



Coordination Mechanisms for the Implementation of European Integration Obligations in the Public Administration of the Western Balkans

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ABSTRACT

The article substantiates coordination mechanisms for implementing European integration obligations in the public administration of the Western Balkan states. The relevance of the study stems from the transformation of EU enlargement policy into a model in which accession negotiations are linked with the internal capacity of the state to plan, allocate responsibility, provide resources, implement, report and adjust reforms. The methodology combines systemic, institutional, comparative, content-analytical and logical-analytical approaches; the empirical framework is based on the Reform and Growth Facility, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Reform Agendas of the regional administrations, European Commission decisions and Reform Monitor materials. The theoretical framework combines the external incentives model, EU conditionality management, gradual integration and access to the Single Market as an interim goal. The article shows that coordination is not limited to inter-ministerial correspondence or diplomatic support for accession negotiations, but includes the source of obligation, responsible authority, co-implementers, resources, indicators, evidence-based reporting, external assessment and policy adjustment. The Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are compared; different coordination risks of compact, politically blocked and multi-level administrative systems are identified. Based on the indicative allocation of the Reform and Growth Facility, the article demonstrates the financial and economic importance of coordination capacity. The article proposes a coordination cycle and a risk matrix that identifies typical coordination failures, control safeguards and managerial implications for Ukraine.

KEYWORDS

public administration, European integration, Western Balkans, coordination mechanisms, Reform Agenda, Growth Plan, European integration obligations, Ukraine.



Координаційні механізми виконання євроінтеграційних зобов'язань у публічному управлінні держав Західних Балкан

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СТАТТЯ

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У статті обґрунтовано координаційні механізми виконання євроінтеграційних зобов'язань у публічному управлінні держав Західних Балкан. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена переходом політики розширення Європейського Союзу до моделі, у якій переговорний процес поєднується з внутрішньою здатністю держав планувати, розподіляти відповідальність, забезпечувати ресурс, виконувати, звітувати й коригувати реформи. Методологія поєднує системний, інституційний, порівняльний, контент-аналіз і логіко-аналітичне узагальнення. Емпіричну базу становлять матеріали Reform and Growth Facility (Інструменту реформ і зростання), Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (Плану зростання для Західних Балкан), Reform Agendas держав регіону (реформних програм держав регіону), рішення Європейської Комісії та дані Reform Monitor (моніторингу реформ). Теоретична рамка поєднує концепцію зовнішніх стимулів, управління умовністю ЄС, ідею поступової інтеграції та доступ до єдиного ринку як проміжну ціль. Продемонстровано, що координація виконання зобов'язань не зводиться до міжвідомчого листування або дипломатичного супроводу переговорів, а охоплює джерело зобов'язання, відповідальний орган, співвиконавців, ресурсне забезпечення, індикатор, доказову звітність, зовнішню оцінку та коригування політики. У статті зіставлено Reform Agendas (реформні програми) Албанії, Косова, Чорногорії, Північної Македонії, Сербії та Боснії і Герцеговини, виокремлено координаційні ризики компактних адміністрацій, політично заблокованих систем і багаторівневих державних конструкцій. На основі індикативного розподілу Reform and Growth Facility (Інструменту реформ і зростання) показано фінансово-економічну вагу координаційної спроможності. Запропоновано координаційний цикл виконання євроінтеграційних зобов'язань та матрицю ризиків, у якій систематизовано типові збої координації, контрольні запобіжники та управлінські орієнтири для України.



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

публічне управління, європейська інтеграція, Західні Балкани, координаційні механізми, Reform Agenda (реформна програма), Growth Plan (план зростання), євроінтеграційні зобов'язання, Україна.

1. Introduction

The European integration of the Western Balkans is no longer limited to a sequence of foreign policy stages, but functions as a complex cycle of public governance. Its outcome depends not only on the political will to join the European Union, but also on the ability of the national administrative system to translate EU requirements into concrete tasks, decisions, budgetary priorities, deadlines, indicators and evidence of implementation.

