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Managing Regional Cooperation in the Process of European Integration: The Experience of the Western Balkan Countries for Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

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The article substantiates the management of regional cooperation among the Western Balkan states as a mechanism of preparation for European integration that combines political coordination, market integration, infrastructure compatibility, energy approximation, digital interaction and investment support. The relevance of the study stems from the fact that regional cooperation in the Western Balkans increasingly performs the function of intermediate administrative approximation to the EU Single Market and is not limited to a diplomatic format of good-neighbourly relations. The methodological framework consists of systemic and institutional approaches, as well as logical-analytical, content-analytical, comparative, and secondary statistical methods. Based on an analysis of analytical and reporting materials from international organizations and regional integration platforms, this paper outlines the institutional framework for the regional integration policies of the Western Balkan states. In particular, it describes the governance models, key instruments, and performance indicators of the Common Regional Market, the Berlin Process, the Transport Community, the Energy Community, the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and the Central European Free Trade Agreement. It is demonstrated that the Common Regional Market 2025–2028 serves as a regional framework for assessing the states' ability to comply with rules aligned with the logic of a single market. The paper systematizes the areas of focus of the Common Regional Market, identifies the governance functions of key regional platforms, and proposes an analytical framework for regional compatibility, in which the political, market, transport, energy, digital, and investment components are considered as interrelated elements of European integration capacity. This study analyzes the key areas of regional cooperation and identifies intra-regional disparities in the processes of European integration related to human capital, mobility, the business environment, investment, competitiveness, digital transformation, and the green and energy transitions. The practical significance of these findings lies in the potential to apply the experience of Western Balkan countries in managing regional cooperation during the process of European integration to Ukrainian policies on cross-border coordination, reconstruction, transport and energy integration, and digital interoperability with the EU.



KEYWORDS

public administration, European integration, regional cooperation, sustainable development, Western Balkans, European Union, Ukraine, Common Regional Market, Berlin Process, transport community, energy community.



Управління регіональним співробітництвом у процесі європейської інтеграції: досвід держав Західних Балкан для України

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СТАТТЯ

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У статті обґрунтовано управління регіональним співробітництвом держав Західних Балкан як механізм євроінтеграційної підготовки, що поєднує політичну координацію, ринкову інтеграцію, інфраструктурну сумісність, енергетичне наближення, цифрову взаємодію та інвестиційну підтримку. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена тим, що регіональне співробітництво на Західних Балканах виконує функцію проміжного управлінського наближення до єдиного ринку ЄС, а не зводиться до дипломатичного формату добросусідства. Методологічну основу становлять системний та інституційний підходи, логіко-аналітичний і контент-аналітичний, порівняльний, вторинний статистичний методи. На основі аналізу аналітичних та звітних матеріалів міжнародних організацій та регіональних інтеграційних платформ, креслено інституційне забезпечення регіональної інтеграційної політики держав Західних Балкан. Зокрема, охарактеризовано типи управління, ключові інструменти, вимірювальний результат діяльності Common Regional Market, Berlin Process, Transport Community, Energy Community, Western Balkans Investment Framework та Central European Free Trade Agreement. Показано, що Common Regional Market 2025–2028 є регіональною рамкою перевірки здатності держав виконувати правила, близькі до логіки єдиного ринку. Систематизовано напрями Common Regional Market, визначено управлінські функції ключових регіональних платформ і запропоновано аналітичну рамку регіональної сумісності, у якій політична, ринкова, транспортна, енергетична, цифрова та інвестиційна складові розглядаються як взаємопов'язані елементи євроінтеграційної спроможності. Проаналізовано ключові напрями регіонального співробітництва та визначено внутрішньо-регіональні неоднорідності в процесах європейської інтеграції, пов'язані з людським капіталом, мобільністю, бізнес-середовищем, інвестиціями, конкурентністю, цифровою трансформацією, зеленим і енергетичним переходом. Практичне значення результатів полягає у можливості використання досвіду управління регіональним співробітництвом держав Західних Балкан у процесі європейської інтеграції для української політики транскордонної координації, відбудови, транспортної й енергетичної інтеграції та цифрової сумісності з ЄС.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

публічне управління, європейська інтеграція, регіональне співробітництво, сталий розвиток, Західні Балкани, Європейський Союз, Україна, Common Regional Market, Berlin Process, транспортна спільнота, енергетична спільнота.

