

Local autonomy around the world: the updated and extended Local Autonomy Index (LAI 2.0)

Andreas Ladner, Nicolas Keuffer & Alexander Bastianen

To cite this article: Andreas Ladner, Nicolas Keuffer & Alexander Bastianen (17 Oct 2023): Local autonomy around the world: the updated and extended Local Autonomy Index (LAI 2.0), Regional & Federal Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2023.2267990](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2267990)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2267990>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 17 Oct 2023.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 7556



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles](#)

Local autonomy around the world: the updated and extended Local Autonomy Index (LAI 2.0)

Andreas Ladner, Nicolas Keuffer  and Alexander Bastianen 

Institut de Hautes Etudes en Administration Publique, Université de Lausanne, Chavannes-près-Renens, Switzerland

ABSTRACT



This paper presents an extension and update of the Local Autonomy Index (LAI) under the name LAI 2.0. It applies the comprehensive methodology of the LAI 1.0 to 57 countries over 30 years (1990–2020), including almost all EU, CoE and OECD member states. Looking at the overall results, over thirty years, the LAI has increased around 7–8%, albeit less important in the most recent period of 2015–2020. The biggest increase is to be found in the Central and Eastern European countries. Conversely, some countries (e.g. Hungary and Belarus) have seen a decrease in local autonomy. The highest ranking countries include the Nordic countries and Switzerland, whereas South-Eastern European countries generally score the lowest. We view the LAI as a springboard to academics and policymakers for a more comprehensive and empirically based understanding of local autonomy over time.


ARTICLE HISTORY Received 30 August 2022; Accepted 3 October 2023

KEYWORDS Local government; local autonomy; comparative research; decentralization; municipalities

Introduction

The creation of our comprehensive Local Autonomy Index (LAI), an overall multi-dimensional measurement of the degree of autonomy enjoyed by local governments, is both an interesting and rewarding task. It draws upon a variety of concepts from different disciplines, and our publications ‘Measuring Local Autonomy in 39 countries’ (Ladner, Keuffer, and Balderheim 2016) and ‘Patterns of Local Autonomy in Europe’ (Ladner et al. 2019), for example, have been extensively used and cited. The LAI has

CONTACT Alexander Bastianen  alexander.bastianen@unil.ch  Institut de Hautes Etudes en Administration Publique, Université de Lausanne, Rue de la Mouline 28, CH-1022 Chavannes-près-Renens, Switzerland

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2267990>.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

brought a certain theoretical convergence regarding the core elements of local autonomy and represented an accurate indicator to apprehend territorial organization of states, public administration, decentralization or intergovernmental relations. Policymakers in international multilateral and national organizations have also been interested by the results of the previous project and have advocated or not the values associated with the concept. The importance of the topic together with the interest in the scientific and practitioner communities are the reasons why we decided to go for a second round, i.e. the LAI 2.0 project.

The Local Autonomy Index 1.0 (LAI 1.0) measured local autonomy between 1990 and 2014 in 39 countries. We reapplied the organization of the first project to update the existing data for 1990 to 2020 and to increase the number of countries covered, i.e. the countries of the European Union (EU) as well as those of the Council of Europe (CoE), and of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Altogether, we now cover 57 countries. This includes all 27 EU member states together with 44 CoE member states (missing are Azerbaijan, Monaco and San Marino) as well as 36 OECD member states (New Zealand is missing, as is Costa Rica which joined the OECD in May 2021 when the project was already ongoing). Additionally, Argentina, Belarus, Kosovo and South Africa have been included. For all these countries we now have data for the years 1990 to 2020 (for the countries covered, see Appendix A).

Based on the good experiences of the last project, we worked again with country group coordinators (Prof. Harald Baldersheim, University of Oslo, Prof. Pawel Swianiewicz, University of Warsaw, Prof. Nikos Hlepas, University of Athens, Prof. Kristof Steyvers, Ghent University, Prof. Carmen Navarro, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Prof. Sabine Kuhlmann, Potsdam University) and 63 country experts (for the names of all the experts involved, see Appendix A1). The time schedule for the mandate of the European Commission was again very tight and lasted from the end of November 2020 to the end of December 2021. The final report was handed in as planned (Ladner, Keuffer, and Bastianen 2021). An online training session was organized by the Leading House at the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration at the University of Lausanne (IDHEAP) with all the country group coordinators and country experts involved in order to present the project, its objectives and the expected deliverables.

In the following sections of the paper, we will briefly recall the theoretical and conceptual background of local autonomy. We will then present and explain the seven dimensions of local autonomy and how they are operationalized into variables. We will also discuss the coding scheme with its minor changes compared to the LAI 1.0 project and address methodological challenges of applying a similar research design to an enlarged context. The paper continues with a presentation of the results, including the scores of

the eleven variables, the seven dimensions, and the LAI across time. Furthermore, it presents the variations of local autonomy according to affiliations to supranational organizations, federalist structure or administrative profiles. It ends with a critical assessment of what has been achieved so far and an outlook on further research avenues.

Theoretical, conceptual and methodological considerations

Local autonomy is a highly valued feature of local government and good governance. However, the scholarly literature emphasized two main issues related to the concept: First, there is no agreed upon definition of local autonomy (Clark 1984; Gurr and King 1987; Page and Goldsmith 1987). Second, the literature is not very specific when it comes to operationalizing the various aspects of local autonomy (Goldsmith 1995; Hansen and Klausen 2002; Vetter 2007). We have therefore drawn upon a variety of sources to define local autonomy and to propose variables to measure the degree of local autonomy in a comparative perspective.

In order to present our conceptualization and measurement, we will follow the various levels and tasks proposed by Adcock and Collier (2001): (1) Formulating systematised concepts through reasoning about the background concept of local autonomy, (2) Developing dimensions of said systematised concepts and their operationalization, (3) Explaining how these dimensions and variables are measured, i.e. the coding scheme, (4) Applying these indicators to produce scores for the cases.

Conceptualization and definition of local autonomy

Due to the multiple conceptual issues related to the study of local autonomy, its multidimensional nature and the plurality of existing theoretical conceptions, there was a consensus in the literature that there was no single valid theory (Kjellberg 1995; Pierre 1990). A thorough review of the literature highlights the fact that local autonomy lies at the crossroads of different disciplines approaching the concept through specific dimensions or by combining them very differently (Ladner et al. 2019). The fact that there are different disciplines dealing with the topic also increases the variety of aspects related to local autonomy. For economists, for example, financial aspects are of great importance whereas scholars of law might be more interested in the constitutional and legal questions. Political scientists are, in addition to intergovernmental relations, interested in the fulfilment of tasks and the discretion of local authorities while achieving these tasks, or together with sociologists, they want to know whether local authorities decide on their administrative and political organization.