In the traditional negotiating framework, the key benchmarks were negotiating chapters, the adaptation of the EU *acquis* (the legal *acquis* of the European Union) and periodic assessments by the European Commission. In the modern enlargement policy, this contour is complemented by a stronger link between reforms, gradual access to certain benefits of the single market, financial support and external verification of results. The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans for 2024–2027 ties payments to the fulfillment of agreed reform conditions, and the Reform Agenda becomes for each beneficiary not a declarative plan, but an operational document with defined reform steps, time frames, and grounds for assessing implementation [1].

In such a model, the weak point is not only the content of reforms, but also the architecture of their coordination. Blurred responsibility between authorities, the separation of strategic documents from budget planning, vague indicators, a weak evidence base for reporting, and belated policy adjustments reduce the manageability of even formally correctly defined reforms. The Ukrainian negotiation process after acquiring candidate status and opening negotiations with the EU is also shifting towards interdepartmental coordination, traceability of implementation, evidence-based reporting, and the simultaneous advancement of several negotiation clusters.

The scientific problem of the article is to determine how the coordination mechanisms of public administration transform European integration obligations from foreign policy requirements into an internal cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, reporting and adjustment of reforms. The experience of the Western Balkans in this study is used not as a ready-made model for transfer to the Ukrainian context, but as an empirical basis for identifying typical governance nodes of a candidate state: division of responsibility, resource provision, performance indicators, demonstrability of results and the connection between the EU's external conditionality and internal administrative capacity.

2. Literature Review

The academic and analytical literature on EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans is gradually shifting its focus from the general political expediency of accession to an analysis of the procedural, administrative and coordination capacity of the candidate states to fulfil their commitments. K. Walsh examines the gradual integration of the Western Balkans in the context of a change in enlargement policy after 2022, when Russia's war against Ukraine has intensified the geopolitical and security dimension of the EU enlargement policy [2]. Gradual integration in this interpretation does not replace full membership, but re-legitimizes the EU's relations with the region through interim opportunities, market integration, financial incentives and the preservation of fundamental reform requirements. L. Ognianoska analyses access to the EU single market as an intermediate and at the same time sufficiently tangible goal for the Western Balkan states [3]. Coordination of European integration commitments goes beyond the formal opening or closing of negotiation chapters. If partial access to the benefits of the single market is seen as a reliable intermediate goal, the candidate country should synchronize not only legislation but also administrative procedures, regulatory practices, institutional responsibilities and sectoral policies before membership. B. Tubić complements this logic with a geopolitical dimension, considering the current EU relations with the Western Balkans through the challenges of the accession process, the possibilities of enlargement and the EU's strategic presence in South-Eastern Europe in the context of global competition [4]. The theoretical analysis of coordination mechanisms relies on models of Europeanization through external incentives. F. Schimmelfennig and U. Zedelmayer, in their review of the model of external incentives, show that the Europeanization of candidate countries depends on a combination of external rewards, the credibility of conditionality, internal adaptation costs and the capacity of political actors to enforce the rules [5]. S. Buscaneanu and E. Li refine this framework by distinguishing between transformation and regulatory costs, as well as by taking into account domestic institutions and alternative international influences [6]. The Reform

Agenda in this framework acts as a tool for managing adaptation costs, incentives, accountability and evidence of implementation. The updated 2020 EU enlargement methodology has consolidated the cluster logic of negotiations, strengthened the role of frameworks and made the process more politically driven, predictable and conditional [7]. Coordination under this negotiation logic is not limited to technical support of individual chapters. It should ensure a vertical connection between the cluster, the national plan, the sectoral executor, the budgetary resource, the performance indicator and the EU's external assessment.

A separate group of analytical works is related to the Growth Plan and Reform Agendas as newer instruments of enlargement policy. A. Stoykov and T. Varin, using the example of North Macedonia, show that the Growth Plan is aimed at reducing the socio-economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU, and the Reform Agenda concentrates key areas of intervention in the areas of public administration, public finance management, energy and digital transition, human capital, the private sector and fundamental reforms [8]. Such a conceptual framework provides grounds to consider the Reform Agenda as a management document that combines goals, deadlines, institutions, indicators, financial incentives and conditions for external evaluation. Ukrainian analytical studies of the experience of the Western Balkans emphasize the institutional dimension of negotiations. D. Naumenko, O. Bulana and S. Dyachenko consider the path of the Western Balkans to the EU as a source of lessons for Ukraine, in particular regarding the duration of negotiations, the importance of the cluster of fundamental reforms, political criteria and typical obstacles to membership [9]. O. Bulana separately substantiates the institutional model of Ukraine's negotiations with the EU, in which the success of the accession process is associated not only with the work of the negotiating team, but also with the state's ability to create an internal coordination structure of government bodies capable of accompanying negotiations, forming positions and ensuring the implementation of obligations [10].

