

The project is aimed at investigating changes going in either democratic or autocratic direction within the local and regional structures in a state as well as their relationship with the similar processes at the national (central) level – focusing on the impact of the national tier on lower territorial levels. This topic has been chosen because most studies on the democratic or autocratic changes have concentrated so far on the national level, while they are also important at local and regional levels. Thus, there is a clear gap to fill in. Thanks to research on this topic, a full picture on the democratic and autocratic changes can be seen and these processes can be better understood.

The case of Poland will be studied in the years 2010-2022 (three full legislative periods of local and regional structures), including the time of pandemic. This state has been selected because it is an interesting case of the EU member having three subnational levels, combination of centralised and decentralised model of administration as well as various political profiles of local and regional authorities (including politically non-aligned persons) and models of their political relationship with central authorities.

The following questions will be posed with reference to Poland: What are the democratic and autocratic trends in the EU countries, including Poland, at the national and lower territorial levels? Are there any patterns between the change towards democracy or autocracy and a change in a centralised or decentralised direction? Are the decentralised territorial structures so called “democratic enclaves” in the case of autocratic changes starting at a national level and did something change in the analysed period in this regard? What types of democratic/autocratic changes can we observe at the local and regional level? If the new autocratic changes occur during the COVID-19 crisis, does it have any impact on the local and regional structures?

It is a pilot study, which will be continued after the end of the project within a more comprehensive research on more EU countries. It will be conducted within one of the EU grants and a big international consortium consisting of the institution applying for the OPUS 20 grant and its international partners from Belgium, France, Spain and UK who will support the currently proposed project at all its stages.

The research will start from working out the final version of the theoretical framework, whose first draft has been prepared within the preliminary research done by the principal investigator together with the international partners. This framework is necessary to define all important terms and have proper tools to explain the democratic and autocratic changes at different territorial levels.

The stage of empirical studies will follow theoretical research. The necessary data on democratic and autocratic trends in Europe will be collected from the existing data bases and compiled in special charts. Other sources of important data will be as follows: interviews with authorities in the selected Polish cities and provinces (*voivodeships*) and with experts, focus group interviews with representatives of local/regional non-governmental organisations and journalists as well as mini-survey as the additional part of bigger opinion poll.

The phase of the right analysis will consist of two parts separated by the consultation meeting with the Polish experts on democracy and territorial politics in Europe. The final stage of the research – concerning the impact of the interplay between national and local/regional structures on democratic or autocratic changes will be carried out following the suggestions and commentaries of the experts. The full results of the research will be worked out and consulted during a special meeting with the experts, including the scholars from international partner institutions and the Polish practitioners.

The outcomes of the project will be: the dataset on the democratic/autocratic trends at different territorial levels in the EU states as well as an article (in English) on the theoretical part of the project; a book on the Polish case (in English) published in a short form - in one of the publishing houses having a worldwide distribution of publications and a policy paper (in Polish and English) – with recommendations on how to tackle inefficiencies in democratic reforms at different territorial levels - for local and regional authorities, media and NGOs.

The results of the research project will also be disseminated in the Internet (website and social media), at conferences with participation of the project investigators (in Poland and abroad) and in their contacts with the academicians, journalists and practitioners.