In order to define local autonomy as comprehensively as possible, it is necessary to take into account the dimensions of the disciplinary approaches identified in the literature. We suggest to draw on the definition of local autonomy of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which served as a model for the development of a draft text of a worldwide charter, since it turns out to be quite comprehensive and includes a variety of the theoretical concerns mentioned: 'Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population' (Council of Europe 1985).

In the spirit of the Charter, we consider local autonomy as a policy space for local democracy (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim 2016). Local government embodies 'two faces of democratic self-determination' (Scharpf 1999, 6–13), i.e. government for the people and government by the people. Drawing on Dahl and Tufté's (1973) definition of the constituent elements of democratic polities – 'system capacity' and 'citizen effectiveness' – local autonomy may be further characterized as components of system capacity that enable decision-makers to respond fully to the collective preferences of citizens.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government also describes the characteristics of local authorities, i.e. the unit under scrutiny in the LAI 2.0: 'local authorities (are) endowed with democratically constituted decision-making bodies and possessing a wide degree of autonomy with regard to their responsibilities, the ways and means by which those responsibilities are exercised and the resources required for their fulfilment' (Council of Europe 1985). The unit of analysis is what is commonly called local authorities. We follow Lidström (1998; 110f.) who distinguishes local government from other organizations through four criteria:

- a local government unit has a clearly defined territory,
- executes a certain amount of self-government,
- has authoritative power over its citizens and has
- directly elected decision-makers and/or municipal assemblies.

Although there might be different levels of local government in some countries, we only looked at one of them to measure autonomy, in general the lowest and the most important one where self-government is most effective. Overlapping was to be avoided. The units we considered were, furthermore, supposed to cover the whole territory of the country.

Relying on the literature, legal, functional, political, and organizational aspects of local autonomy are identified as its important constitutive elements. Our triangle of local autonomy presents the dimensions of local autonomy (Figure 1): legal autonomy is related with the institutional status of local authorities, access with the degree of influence local government has on political

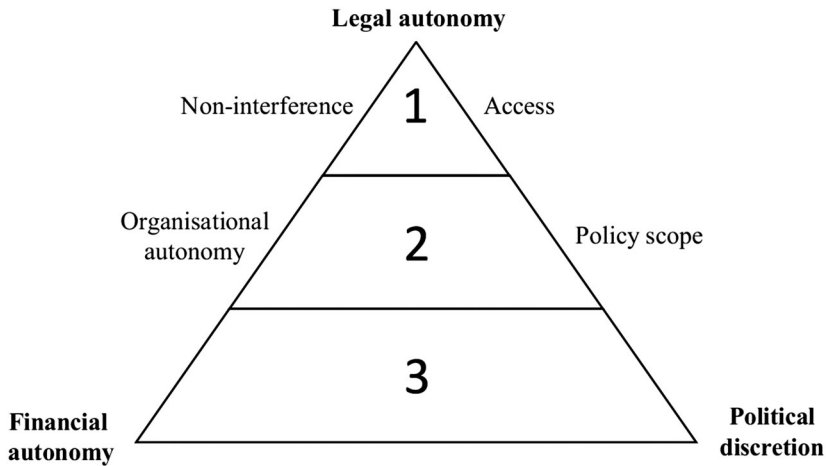


Figure 1. The triangle of local autonomy.

Note: the numbers in the figure (1, 2, 3) are used for weighting the dimensions in the construction of the index.

decisions at higher levels, policy scope with the functional responsibilities of local authorities, political discretion with their policy decision-making competences, financial autonomy with their resources, organizational autonomy with their leeway to determine political arenas and administration and non-interference with control over local authorities. Their definition and operationalization correspond to substantial elements put forward by the European Charter of Local Self-Government (see Appendix A2).

Because some of the Charter's criteria are difficult to measure or because they do not really correspond to the definition of a dimension of local self-government, they do not systematically constitute an indicator of it (Keuffer 2020). Drawing from studies on federalism, decentralization and regionalization (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2016), some dimensions are more related to the capacity of governments to organize themselves and to execute tasks or provide services independently (self-rule) and others to inter-governmental relationships (shared-rule). We decided to favor interactive rule instead of shared-rule, since local government may enjoy shared-rule with higher levels of government and access to national decision-making, but their performance is influenced through intricate procedures of control (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim 2016).

Dimensions of local autonomy and construction of the index

Local autonomy is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The relative importance of its dimensions is, however, difficult to establish as it depends on the perspective taken and the reasons for using the concept in empirical

research. Following the literature, the European Charter of Local Self-Government and both theoretical and empirical arguments, we distinguish between the following seven dimensions of local autonomy:

- Legal autonomy describes the position given to the local authorities within the state;
- Access measures the extent to which local authorities are able to influence political decisions on higher levels;
- Policy scope represents the range of functions or tasks where local authorities are effectively involved in the delivery of services, be it through their own financial resources and/or through their own staff;
- Political discretion describes the range of tasks over which local government effectively has a say and whether it enjoys a general competence clause;
- Financial autonomy combines variables related to financial resources of local government giving them the possibility to influence their own budget;
- Organizational autonomy measures the extent to which local authorities are able to decide aspects of their political system and their own administration;
- Non-interference describes the extent to which local authorities are controlled by higher levels of the state.

These seven dimensions are measured through 11 variables, which more precisely capture specific characteristics of local autonomy:

- Legal autonomy (D_LA)
 - Legal protection: The existence of constitutional or legal means to assert local autonomy (V_LP).
- Access (D_AC)
 - Central or regional access: The extent to which local authorities have channels to influence higher level governments' policy-making (V_CRA).
- Policy scope (D_PS)
 - Policy scope: The range of functions (tasks) where local government assumes responsibility for the delivery of the services (whether it is provided by municipal personnel or through other arrangements) (V_PS).
- Political discretion (D_PD)
 - Institutional depth: The extent to which local government is formally autonomous and can choose the tasks they want to perform (V_ID).
 - Effective political discretion: The extent to which local government can make final decisions over the functions listed under policy scope (V_EPD).
- Financial autonomy (D_FA)

- Fiscal autonomy: The extent to which local government can independently tax its population (V_FA).
- Financial self-reliance: The proportion of local government revenues derived from own/local sources (i.e. taxes, fees, charges over which local government has influence) (V_FSR).
- Borrowing autonomy: The extent to which local government can borrow (V_BA).
- Organizational autonomy (D_OA)
 - Organizational autonomy: The extent to which local government is free to decide about its own organization and electoral system (V_OA).
- Non-interference (D_NI)
 - Administrative supervision: The extent to which administrative supervision of local government is (un)obstructive (V_AS).
 - Financial transfer system: The proportion of unconditional financial transfers to total financial transfers received by the local government (V_FTS).