The available research sufficiently fully reveals the political conditions of enlargement, the evolution of the negotiation methodology, the idea of gradual integration, the logic of external incentives and the risks of delaying the accession process. The applied dimension of coordination remains less developed: the transition of the European integration commitment from the external condition of the EU to the internal management cycle; the reflection of this cycle in the Reform Agendas; the relationship between political conditionality, financial support, administrative responsibility, indicators and evidence-based reporting; implications for the Ukrainian model of managing the European integration process.

3. Problem Statement

The article aims to substantiate the coordination mechanisms for the implementation of European integration obligations in the public administration of the Western Balkan states and to develop an applied coordination cycle suitable for adaptation in the Ukrainian system of managing negotiations on accession to the EU.

Achieving the goal involves solving the following tasks: to reveal the connection between the modern methodology of EU enlargement, the Growth Plan and internal coordination of reforms; to analyze the Reform Agendas of the Western Balkan states as management documents for the implementation of European integration obligations; to identify typical coordination nodes of a candidate state; to form a coordination cycle for the implementation of obligations relevant for Ukraine.

4. Methods and Materials

The source base of the study is academic works on the theory of external conditionality, Europeanization and gradual integration [2–6], analytical materials on the Growth Plan, Reform Agendas and the Ukrainian institutional model of negotiations [8–10], EU program documents on the updated enlargement methodology, the Reform and Growth Facility, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, allocations by beneficiaries and approval of Reform Agendas [1; 7; 11–15], as well as Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and documents on Bosnia and Herzegovina [16–21]. The Ukrainian adaptation contour was formed based on analytical materials on the institutional model of Ukraine's negotiations with the EU and the official document of the European Commission on the 2025 enlargement package, which recorded the completion by Ukraine of bilateral

screening and the adoption of roadmaps in the field of the rule of law, public administration and democratic institutions [10; 22].

The methodological basis of the study combines systemic, institutional, comparative, content-analytical and logical-analytical approaches. The systemic approach was used to consider the implementation of European integration obligations as a cycle of transition from an external requirement to an internal management result. The institutional approach was used to analyze the role of responsible bodies, coordination procedures, reporting and external evaluation. The comparative approach was used to compare the Reform Agendas of the Western Balkan countries according to coordination parameters. The content analysis of Reform Agendas was conducted according to the following categories: source of commitment, reform block, responsible contour, indicator or milestone of implementation, link to financing, monitoring method, implementation risk and function for the negotiation process. Logical-analytical generalization was used to build a coordination cycle and a risk matrix.

Reform Agendas are considered not as political declarations, but as documents in which one can trace management parameters: the connection of the reform with EU conditions, responsible executor, time horizon, result indicator, monitoring method and potential risk of non-implementation. The content-analytical framework does not replace a full legal analysis of the EU acquis (legal acquis of the European Union), but records the presence or absence of an administrative mechanism for transforming commitments into managed actions.

5. Results and Discussion

The European Union's current enlargement policy is shaping a new type of relationship between reforms, financial support, external evaluation and internal administrative coordination. Regulation (EU) 2024/1449, which established the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, defines this instrument as a mechanism to support reforms and growth in the region for the period 2024–2027 [11]. Financial support under this instrument is not granted automatically: it depends on the implementation of agreed reform steps, compliance with preconditions, general conditions and specific payment terms. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans is built around four interrelated areas: gradual approximation to the EU single market, deepening regional economic integration, accelerating fundamental reforms and increasing financial assistance conditional on the implementation of reforms [12]. The Reform Agenda serves as an operational document that translates the EU's external conditionality into internal objectives, deadlines, indicators, responsibilities and the basis for assessing implementation. The economic scale of the Reform and Growth Facility reinforces the importance of the coordination mechanism. The total volume of the instrument is €6 billion for 2024–2027, but the distribution among beneficiaries is not an unconditional financial guarantee. The European Commission notes that the initial allocations may vary depending on the results of the implementation of the Reform Agendas; if the conditions are not met, the funds may be reduced or reallocated to other beneficiaries [13]. Coordination of reforms becomes not a technical procedure, but a condition for access to financial resources, investment support and gradual integration into the EU single market.