1. Introduction

Among the candidate countries for accession to the European Union (EU), more than half are Western Balkan states, whose official European integration process began in the 2000s with the submission of membership applications (North Macedonia in March 2004, Montenegro in December 2008, Albania in April 2009, Serbia in December 2009, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in February 2016). The experience of these countries in the negotiation process for accession to the EU is interesting from the point of view of the specifics of integration due to the need for their coexistence in the region. The quality of regional interaction tests the European integration capacity of each Western Balkan state, since the region's ability to functionally approach the logic of the EU single market is significantly affected by the fragmentation of markets, transport corridors, energy systems, professional qualifications, digital services, border crossing procedures, etc. Several integration initiatives are designed to overcome such fragmentation in the Western Balkans, acting as platforms for effective regional cooperation: Common Regional Market, CRM [8], Mini-Schengen / Open Balkan, Transport Community [29], Berlin Process [1], Western Balkans Investment Framework, WBIF [30], Energy Community [6], Central European Free Trade Agreement, CEFTA [3], etc. A significant role in integration processes in the Western Balkans is played by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), launched in 2008 as an operational body of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) with the functions of a coordination center for guiding, monitoring and supporting cooperation in the region [24]. Its activities are aimed at supporting European integration processes and cooperation in the economic, social, and energy spheres, the development of human capital, infrastructure, digitalization, etc.

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, performing a management function, contributes to integration processes by creating common rules, checking the compatibility of administrative procedures, forming coordination channels between governments, reducing transaction costs for business, and preparing state institutions to work in a wider European legal and economic space. Thus, the Western Balkan states, each moving along their own negotiating trajectory for membership in the European Union, receive two advantages: first, even before accession, they have the opportunity to integrate more closely with the EU single market, and second, through joint efforts they strengthen intra-regional integration. Considering regional cooperation as an intermediate stage of administrative approximation, states, within the framework of its implementation, check the ability to coordinate policies, recognize each other's documents, support digital data exchange, develop transport and energy interoperability, implement infrastructure and investment projects with EU support, and report on the results of cooperation.

2. Literature Review

In scientific works and special analytical developments focused on the problems of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, the issue of regional interaction and its impact on the readiness of states for EU membership is investigated. In particular, modern researchers analyze:

- the absorption capacity of the EU and the Western Balkans and the role of the Common Regional Market in the European integration processes, determining whether it is a strategy to gain time for the EU or a tool to increase the internal capacity of the states of the region themselves for economic cooperation, political stability and use of the opportunities of the single market [19];
- the EU proposals for the Common Regional Market, emphasizing that this format is based mainly on soft governance mechanisms and has limitations related to corruption, weakness of the rule of law and uneven readiness of the states of the region to implement common rules [12];
- intra-regional dynamics of the Western Balkans, emphasizing the role of regulatory approximation, reduction of trade barriers and investments in transport infrastructure, as well as liberalization of the movement of capital, services and labor in the region [26];
- various regional initiatives of the Western Balkans through the prism of preparation for phased accession to the EU, showing that modern regional platforms have different functional weight for negotiation clusters [18];
- regional cooperation within the framework of the "Open Balkan" initiative, emphasizing that political declarations do not always produce tangible results due to the different pace of integration of

the states of the region, as well as due to the lack of mutual trust and the dependence of regional formats on the intensity of EU involvement [2].