In previously published efforts related to the construction of the LAI, we addressed issues of dimensionality and weighting (Ladner and Keuffer 2021). The literature on local autonomy suggests that the concept is multifaceted but shows no consensus on the importance of its various facets. If we simply add up the dimensions to obtain an overall index of local autonomy, they will play the same role in the final decentralization measurement. According to our conception of local autonomy, functional and financial aspects are more important than the legal dimension. A legalistic perspective provides central information about the legal status of local governments, but it tells little about the law in use. We consider more important whether the provision of essential tasks and services is allocated to local authorities rather than to higher levels of government and whether they have real authoritative decision-making in how these services are provided. Another crucial element of local autonomy in this sense is whether they have financial resources to assume the responsibility for the delivery independently. In addition, we consider the power of local authorities to organize their electoral system and their administration according to their needs and preferences to be another significant element. Lastly, we consider vertical relations with higher levels of government as important aspects of local autonomy, in both directions: 'top-down' (supervision and the guiding of activities through transfers in the form of earmarked grants), and 'bottom-up' (the influence local government has on political decisions at a higher level).

A similar question arises for the variables, as they measure more precise characteristics of the concept and constitute the dimensions. For example, the four financial variables capture crucial aspects of local autonomy, but

how can they be grouped so that together they measure an element of autonomy as a whole, and how can they be related so that one crucial characteristic carries more weight than another of lesser importance? Furthermore, as they measure different highly variable characteristics, the variables cover different ranges (0–3, 0–4). To make them comparable, we decided to standardize them on a scale from 0 to 100 (like the dimensions). Then, to construct the dimensions and the index, we combined theoretical arguments and empirical analysis (Ladner and Keuffer 2021). The results of factor analysis and theoretical concerns suggested combining institutional depth with effective political discretion into political discretion, with more emphasis on the second variable because it concerns more concretely whether local authorities have the power to take up new functions on their own, separating policy scope from effective political discretion, and putting together fiscal autonomy with financial self-reliance and borrowing autonomy. We decided to combine financial transfer system with administrative supervision as it can consist of two ways for higher levels of state to control the activities of local authorities. In the financial autonomy dimension, we considered that financial autonomy and financial self-reliance are more important than borrowing autonomy, whereas in the non-interference dimension, we suggested considering both variables as of equal importance. The weight given to the different variables reflects our understanding of the importance of the various elements of local autonomy. Box 1 shows the variables used for the different dimensions and their importance (weights). For financial autonomy, for example, it is fiscal autonomy and financial self-reliance which are three times more important than borrowing autonomy.

Box 1. Construction of the seven dimensions of local autonomy

$D_LA_YEAR = 100/3 * V_LP_YEAR$
 $D_AC_YEAR = 100/3 * V_CRA_YEAR$
 $D_PS_YEAR = 100/4 * V_PS_YEAR$
 $D_PD_YEAR = 100/16 * (V_ID_YEAR + 3 * V_EPD_YEAR)$
 $D_FA_YEAR = 100/25 * (3 * V_FA_YEAR + 3 * V_FSR_YEAR + V_BA_YEAR)$
 $D_OA_YEAR = 100/4 * V_OA_YEAR$
 $D_NI_YEAR = 100/7 * (V_AS_YEAR + V_FTS_YEAR)$

For the construction of our overall local autonomy index, we proceeded very similarly. Here, the weighting goes even further as is documented by the triangle of local autonomy (Figure 1). The triangle integrates functional, legal, organizational, and vertical aspects of local autonomy and therefore covers all the important elements discussed in the literature. The numbers show the weight given to the different dimensions. For our Index (LAI 2.0) we consider – like for the LAI 1.0 – political discretion and financial autonomy to be the most important dimensions (weight = 3). Above them, we place policy scope which is closely related to political discretion on the right and

organizational autonomy on the side of financial autonomy (2). At the top finally, we have access to higher-level decisions and non-interference by higher level of government and legal autonomy (1). Legal autonomy, financial autonomy and political discretion form the three cornerstones or pillars of local autonomy. For other purposes, however, the weighting might be set differently.

Having identified and constructed the seven dimensions of local autonomy and decided on the importance we want to attribute to each of the dimensions, we can now easily construct our LAI (Box 2). Similarly to what we did while creating the compound dimensions, we restrict ourselves to an addition of the weighted dimensions.

Box 2. Construction of the LAI (D_LAI)

$$D_LAI_YEAR = (1 * D_LA_YEAR + 1 * D_AC_YEAR + 2 * D_PS_YEAR + 3 * D_PD_YEAR + 3 * D_FA_YEAR + 2 * D_OA_YEAR + 1 * D_NI_YEAR) / 13$$

One of the main challenges is to treat the information gathered in a useful manner to gain insight into the variation of local autonomy and to make it accessible for further research. Our index of local autonomy was tested against other data aggregations. The results showed that the weighting and aggregation procedures followed to construct the LAI present the best guarantees to integrate all the main aspects of the literature (content validity), to be empirically associated with alternative indicators measuring the same concept (convergent validity), and to represent a measurement that reduces complexity (Ladner and Keuffer 2021).

Coding scheme and development

The coding scheme of the LAI 2.0 is very similar to that of the LAI 1.0. It relies on the different types of rights and capacity highlighted in the literature outlined above and the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Furthermore, the local autonomy indices follow, where applicable, the methodology of the Regional Authority Index (RAI; Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010; 2016). The RAI has proven to have a solid convergent and content validity (Schakel 2008) and has been used as a regionalization or a multidimensional decentralization measurement. Some adaptations, however, had to be made to capture the specific characteristics of local government. Consequently, a codebook was created, which covers the role of local government within the state and goes far beyond recording the share of funds managed by local authorities: it captures to what extent local authorities had a say in how these funds are spent. The codebook contains the eleven variables and their coding instructions (see Appendix A3).

The codebook differs slightly from the codebook of the LAI 1.0 project. All the changes with the details and the codes are documented in the appendix (see Appendix A4). Most of the adaptations consisted of changes in the coding criteria and minor forms of the wording, which do not impact the scoring at all. These changes were meant to collect more detailed information about several aspects of local autonomy, while guaranteeing the comparability of the results with the initial ones. The main changes concerned policy scope, effective political discretion, organizational autonomy and central or regional access. In some cases, these ensued in impacts on scoring, resulting in some modifications. But in most cases, scores are not impacted. For example, changes in the scores by fields of services in the policy scope and effective political discretion variables almost never result in changed scores at the level of the aggregated variables. This was then used as a base to update the former scores to the LAI 2.0 codebook.