The financial weight of the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans administrations is uneven. The largest indicative allocation falls on Serbia – €1,586.4 million, the smallest – on Montenegro, €383.5 million. Bosnia and Herzegovina, after a reduction in its initial indicative allocation due to the delay in submitting its Reform Agenda, can claim €976.6 million [13]. Conditionality of payments turns coordination capacity into a financial and economic factor: a delay or incomplete implementation of the Reform Agenda directly affects access to support. The European Commission approved the Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in October 2024, paving the way for the practical application of the Reform and Growth Facility for these beneficiaries [14]. Bosnia and Herzegovina joined this framework later: the Commission decided on 28 November 2025 to include its Reform Agenda in the multiannual programme, and on 4 December 2025 it reported a positive approval of the reform agenda [15; 21]. The different pace of approval of Reform Agendas reveals a gap between the common external framework of the EU and the uneven internal readiness of administrations for programmatic coordination of reforms (Table 1).

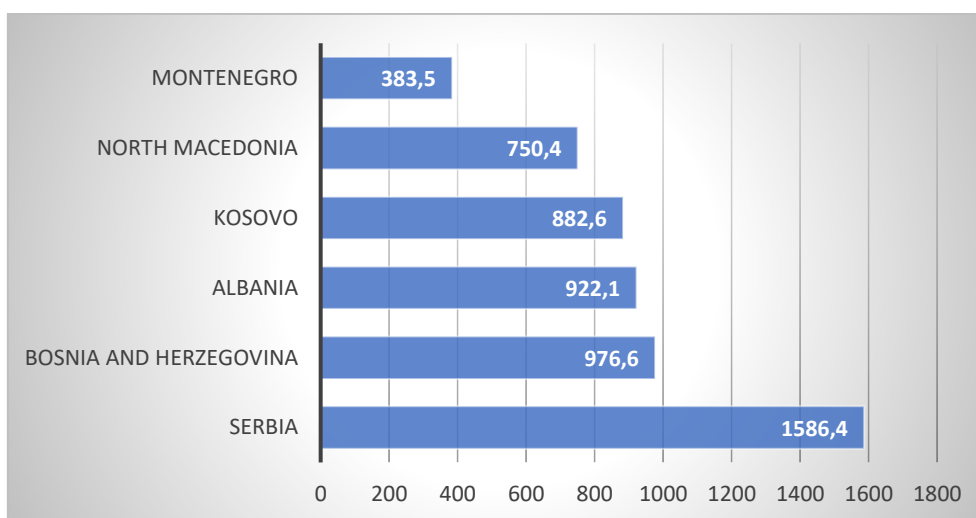


Figure 1. Indicative distribution of Reform and Growth Facility funds by beneficiaries in 2024–2027, million euros

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the European Commission [13].

Reform Agendas show that the common external framework of the EU does not eliminate differences in the internal architecture of implementation. In countries with a more compact government structure, it is easier to identify a responsible center, but the risk of formal indicator implementation remains. In complex multi-level systems, the main problem is not the content of the commitments, but the coordination between different institutional levels, data reconciliation and a common format of evidentiary reporting. Therefore, the coordination mechanism should be analyzed as an independent element of public administration, and not as an auxiliary administrative procedure.