Ukrainian scientific achievements in the study of regional cooperation and European integration of the Western Balkan states, although less numerous, nevertheless contain both scientific articles on individual problems [14–17; 25] and collective analytical works, which mostly include a mandatory content component with a review of the experience of these states for Ukraine [4; 13]. In general, scientific studies of the integration processes of the Western Balkan states make it possible to study various regional initiatives and their ability to be practically implemented in terms of simplifying procedures, mutual recognition, opening markets, approximating standards, and preparing the infrastructure for integration. They fairly fully describe the political formats of regional cooperation and economic barriers to integration. However, the management component of regional cooperation of the Western Balkan states in the process of European integration remains less studied. In particular, scientific research is required on the issues of the functioning of regional integration platforms in the context of the compatibility of procedures, infrastructure, markets, energy, and digital systems; measurability of regional cooperation results; combination of political regional agreements with national interests, etc.

3. Problem Statement

The article aims to substantiate the management of regional cooperation of the Western Balkans as a mechanism of European integration preparation and to develop an analytical framework of regional compatibility suitable for adaptation in the Ukrainian policy of cross-border, transport, energy, digital and reconstruction coordination. The Ukrainian adaptation of this experience is related to the need not only to combine the integration practices of the EU member states in the negotiation process on accession to the European Union, but also to take into account the management experience of regional cooperation of the candidate countries for accession to the EU.

4. Methods and Materials

The methodological basis of the study combines systemic and institutional approaches, methods of logical analysis and content analysis, comparison and generalization, secondary statistical methods, etc. In particular, the systemic approach was used to consider regional cooperation as an interaction of political, market, transport, energy, digital and investment mechanisms. The institutional approach was used to analyze the role of regional integration platforms and coordination bodies. The comparative method made it possible to distinguish and determine the features of the management of regional integration platforms. Secondary statistical analysis was used to interpret statistical indicators of the dynamics of sustainable development of regional cooperation and the ranking positions of the economies of the Western Balkans. Content analysis of documents made it possible to obtain the necessary information about regional integration initiatives: scope, type of platform, institutions involved, management tools, connection with the acquis or the EU single market, measurable result and adaptation conclusion for Ukraine. Logical-analytical generalization was used to build a framework for regional compatibility.

The theoretical component of the source base of the study is represented by scientific works on regional cooperation of the Western Balkans, absorption capacity, intra-regional economic dynamics, as well as the place of the region in the political strategy of the European Union and the processes of European integration, etc. [2; 4; 12; 13; 14–17; 18; 19; 25; 26]. The empirical component is represented by analytical, reporting and other materials of the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee [7; 8; 9; 10]; international organizations and regional integration platforms: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Common Regional Market (CRM), Berlin Process, Transport Community, Energy Community, Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) [1; 3; 5; 6; 11; 20–24; 27–30].

5. Results and Discussion

The Common Regional Market, CRM (2020) is now recognized as the central framework for regional economic cooperation of the Western Balkans. The European Commission considers it the most ambitious regional integration initiative in the Western Balkans, which can ensure the integration of the region with the EU single market even before accession [8]. The purpose of the CRM is to prepare the economies of the region for gradual integration into the European Union single market.

The Berlin Process (2014) performs a political and coordination function. It supports a regular format of meetings within which the countries of the region, EU Member States and European institutions agree on cooperation priorities. In 2025, the central priorities of the Berlin Process remained economic growth, prosperity and the promotion of the Common Regional Market [20]. At the same time, the management role of the Berlin Process is to keep regional cooperation on the EU political agenda and create a framework for further sectoral decisions.

The Transport Community (2017) is a platform for sectoral regional governance. Its activities are aimed at achieving effective transport integration by implementing transport policies and projects in the Western Balkans. This includes not only the construction of infrastructure, but also the coordination of safety rules, digitalization, decarbonization, opening the railway market, maintenance and prioritization of projects [29].

The Energy Community (2006) performs governance functions in the energy sector. Its task is to bring the contracting parties closer to the energy acquis, ensure the development of markets, strengthen regulatory capacity, implement climate and energy commitments and integrate with EU energy markets [6]. Through this framework, the Western Balkans undergo practical training in energy integration before membership, while compliance with the rules is checked not by a one-time declaration, but by regular monitoring.