To do so and at best assure a comparable time-series from 1990 to 2020 for all 57 countries at the aggregated 11-variable level, variable scores for some countries of the LAI 1.0 release have been adapted to fit the updated LAI 2.0 codebook presented above. This ensures that the scoring (2015–2020) of the countries included in the first release (1990–2014, $N = 39$) and the scoring of the newly added countries are all compatible. To begin, we looked at the 2014 (LAI 1.0) and 2015 (LAI 2.0) scores of the 39 countries included in the first release and examined both scores based on the coding sheets and the context based on the corresponding country profiles of both releases. The assessments were made by the country experts, country group coordinators and finally, the leading house, after having instructed the experts to look at the situations in 2014 and 2015 and see whether the new coding would change the score in 2014 (see Appendix A5). We then identified if there were changes in the scores and whether these changes were due to actual changes that occurred between 2014 and 2015 ('real changes') or if these were related to the changes made in the codebook ('no real changes'). In a few cases, either the country experts or the country group coordinators prompted to recode certain scores to better reflect the coding scheme for the LAI 2.0. In case of codebook-related score changes, we applied the 2015 score to the 2014 LAI 1.0 score and then worked our way backwards by multiplying the previous scores by the same proportion of scoring change between 2014 and 2015. In some cases (e.g. Belgium and Sweden), either the most recent country profiles or external control reports prompted to recode some of the earlier scores, the values being reassessed to correspond more faithfully to the current codebook. In cases where variable scores did not change between 2014 and 2015 even though coding instructions were updated, we again based our judgement on country profiles and external control reports to recode certain scores or not, as mentioned above.

In the special case of Slovakia, the country expert recoded the entire 30-year set to correspond to the newest codebook instructions.

These adaptations are only in service of the updated and extended Local Autonomy Index 2.0 and that is where the focus should lie. As the LAI 2.0 replaces its predecessor with more detailed coding and more included countries, it should not be read in relation to the former coding scheme. Previous scores have been adapted as mentioned above to maintain a full time-series for the aggregated variable scores, to calculate dimensions and the overall LAI score per country, which then allows us to observe trends and developments.

Countries under scrutiny and measurement

The coding of the different dimensions measured were aggregated according to the following rules:

- (1) In a unitary country where all local authorities have the same degree of autonomy, the unit of aggregation is the country.
- (2) In unitary countries with asymmetric arrangements, there are different units of aggregation (for example: 'local authorities in general' and 'cities with special competences').
- (3) In federal countries where all local authorities have the same degree of autonomy, the unit of aggregation is the country.
- (4) In federal countries where the degree of autonomy varies from one subunit to another, the unit of aggregation is determined by the subunits (States, cantons).

Case 1 concerns countries like Finland, Sweden, or Colombia. Japan, Slovenia, or Poland form case 2. Germany and Austria belong to case 3 and Switzerland and the United States of America (USA) to case 4. For cases 2 and 4, a country value was calculated using population size to weight the different varying subunits. The USA have been an exception as there were limits to our ability to score details of 50 states across the full range of variables as listed in the codebook. We therefore relied on a more quantitative approach by using existing data corresponding to the variables that were available for all 50 states, limited to only a year.

The initial LAI 1.0 project conducted by the IDHEAP of the University of Lausanne covered 39 countries: 28 EU member states together with the four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Liechtenstein). Additionally, Albania, North Macedonia, Moldova, Georgia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine have been included. All these countries have ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government as is the case for the 47 member states of the CoE. In the first release of the project, some member states of the CoE had to be left aside (Andorra, Monaco, San

Marino, Montenegro, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Russian Federation). In order to be systematic in the inclusion of the CoE member states, the LAI 2.0 project was aimed at also covering these countries for the timespan of 1990–2020.

The final database includes 57 countries, from 1990 to 2020, i.e. almost all member States of the EU (27), of the CoE (44) and of the OECD (36). However, the inclusion of Azerbaijan has been impossible given political issues at the time of data collection. Monaco, San Marino and New Zealand have also been left aside due to the lack of available country experts. Instead, other countries have been added during the process: Kosovo and Belarus as well as Argentina and South Africa. Some countries are only concerned by a time-related update from 2015–2020 (the 39 European countries already included in the initial project), whereas the coding of others covered the entire timespan (1990–2020).

The method adopted to measure local autonomy – i.e. the assessment by experts – allowed us to gather a large amount of comparable data. In order to avoid reliability and validity risks highlighted in the literature regarding expert judgments (e.g. Steenbergen and Marks 2007), several meetings with the experts were organized to improve and to clarify the wording of coding instructions and procedures, and to discuss preliminary results. For example, additional coding instructions were given to specify what the sub-categories of policy scope and effective political discretion were meant to refer to.

As in the initial project, the coding of the countries has been controlled internally while compiling the data using existing datasets on fiscal decentralization, local government expenditures and local government employees. On the basis of our knowledge about local government, the consistency of the coding has been checked in three steps: (1) For each country (are there variables where the value coded does not fit into the overall pattern of the country?); (2) Within country groups (are there countries with a coding on special variables which do not fit into the overall pattern of the country group?); (3) For all countries compared (which are the outliers for each variable and for the total value?).

As for the external control, the country profiles, the coding of the different variables and a draft of the first results have been sent to the following international experts: Prof. Dr. Anders Lidström (Umeå University, Sweden) and Isabelle Chatry (Unit on Decentralisation, public investment and subnational finance at the OECD). They stated to what extent they agree on the coding and explained their disagreement.

Results

The remainder of the paper will look at the main trends over time (with a particular focus on post-2015) and differences between ‘world regions’ (with a

particular focus on the newly included countries). A more detailed presentation of the data is found in the appendix (see Appendix A6, A7 and A8). For this part, we present the information in different forms, depending on the purpose of data use (variables for precise indications, dimensions for specific patterns and index for general cross-country comparisons of local autonomy). All the data, methodological explanations and country profiles can also be downloaded on our website under the following link: <http://local-autonomy.andreasladner.ch/>.

If we look at the variables, the average values for all 11 variables have increased since 1990–94. For some variables, such as institutional depth, legal protection and central and regional access, this increase has been more important, whereas for others, like the financial transfer system and borrowing autonomy, only very weak. It looks like the local authorities were able to strengthen their overall position and their role within the state much more than to increase their fields of action or to increase their concrete autonomy in financial and organizational matters. Between 2010–2014 and 2015–2020, there has even been a decrease for policy scope, effective political discretion and fiscal autonomy (Table 1).

If we consider the different dimensions, the results are unsurprisingly rather similar. As can be seen in Figure 2, all dimensions seem to have followed a general increase, and it is political access to higher levels which increased the most. Legal autonomy and political discretion also increased above average. Where policy scope and political discretion stopped to increase in the time period starting with 2010, financial autonomy stopped to increase a few years earlier. Important to remember is also that the time-series starts off with 54 countries for the 1990–94 period, only to finally reach the full amount of 57 countries in the year 2000. This is because a certain number of covered countries did not exist during the early 90s: Latvia (1991), Ukraine (1991), Albania (1992), Romania (1992), Malta (1993), Armenia (1996), Bosnia and Herzegovina

Table 1. Eleven variables of the LAI 2.0.