Table 1. Governance parameters of the Reform Agendas of the Western Balkans

State	Coordination focus	Typical reform blocks	Management risk	Function for the negotiation process
Albania	Combining public administration reforms, digitalization, business environment and legal approximation	Fundamental reforms, economic competitiveness, digital services, market reforms	Risk of excessive centralization of implementation and formal closure of intermediate steps	Fixing the pace of negotiations through demonstrable implementation of the Growth Plan priorities
Kosovo	Systematizing the coordination of the Reform and Growth Facility and linking reforms to gradual economic integration	Public administration, economic governance, energy, digitalization, human capital	Status and foreign policy context complicates the usual logic of integration interaction	Maintaining institutional engagement with the EU despite the specific status regime
Montenegro	Using a relatively advanced negotiating position to focus on reform implementation	Rule of law, public finances, business environment, green and digital transition	Disconnection between negotiation progress and actual administrative discipline of implementation	Transforming formal leadership in negotiations into measurable reform outcomes
North Macedonia	Maintaining a structured reform agenda in the face of political deadlock	Public administration, competitiveness, energy, digitalization, human capital	Dependence on political disputes not fully controlled by internal administration	Maintaining institutional momentum in an unstable political environment
Serbia	Combining market reforms with a politically complex foreign policy and rule of law context	Economic governance, digital transition, energy, institutional reforms	Discrepancy between technical implementation of reforms and broader EU political criteria	Testing the ability to combine technocratic reforms with political accession conditions
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Later entry into the Reform Agenda through a complex multi-level state structure	Functioning of institutions, economic reforms, administrative coordination, European standards	Fragmentation of competences between levels of government and slowing down of reform coordination	Demonstrating that financial conditionality works more slowly without an agreed focal point

Source: Compiled by the author based on [14–21; 23].

The management risks in Table 1 are summarized on the basis of the Reform Agendas, the pace of their approval, the political and institutional context and the logic of the Reform and Growth Facility. They do not duplicate the formal provisions of the documents, but summarize the management vulnerabilities between the official commitment and actual implementation.

Coordination of the implementation of European integration commitments covers at least three levels. The first level is related to the political confirmation of priorities and the acceptance of commitments to the EU. The second level concerns the administrative distribution of tasks between ministries, agencies, parliamentary structures, local governments and independent institutions. The third level involves evidentiary reporting: the result must be confirmed by a document, indicator, adopted act, established procedure or measurable change.

The Reform Agenda combines European integration policy with budgetary planning, administrative responsibility and external verification. If a reform does not have a resource, a responsible executor, a deadline and an indicator, it cannot be verified as a fulfilled condition. Therefore, the implementation of commitments requires not only legal harmonization, but also a management circuit capable of supporting the cycle of planning, implementation, proving the result and adjusting the policy.

