether bottom-up European integration through ATCs' twinning partnerships will gain momentum in the future. On the one hand, 44 ATCs reported that a new partnership with a foreign community was planned. 18 ATCs do not have plans to establish new partnerships (four did not reply). Of the 22 ATCs that already have at least one formal or informal partnership, 20 aim to initiate at least one more, which corresponds to 91 percent. In contrast, only 23 out of 39 ATCs without any twinning partnerships have plans to become the twinning partner of a foreign community, which corresponds to 59 percent (one of those communities did not reply). These numbers reflect one of the problems that respondents mentioned above. Having no twinning partner yet represents a major obstacle to establishing new partnerships. Among ATCs striving for new partnerships, there is a clear trend towards a twinning community in the EU: 43 ATCs affirmed this aim. Ten ATCs replied that they plan to find twinning partners in Europe beyond the EU (multiple replies were possible). The same number of ATCs is open towards twinning partnerships throughout the world. Five ATCs are planning to establish twinning relations with communities in the EU, within Europe more broadly, and across the world.

When it comes to concrete steps of initiating a new partnership, the number of ATCs replying positively drops to less than half. Only 19 ATCs reported that they have already taken action to set up a new partnership. In accordance with the above-mentioned trend towards partnerships with communities located in the EU, 16 ATCs mentioned such communities as addressees of their activities. Two ATCs have taken steps towards establishing partnerships with European

communities beyond the EU, and three others have started preparations for worldwide twinning partnerships (multiple replies were possible). Thus, whereas many ATCs have plans and are optimistic with regard to the conclusion of new twinning partnership agreements, these announcements are not necessarily matched by concrete activities.

Despite the relatively limited number of concrete activities to create new partnerships, the majority of ATCs is (very) optimistic that they will found at least one (more) twinning relation with a community outside Ukraine within the next five years.

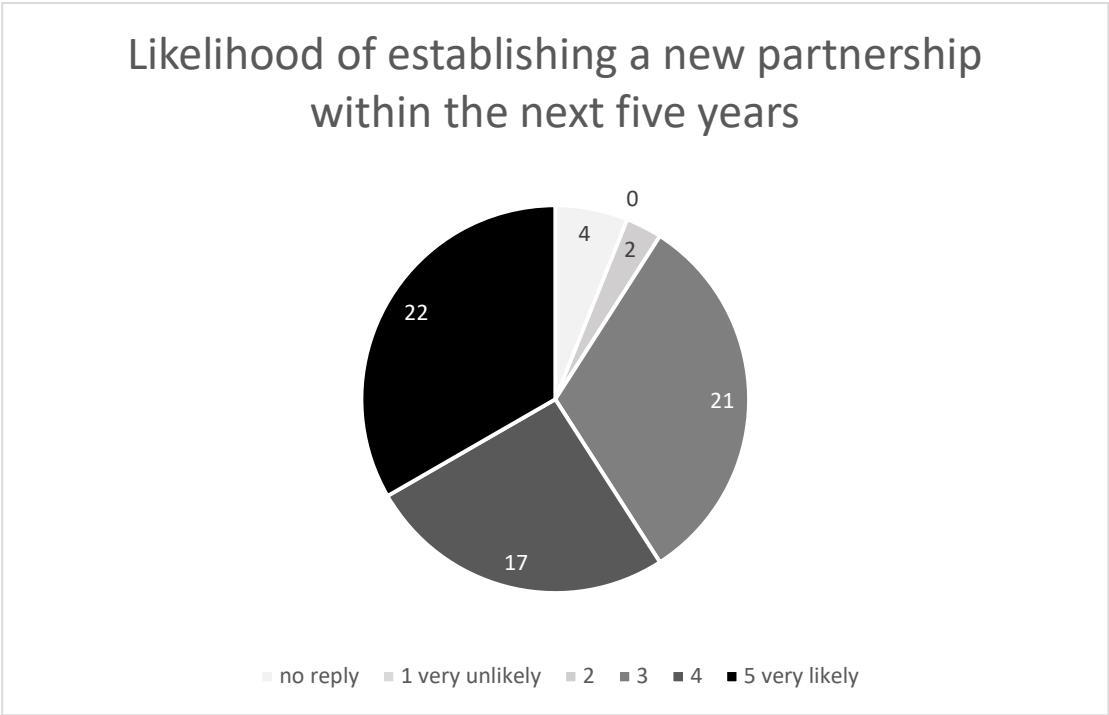


Figure 2. Likelihood of establishing a new partnership within the next five years

In addition to the somewhat contradictory findings, some methodological shortcomings make it difficult to assess the prospects of Ukraine’s European integration ‘from below’. For instance, we do not know much yet about the depth of ATC’s twinning relationships or the strength of their ties to networks. The fact that some ATCs did not mention their membership in the Mayors for Economic Growth Initiative or the Covenant of Mayors could be a sign that these relationships are not relevant in their day-to-day business. This can only be confirmed by further research. Further studies would be necessary to find out to what degree citizens take an active part in community twinings. Still, by mapping ATCs societal links to European communities and networks, the chapter substantiates the relevance of a sociological perspective on Ukraine’s European integration and the role decentralization has in it.

Conclusions

The survey revealed that a large majority of respondents see municipal twinning partnerships as conducive to Ukraine's European integration. This opinion coincides with a sociological perspective on European integration and respective empirical studies. Twinning, however, could not unfold its full potential in Ukraine yet. On the one hand, the number of existing twinning relationships is still comparatively low. On the other hand, ATCs' plans to establish new twinning partnerships are often not matched by concrete steps towards this goal. In order to close this gap, national and transnational associations such as the AUC and the CEMR could promote new twinings among their members even more actively.¹⁴ Existing partnerships could be strengthened by including Ukraine into the EU's Citizens for Europe programme. So far, EU member states, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo participate in the programme.¹⁵ Public bodies and non-profit organisations from these countries are eligible to apply for funding related to town twinning and networks of towns. Both the European Neighbourhood Instrument Cross-border Cooperation programme and the Eastern Partnership Territorial Cooperation Support Programme do not represent equivalents because they are restricted to neighbouring regions and fixed-term project cycles. What is more, the latter programme only includes Eastern Partnership countries and is thus of limited relevance for ATCs planning to establish new twinning partnerships with communities located in the EU. Community twinning and community networks could also be included as focus areas in programmes supporting decentralization in Ukraine, such as U-LEAD with Europe.

¹⁴ Both the AUC and the CEMR already support communities in finding twinning partners, among others by collecting and publishing requests for partnerships under <http://2.auc.org.ua/page/partnerstvo-mist-tvining> and <http://www.twinning.org/en/request/ContactDetails#.XdHc8NUxmUk>

¹⁵ Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway are potentially participating countries.

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