	1990–94	1995–99	2000–04	2005–09	2010–14	2015–20
Institutional depth (0–3)	1.83	1.92	2.09	2.18	2.24	2.24
Policy scope (0–4)	1.77	1.80	1.88	1.95	1.98	1.93
Effective political discretion (0–4)	1.54	1.53	1.62	1.69	1.72	1.67
Fiscal autonomy (0–4)	1.51	1.52	1.57	1.71	1.71	1.64
Financial transfer system (0–3)	1.54	1.62	1.58	1.57	1.57	1.58
Financial self-reliance (0–3)	1.82	1.85	1.86	1.92	1.93	1.99
Borrowing autonomy (0–3)	1.51	1.53	1.56	1.63	1.56	1.58
Organizational autonomy (0–4)	2.68	2.72	2.75	2.77	2.75	2.84
Legal protection (0–3)	1.86	2.00	2.06	2.10	2.13	2.17
Administrative supervision (0–3)	1.55	1.65	1.71	1.74	1.74	1.83
Central and regional access (0–3)	1.43	1.47	1.72	1.80	1.83	1.94

Legend: mean values 1990–94 ($N = 54$), 1995–99 ($N = 56$), 2000–04 ($N = 57$), 2005–09 ($N = 57$), 2010–14 ($N = 57$), 2015–20 ($N = 57$), unstandardized; ranges in parentheses.

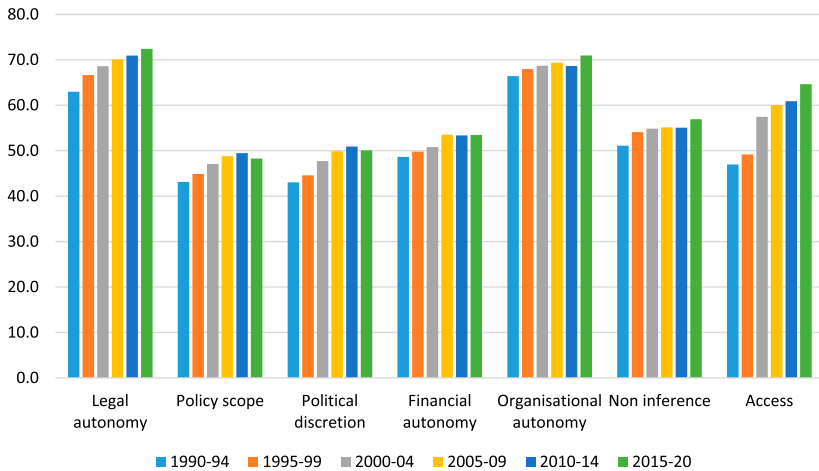


Figure 2. Seven dimensions of the LAI 2.0. Legend: mean values 1990–94 ($N = 54$), 1995–99 ($N = 56$), 2000–04 ($N = 57$), 2005–09 ($N = 57$), 2010–14 ($N = 57$), 2015–20 ($N = 57$), standardized.

(1996) and Kosovo (2000). Furthermore, Andorra’s institutional architecture was developed in 1993 with the approval of the Constitution, and for South Africa, the local government system became democratic and constitutionally recognized in 1994. Countries are included in a period from the year of existence and the time period results correspond to the means of the existing scores.

Figure 3 finally presents the LAI 2.0 for the last 30 years. The changes of the mean values across all years (measured as average values for five-year periods), are less spectacular than the figure with its restricted scale makes us believe. There is an increase of around 7%, only, and since 2005–09, the overall increase is lower than the previous period.

Going back to single countries and looking at the LAI 2.0 ranking, we find Finland ahead of Switzerland and the other Nordic countries, except for Norway (Figure 4). At the bottom we find a variety of countries like for example Turkey and Israel, Malta, Cyprus and Ireland or Moldova, Georgia, Belarus and the Russian Federation. There seems to be some regional-cultural pattern with more autonomous local authorities in the north and less autonomy in the east and the Anglo-Saxon countries.

In between the top and bottom, we suggest distinguishing three groups of countries:

- Countries where local authorities have a medium-high degree of autonomy (index values between 60 and 70): Norway, Portugal, Colombia, USA, South Africa, Spain, Germany, Slovakia, Serbia, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, Japan, Poland, Austria, Belgium and Greece.

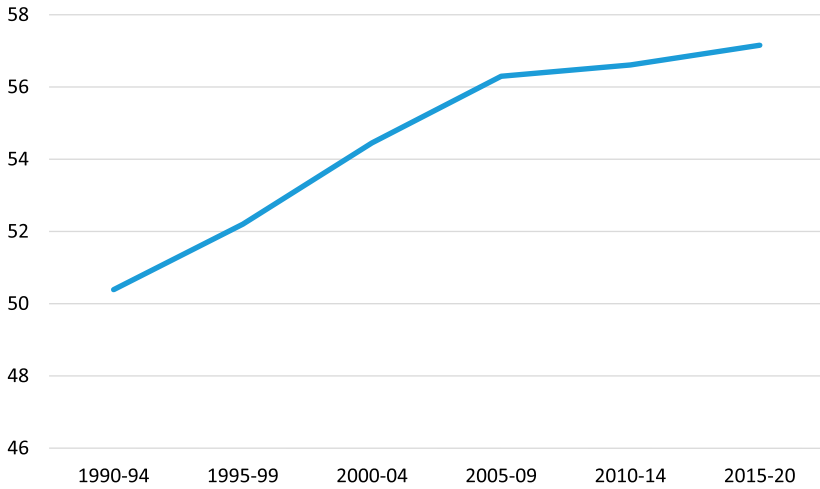


Figure 3. LAI 2.0. Legend: mean values 1990–94 ($N = 54$), 1995–99 ($N = 56$), 2000–04 ($N = 57$), 2005–09 ($N = 57$), 2010–14 ($N = 57$), 2015–20 ($N = 57$), standardized.

- Countries with a medium degree of local autonomy (values between 50 and 60): Netherlands, Bulgaria, Argentina, Andorra, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Georgia, North Macedonia, Albania, Slovenia, Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Croatia and Australia. This is also where the mean value for all 57 countries can be found (57.16).
- Countries with a medium-low degree of autonomy (values between 40 and 50): United Kingdom (UK), Ukraine, Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Chile, Canada, Hungary, Armenia, Mexico, Turkey and Ireland.

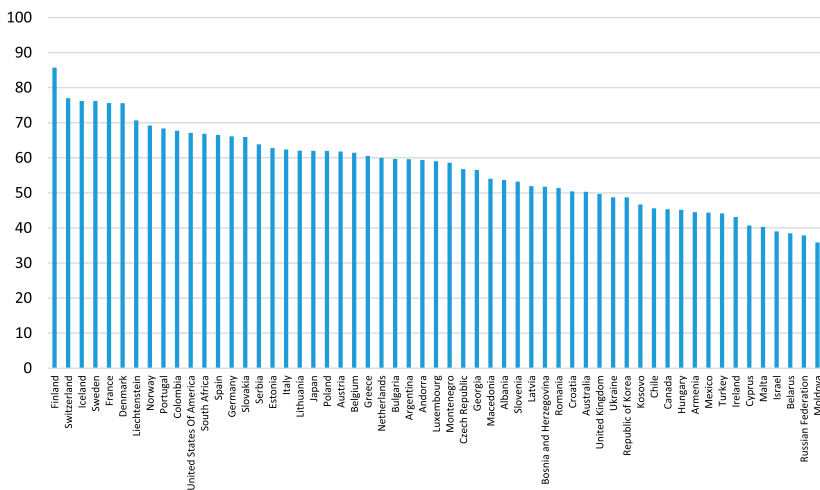


Figure 4. LAI 2.0 Autonomy-Ranking. Legend: mean values 2015–2020, standardized.