The Western Balkans Investment Framework, WBIF (2009) provides an investment and project framework for regional cooperation. In the WBIF annual report for 2024, this platform is presented as a mechanism for coordinating investments for the socio-economic development of the region [30]. Its managerial significance lies in the combination of political priorities, donor resources, infrastructure projects, technical preparation, financial closure and monitoring of implementation. Regional cooperation should be assessed by the ability to bring projects to implementation, and not only by signed agreements.

The Central European Free Trade Agreement, CEFTA (2006) and the Green Lanes mechanisms form the trade and customs dimension of regional interoperability. Their significance lies in creating a practice of exchanging customs data, prioritizing the movement of goods, reducing waiting times at borders and bringing regional trade closer to the logic of the single market. The European Commission links CEFTA with overcoming the fragmentation of the region, in particular by simplifying the movement of goods and expanding green lanes, which should reduce waiting times at borders [3; 8].

A comparison of regional integration platforms shows that each of them covers a different level of European integration preparation. In particular, the Berlin Process supports the political framework; CRM creates market and administrative rules; CEFTA supports trade integration and mechanisms for simplifying the movement of goods; Transport Community and Energy Community provide sectoral approximation; WBIF translates regional priorities into project financing. Taken together, these platforms form a multi-level circuit of regional governance, where political coordination, market rules, infrastructure compatibility, energy approximation, digital solutions, investment cycle and monitoring cannot be broken without losing practical effect.

Such a European integration policy gives positive results and contributes to the gradual advancement of the Western Balkan states along the negotiation trajectory towards EU accession. In particular, the Regional Cooperation Council initiated an annual large-scale public opinion and business sentiment survey, the Balkan Barometer (covering six Western Balkan economies and aimed at recording the public background of European integration and the level of support for EU membership), which in 2025 recorded an increase in support for membership in the European Union in the region to 64% [21]. This indicator is important as a marker of public legitimacy of the integration process, but it should not replace the assessment of procedural, infrastructural or regulatory compatibility. Recognizing the importance of all regional integration platforms in promoting European integration policies in the Western Balkans, it is appropriate to pay due attention to the Common Regional Market as the leading institution ensuring regional economic cooperation in the region. The first phase of the

CRM operation was regulated by the action plan for the period 2021-2024, approved at the Berlin Process Summit on November 10, 2020. It concerned digital coordination, in particular, a significant reduction in roaming costs between the Western Balkan countries and the EU; free movement of people, in particular, six countries in the region (WB6) signed and ratified agreements on professional qualifications of medical and higher education workers (in 2023, the number of doctors from the Western Balkans abroad was 13% of the total number of doctors in the region); free circulation of goods (green lanes were extended to all border crossing points for all goods, which reduced customs clearance time by 30% on average, and intra-regional trade in goods increased by almost 70% from 2020 to 2022); expansion of investment mechanisms (from 2020 to 2023, the inflow of foreign direct investment in the region increased by 62%), etc. [23].

Table 1. Regional integration platforms of the Western Balkans

Platform	Management type	Key tools	Measurable outcome/risk	Adaptation conclusion for Ukraine
Berlin Process	political coordination	- summits, - declarations, - roadmaps, - regional arrangements	Supports EU focus on the region, but requires linkage to implementation	Regular high-level format useful for coordinating reconstruction, security and integration
Common Regional Market	market and administrative integration	- CRM Action Plan, - mutual recognition, - mobility, - digital solutions	Reduces market fragmentation, but depends on administrative compatibility	Cross-border procedures should prepare businesses and citizens for single market rules
CEFTA / Green Lanes	trade and customs simplification	- trade agreements, - simplification of procedures, - exchange of customs data	Reduces barriers, but requires implementation of agreements by all parties	Ukraine's customs and border modernization should be built as a joint procedure with the EU
Transport Community	sectoral infrastructure management	- transport standards, - TEN-T, - policy monitoring, - traffic safety	Increases compatibility of transport policies and corridors, but requires joint decarbonization	Transport reconstruction should combine physical infrastructure with EU rules and standards
Energy Community	sectoral regulatory management	- energy acquis, - market rules, - decarbonisation, - monitoring	Brings energy markets closer to the EU, but requires regulatory independence	Energy integration should be assessed through market rules, networks and regulatory sustainability
WBIF	investment and project management	- blended finance, - grants, - loans, - guarantees, - technical preparation of projects	Translates political priorities into investment projects with monitoring, but requires transparency	Reconstruction requires transparent prioritization, preparation and control of project monitoring

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [1; 3; 6; 20; 22; 29; 30].