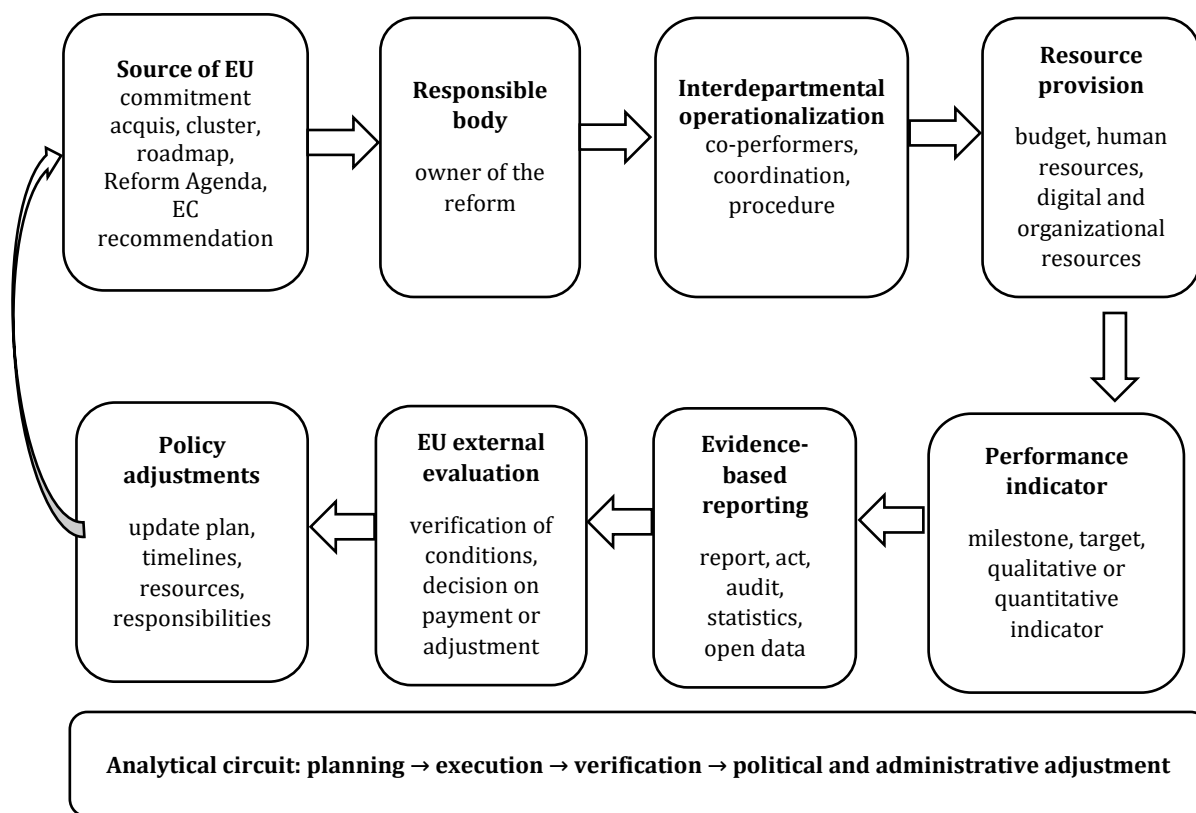


Figure 2. Coordination cycle of implementation of European integration obligations in the public administration of a candidate country

Source: Compiled by the author.

The first element of the coordination cycle is to fix the source of the commitment. Its content can come from the EU acquis (the legal acquis of the European Union), a negotiating chapter, a cluster, a roadmap, the Reform Agenda or the recommendations of the European Commission. The commitment must then be assigned to a responsible body. Without an institutionally defined executor, coordination becomes an exchange of information without a management center.

Interdepartmental operationalization ensures the coordination of reforms affecting several sectors: public finances, civil service, digital infrastructure, anti-corruption policy, local government or the judiciary. After that, the commitment must be linked to budgetary and resource provision. European conditionality becomes managerially realistic only when the reform has human, financial, digital or organizational resources.

The performance indicator fixes the criterion for verifying the result. The presence of an adopted act in itself does not always mean the actual fulfillment of the obligation. For some reforms, the adoption

of a law or a by-law is a sufficient intermediate result; for others, statistical indicators of the service operation, reduction of administrative procedure terms, number of launched digital modules, audit of the institution or actual application of a new procedure are required. Evidence-based reporting should record the type of result that follows from the nature of the obligation.

After the completion of bilateral screening and adoption of roadmaps on the rule of law, public administration reform and functioning of democratic institutions, the coordination cycle acquires direct applied significance for Ukraine [22]. The negotiation process moves from the preparatory phase to the regime of management tracing of each obligation: from the negotiation document to the internal implementation procedure.

Several types of coordination problems are distinguished based on country examples. The Albanian case demonstrates the advantage of a more compact coordination architecture, where the government can more quickly coordinate changes between key ministries [16]. At the same time, such a model risks excessive centralization: sectoral bodies may perceive European integration commitments as an external mandate rather than as their own policy. Kosovo shows a different type of problem: its Reform Agenda includes a special emphasis on the coordination system of the Reform and Growth Facility, since the status and foreign policy context complicates the usual logic of integration [17]. Montenegro has the advantage of longer negotiation experience, but its example confirms that formal progress does not automatically create a quick result [18].

North Macedonia demonstrates the weight of external political blockages: a candidate country can maintain administrative readiness even when the negotiation process is slowed down by issues not fully under the government's control [19]. The Serbian case is complicated by the gap between technical reforms and broader political criteria [20]. Bosnia and Herzegovina show that a multi-level state structure can significantly complicate the implementation of commitments [15; 21]. In such a system, coordination requires not only a central plan, but also procedures for agreement between levels of government, arbitration mechanisms, data harmonization and a common reporting format. The scale of the Ukrainian system of European integration governance differs from the Balkan models, but the problem of coordination complexity remains common. Reforms related to accession negotiations cannot be implemented by the central government alone. They require the participation of parliament, ministries, independent regulators, local governments, the judiciary, anti-corruption infrastructure and the business environment. The coordination center in such a system does not replace the executors, but ensures the tracing of responsibility.