Looking at the development over time, in a majority of countries, there was an increase in local autonomy most pronounced in Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Montenegro and Romania (Figure 5). In quite a few countries, however, there was not much of a change and in some countries, there was a slight decrease, like in Liechtenstein, Estonia, Mexico, Poland and Israel. In Hungary and to some minor extent in Belarus, the decrease of local autonomy was quite considerable.

Taken all together, there does not seem to be a convergence with all the low autonomy countries catching up and achieving similar values as the high autonomy countries nor are the high autonomy countries losing autonomy in a considerable manner.

That there is no convergence comes out clearly when we look at country groups with different degrees of local autonomy (Figure 6). At the first sight, it looks like the differences were decreasing. A closer look, however, reveals that since the beginning of the new century, medium and low autonomy countries stopped catching up and the trend towards convergence has come to a standstill.

The idea behind the LAI is – apart from making interesting data available for future research – to reach beyond what is commonly measured by local government spending or the amount of local tax collected by the local authorities. This seems effectively to be the case. Relying on the OECD fiscal decentralization database, we can observe that the correlation between the LAI and the percentage of local government expenditures compared to total government expenditures is not significant (pearson corr. = .312, sig. = 0.087, $N = 31$), and the correlation with local government tax revenues in relation to total tax revenue is rather weak (pearson corr. = .361, sig. = 0.033, $N = 35$).

Comparing the LAI with country affiliations and federalist structure (Table 2) shows that – at least as an average – the OECD countries have the highest degree of local autonomy. On the scale from 0 to 100, the value of the LAI 2.0 is 3.68 points higher than all countries together. The OECD countries are followed by EU member states. If we look at the different dimensions, it is noteworthy that the federal countries score below average as far as political discretion, policy scope and non-interference are concerned. This is most probably due to the intermediate level, which is also involved in the provisions of tasks and services and to more refined intergovernmental relations. As for the OECD countries, legal autonomy seems to be of lesser importance. Here, the difference is most remarkable in terms of financial autonomy. The newly included countries score lower than the other country groupings on the overall LAI mean score as well as on most dimensions.

As another way of clustering countries into groups, we use Kuhlmann and Wollmann's (2019) typology of 'administrative profiles', where European local government systems are classified according to distinctive combinations of core characteristics related to administrative traditions and structures, decentralization, functions, and relationships between levels of government. A

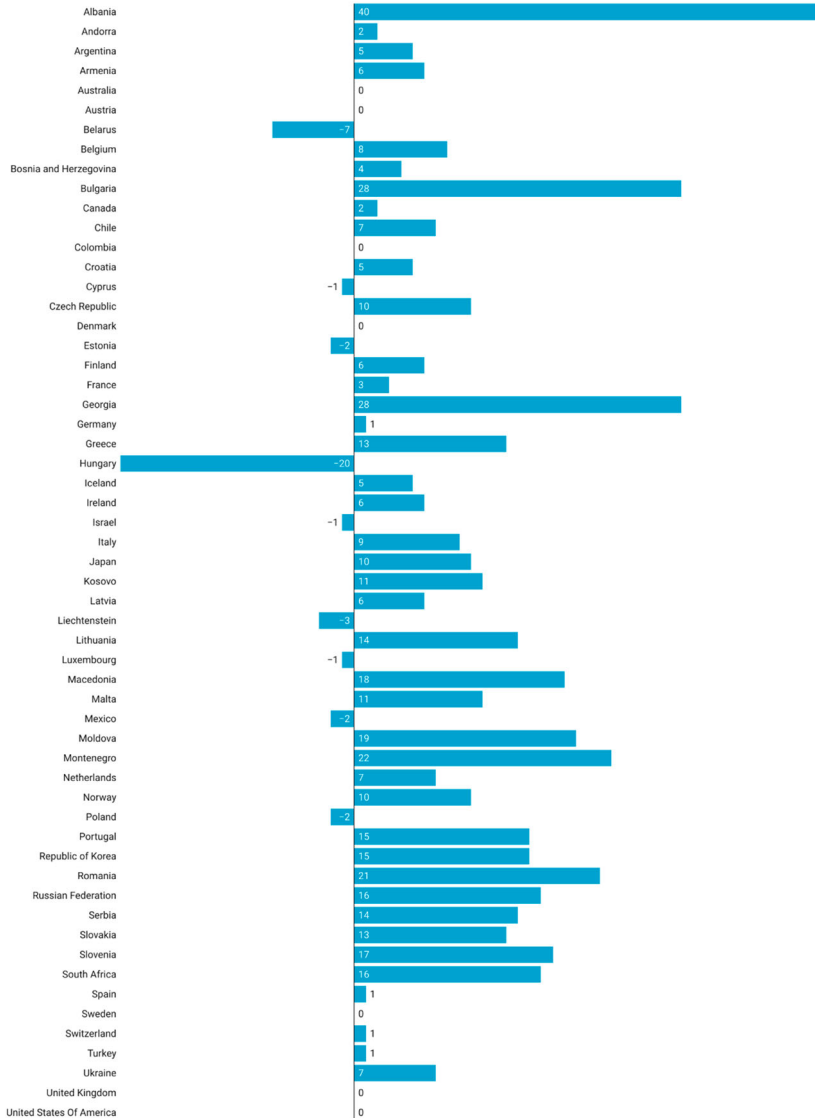


Figure 5. Difference between mean values of 2015–20 compared to 1990–94. Legend: Difference in five-year period mean values (2015–20 subtracted by 1990–94) $N = 57$. Data exceptions: Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (data starts in 1996), Kosovo (data starts in 2000); based on standardized scores.

closer look at the patterns of local autonomy according to different administrative profiles (Figure 7) not only reveals the high degree of local autonomy of the Nordic countries but also the importance of the provision of tasks and services there (functional aspect of autonomy). In these countries, local authorities do more and have more possibilities to decide what they do and how