The communication function of coordination supports the internal legitimation of reforms. In the Western Balkan countries, the delay in negotiations often created public fatigue and distrust of the European perspective. If citizens do not see the connection between reform, service, economic opportunity, or protection of rights, European integration turns into an abstract political process. Evidential reporting should work not only for the European Commission, but also for the internal public legitimation of reforms (Table 2).

Table 2. Risk matrix for coordinating the implementation of European integration obligations

Coordination risk	Where it occurs	Typical manifestation	Control fuse	Management conclusion for Ukraine
Formalization without resources	After commitment	The measure is included in the plan, but does not have the budget, staff or technical capacity	Resource passport of the reform: budget, staff, digital tools, technical assistance	Each negotiation commitment should undergo a resource check before being included in the implementation plan
Centralization without sectoral ownership	At the stage of responsibility allocation	The government center controls the reporting, but the ministries do not perceive the reform as their own policy	Responsibility matrix with the owning body, co-implementers and deadlines	The coordination center should trace responsibility, not replace executors
Fragmentation between levels of government	In multi-level or decentralized systems	The state, regional and local levels provide different data or block approval	Uniform reporting format, inter-level agreement protocol, arbitration mechanism	Decentralization requires a separate European integration coordination circuit
Indicator substitution of results	At the stage of implementation monitoring	Implementation is reduced to the adoption of an act without checking the real change in the procedure or service	Combination of implementation milestone, target indicator and proof of application	Ukrainian roadmaps should distinguish between legal, procedural and actual implementation

Coordination risk	Where it occurs	Typical manifestation	Control fuse	Management conclusion for Ukraine
Disconnection between internal and external assessment	After EU reporting	Internal report records the implementation, but the EC does not recognize the result as sufficient	Preliminary verification of evidence according to the EC logic and open register of comments	Implementation should be assessed not only by national self-assessment, but also by the expected EU standard
Weak public legitimacy	In the communication of reform results	The connection between obligations, services, rights and economic opportunities is not obvious	Public reporting in the language of results	An internal communication circuit for European integration is needed

Source: Compiled by the author.

The risk matrix complements the coordination cycle by analyzing potential failure points. The sequence of commitment implementation may be formally maintained, but the result is lost due to lack of resources, blurred responsibility, fragmentation between levels of government, indicator substitution, inconsistency of internal self-assessment with EU standards, or weak public legitimacy. For the Ukrainian negotiation management system, the matrix performs the function of ex ante control: it checks not only the existence of a plan, but also the conditions for its actual implementation. The generalization of Reform Agendas and the logic of the Reform and Growth Facility confirms the need for a coordination cycle, where each commitment goes through a sequence from fixing the source to adjusting the policy after an external assessment.

6. Conclusions

Coordination mechanisms for the implementation of European integration obligations in the Western Balkan countries are taking shape in the context of the changing logic of EU enlargement. The Growth Plan and the Reform and Growth Facility have transformed reform from a declarative policy direction into a condition linked to financial support, external assessment and interim results. Coordination is becoming a central element of a state's European integration capacity.

The Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate different models of internal organization of the implementation of obligations. A more compact state structure does not eliminate the risk of centralized formal implementation, politically blocked systems require maintaining administrative dynamics in an unstable negotiation calendar, and complex multi-level administrations face the risk of fragmentation of responsibility. In all cases, the outcome depends on whether the reform is combined with a responsible body, budgetary and human resources, an indicator, evidence-based reporting, and an adjustment procedure.

The proposed coordination cycle separates the actual management of European integration commitments from formal planning. Its elements – source of commitment, responsible body, interdepartmental operationalization, resource provision, performance indicator, evidence-based reporting, external evaluation, and policy adjustment – can be used to design a Ukrainian system for managing EU accession negotiations. The risk matrix complements the coordination cycle by identifying potential failure points: formalization without resources, centralization without sectoral ownership, fragmentation between levels of government, indicator substitution of results, a gap between internal and external evaluation, and weak public legitimacy.

After the completion of bilateral screening and the adoption of roadmaps, what is critical for Ukraine is not the number of strategic documents, but the traceability of each commitment in the real management cycle. Adapting the experience of the Western Balkans requires an early combination of negotiation, administrative, budgetary, personnel, evidentiary and communication logic. Without such a combination, even substantively correct reforms may remain formal steps without a result recognized by the EU.

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