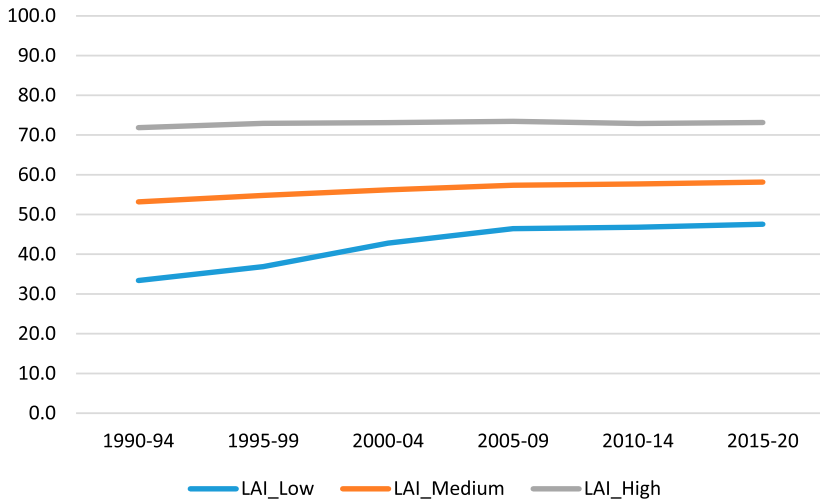


Figure 6. Changes of the LAI 2.0 across time for low, medium and high autonomy countries. Legend: mean values 1990–94 ($N = 54$), 1995–99 ($N = 56$), 2000–04 ($N = 57$), 2005–09 ($N = 57$), 2010–14 ($N = 57$), 2015–20 ($N = 57$), standardized.

they do it. Interesting to know is that legal aspects of local autonomy do not seem to be an issue as it is in other groups of countries. Legal aspects are particularly important in Eastern countries, which contradicts to some extent the low degree of non-interference in these countries. Financial autonomy is more widespread in the Napoleonic and federal countries as well as in the Nordic countries.

Summary and conclusion

This paper presents the methodology, data and results of the ‘LAI 2.0’, an update and extension of the first Local Autonomy Index project. The project encompasses 57 countries, including all 27 EU member states, 44 CoE member states, and 36 OECD member states. Additionally, Argentina, Belarus, Kosovo, and South Africa have been included. The project covers the period from 1990 to 2020.

To produce reliable and comparable data within a limited timeframe, a team of researchers familiar with each country was assembled. They coded their respective countries based on a common coding scheme developed by project leaders and country group coordinators. The code book drew upon theoretical considerations, empirical studies, and the European Charter of Local-Self-Government. The results underwent three consistency checks and were finally controlled by two external experts.

The main findings reaffirm those of the LAI 1.0. On average, all 11 variables showed an increase since the period of 1990–94. Some variables, such as

Table 2. LAI 2.0 and dimension values (with deviations) according to either affiliations to supranational organizations or federalist structure.

Country groups	LAI 2.0	Legal autonomy	Access	Policy scope	Political discretion	Financial autonomy	Organizational autonomy	Non-interference
All (N = 57)	57.16 (11.62)	72.42 (26.47)	64.63 (24.39)	48.28 (15.22)	50.06 (15.92)	53.48 (22.48)	70.96 (17.96)	56.93 (23.66)
Federalist countries (N = 14)	58.19 (10.88)	73.62 (29.72)	68.86 (31.73)	44.01 (13.43)	43.18 (15.28)	63.81 (22.35)	76.13 (11.18)	52.78 (22.97)
Council of Europe (N = 44)	58.55 (11.62)	75.17 (23.63)	68.11 (23.50)	48.71 (15.27)	52.31 (15.46)	52.78 (23.16)	72.37 (17.65)	60.46 (22.16)
European Union (N = 27)	60.17 (11.05)	78.09 (22.39)	71.71 (23.80)	48.23 (17.39)	55.68 (14.17)	54.57 (20.77)	71.48 (17.35)	62.25 (23.01)
OECD (N = 36)	60.24 (11.57)	69.35 (28.79)	67.48 (23.38)	50.60 (14.78)	53.47 (16.19)	59.74 (20.28)	73.55 (18.09)	58.31 (22.55)
Newly included countries (N = 18)	51.89 (10.13)	69.65 (31.72)	54.21 (26.39)	44.88 (13.85)	40.31 (15.90)	53.35 (22.15)	66.70 (17.03)	46.51 (22.94)

Legend: mean values, 2015–2020, standardized; standard deviations in parentheses.

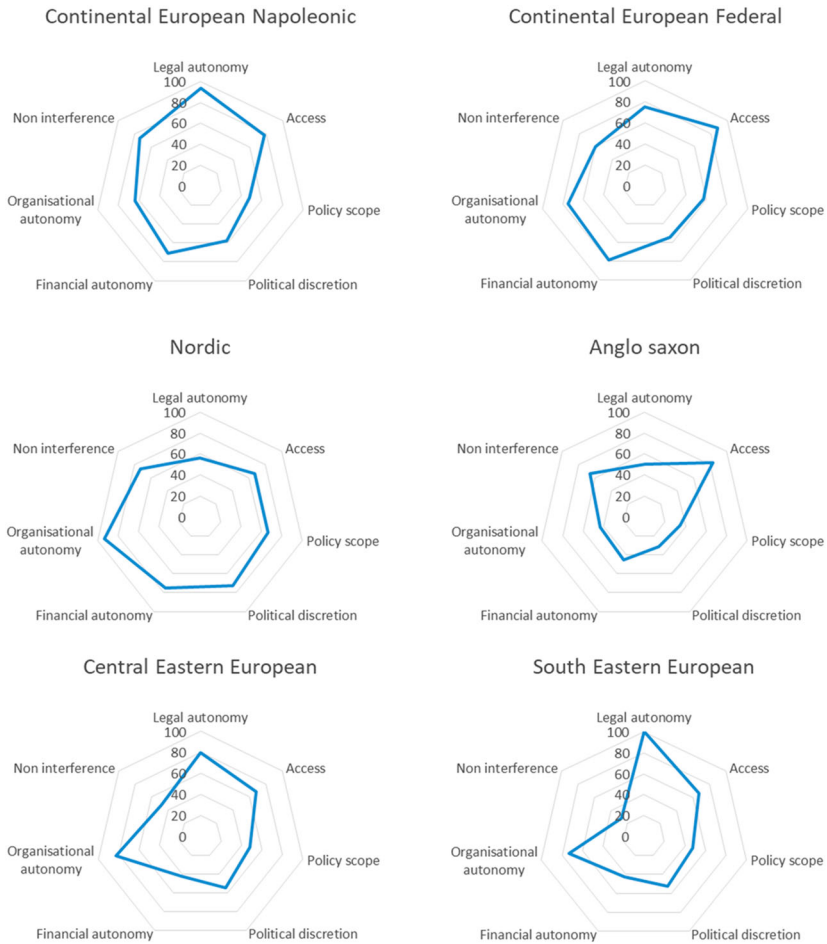


Figure 7. Patterns of local autonomy and administrative profiles. Legend: Continental European Napoleonic ($N = 6$): France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece; Continental European Federal ($N = 3$): Germany, Austria, Switzerland; Nordic ($N = 6$): Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Netherlands; Anglo-Saxon ($N = 2$): UK, Malta; Central Eastern European ($N = 4$): Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary; South Eastern European ($N = 2$): Bulgaria, Romania. Mean values LAI 2.0 2015–2020, standardized.

institutional depth, legal protection, and central and regional access, experienced significant increases, while others like financial transfer system and borrowing autonomy saw only slight improvements. The trend suggests that local authorities have strengthened their formal position and role within the state rather than expanding their areas of operation and concrete autonomy in financial and organizational matters.

Dimension-wise, the results follow a similar pattern. All dimensions showed a general increase, with political access to higher levels experiencing the greatest growth. Legal autonomy and political discretion also increased above average, while financial autonomy stopped increasing a few years prior to 2010.

Specifically, there was an overall increase in autonomy between 1990 and 2020, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. However, some countries showed minimal change or a slight decrease, such as Liechtenstein, Estonia, Mexico, Poland, and Israel. Notably Hungary and to a lesser extent Belarus experienced a considerable decrease in local autonomy.

Nordic countries (excluding Norway) and Switzerland maintained the highest levels of local autonomy, while countries like Turkey, Israel, Malta, Cyprus, Ireland, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, and the Russian Federation ranked lower in the index.

Over the 30-year period across all 57 countries, there was a progressive increase of the LAI, with a higher growth rate observed in the first decade. The increase gradually slowed down and stabilized towards 2020, resulting in an overall increase of around 7–8% for the covered countries.

Differences in scores were observed based on affiliation with the EU, CoE, and OECD. The EU and CoE member states showed a stronger increase over time, while OECD member states as a group had the highest scores. Federalist countries did not have significantly more autonomous local authorities compared to non-federalist countries, although they did display slightly higher financial and organizational autonomy. This is due to the involvement of intermediate level in the provision of tasks and services.

While the LAI 2.0 project produced interesting results, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns the scope of local governments analysed, focusing on the lowest and most effective level of local self-government. Intermediate local governments and inter-municipal cooperation bodies were excluded from the analysis.

The second limitation relates to the units of aggregation, which vary in federal countries with different degrees of autonomy among subunits. This paper only presents results at the national level to reduce complexity, it does not account for variations within countries.

The third limitation pertains to the coding process, which relied on experts' understanding and judgement based on the codebook. While efforts were made to improve and clarify coding instructions, introducing a 'second opinion' coding and quantitative indicators would enhance the reliability of the index.

All things considered, external experts confirmed the methodology's solidity and the relevance of the comprehensive set of indicators, variables, and dimensions in measuring local autonomy. The LAI has expanded its reach beyond Europe and now includes a wide range of countries on six continents, spanning a 30-year period. This index serves as a valuable resource for

academics and policymakers seeking a comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of local autonomy and its evolution over time, contributing to the debates on local governance and decentralization.

Acknowledgements

The LAI 2.0 project and this article, which presents its main results, were initiated by the late Prof. Dr. Andreas Ladner. His immense accumulated knowledge and recognized comparative work on decentralization, federalism, and local government systems, at a national or international level, made him the right person to develop the Local Autonomy Index. To our great sadness, our friend and colleague Andreas passed away on 7 February 2023, while this article was being written. We miss Andreas' passionate, inspiring, and accessible personality. This article, being his last journal contribution, is dedicated to him.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Nicolas Keuffer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0841-6759>

Alexander Bastianen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5905-7616>

References

- Adcock, Robert, and David Collier. 2001. "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 529–546. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055401003100>
- Clark, Gordon L. 1984. "A Theory of Local Autonomy." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (2): 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1984.tb01448.x>
- Council of Europe. 1985. European Charter of Local Self-Government. CETS No. 122. <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/122.htm> (consulted on 2022.12.16).
- Dahl, Robert A., and Edward R Tuft. 1973. *Size and Democracy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goldsmith, Michael. 1995. "Autonomy and City Limits." In *Theories of Urban Politics*, edited by David Judge, Gerry Stocker, and Harold Wolman, 228–252. London: Sage.
- Gurr, Ted R., and Desmond S King. 1987. *The State and the City*. London: Macmillan.
- Hansen, Tore, and Jan E Klausen. 2002. "Between the Welfare State and Local Government Autonomy." *Local Government Studies* 28 (4): 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004167>
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Gary Marks, and Arjan H Schakel. 2010. *The Rise of Regional Authority: A Comparative Study of 42 Democracies (1950-2006)*. London: Routledge.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Gary Marks, Arjan H. Schakel, Sandra Chapman Osterkat, Sara Niedzwiecky, and Shair-Rosenfield Sarah. 2016. *A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance. Volume I: Measuring Regional Authority*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Keuffer, Nicolas.. 2020. *L'autonomie communale en Suisse: conceptualisation, classifications empiriques et facteurs explicatifs*. Lausanne: IDHEAP
- Kjellberg, Francesco. 1995. "The Changing Values of Local Government." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 540 (1): 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716295540000004>
- Kuhlmann, Sabine, and Helmut Wollmann. 2019. *Introduction to Comparative Public Administration. Administrative Systems and Reforms in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Ladner, Andreas, and Nicolas Keuffer. 2021. "Creating an Index of Local Autonomy – Theoretical, Conceptual, and Empirical Issues." *Regional & Federal Studies* 31 (2): 209–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1464443>
- Ladner, Andreas, Nicolas Keuffer, and Harald Baldersheim. 2016. "Measuring Local Autonomy in 39 Countries (1990-2014)." *Regional and Federal Studies* 26 (3): 321–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2016.1214911>
- Ladner, Andreas, Nicolas Keuffer, Harald Baldersheim, Nikos Hlepas, Pawel Swianiewicz, Kristof Steyvers, and Carmen Navarro. 2019. *Patterns of Local Autonomy in Europe*. London: Palgrave.
- Ladner, Andreas, Nicolas Keuffer, and Alexander Bastianen. 2021. *Local Autonomy Index in the EU, Council of Europe and OECD Countries (1990-2020). Release 2.0*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Lidström, Anders. 1998. "The Comparative Study of Local Government Systems – a Research Agenda." *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 1 (1): 97–115.
- Page, Edward, and Michael Goldsmith. 1987. *Central and Local Government Relations*. London: Sage.
- Pierre, Jon. 1990. "Assessing Local Autonomy." In *Challenges to Local Government*, edited by Desmond S. King, and Jon Pierre, 37–54. London: SAGE Publications.
- Schakel, Arjan H. 2008. "Validation of the Regional Authority Index." *Regional and Federal Studies* 18 (2-3): 143–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560801979498>
- Scharpf, Fritz W. 1999. *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Steenbergen, Marco R., and Gary Marks. 2007. "Evaluating Expert Judgements." *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (3): 347–366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00694.x>
- Vetter, Angelika. 2007. *Local Politics: A Resource for Democracy in Western Europe? Local Autonomy, Local Integrative Capacity, and Citizens' Attitudes Towards Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.