On October 14, 2024, at the next summit of the Berlin Process, the “Western Balkans Six Leaders’ Declaration on Common Regional Market 2025–2028” was signed, which approved the “Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025-2028” as a regionally managed framework based on EU rules and standards [22]. This means the transition of regional cooperation from a political declaration of good neighborliness to a check on administrative, regulatory and sectoral compatibility. The Action Plan 2025-2028 structures the CRM through areas related to human capital, mobility, business environment, investment, competitiveness, digital transformation, green and energy transitions.

Considering regional compatibility through the outlined directions, we will define their: 1) management functions, 2) effectiveness and 3) connection with EU integration [22]:

– Human capital and mobility:

1) coordination of policies in the field of education, vocational training and the labor market, as well as mutual recognition of qualifications, documents and procedures for access to professions;

2) better matching of skills to the needs of the regional market, reducing administrative barriers to employment and training;

3) preparation for labor mobility and European standards of qualifications, approximation to the principles of freedom of movement of persons and services.

This direction in the regional dimension is one of the most sensitive directions of CRM. For real mobility, the presence of appropriate skills or political consent is not enough, but compatible registers, procedures for checking qualifications, language and professional standards, social protection mechanisms and access to information are necessary. In this area, regional cooperation is directly related to the logic of the free movement of persons and services in the EU.

– Business environment:

- 1) harmonizing procedures for businesses, simplifying market access and lowering barriers;
- 2) reducing business costs for cross-border operations;
- 3) preparing companies to operate under the rules of the single market.

This direction in the regional dimension depends on whether a company can operate outside the national market without high administrative costs. If permits, customs procedures, certification or digital registers are incompatible, regional trade remains limited even if agreements are formally in place. Therefore, CRM management should be assessed through the practical costs of business, the speed of procedures, the availability of electronic services and the predictability of rules.

– Investment and competitiveness:

- 1) coordinating investment policies, supporting value chains and industrial cooperation;
- 2) attracting private capital and increasing productivity;
- 3) compatibility with EU approaches to competitiveness, state aid and sustainable investment.

This direction in the regional dimension depends not only on investment support through common financial platforms, but also on the need for regional cooperation in project infrastructure. Political declarations on the construction of roads, energy networks, social infrastructure and digital systems require management decisions with a mandatory project selection procedure, technical preparation, financial closure and implementation monitoring.

– Digital transformation:

- 1) compatibility of digital services, registries, trust services and electronic identification;
- 2) faster data exchange and reduction of paper procedures;
- 3) preparation for digital interaction with the single market and eIDAS (electronic IDentification, Authentication and trust Services) requirements.

This direction in the regional dimension ensures the technical possibility of mutual recognition, data exchange, document verification, monitoring of procedures and transparent reporting. Without digital interoperability, the regional market remains dependent on paper-based procedures and manual approvals, which increases time and administrative costs, as well as corruption risks.

– Green and energy transition:

- 1) approximation of energy rules, climate objectives and sustainable financing;
- 2) increasing energy security and reducing regulatory fragmentation;
- 3) preparing for the European Energy and Climate Space.

This direction is of strategic nature in the regional dimension. For the Western Balkans, energy integration is linked to market rules, security of supply, decarbonization, regulatory independence and investment. It promotes formal approximation to the EU *acquis* and ensures continuous monitoring of implementation [22].

The managerial value of CRM lies in testing regulatory and administrative practices within regional cooperation with a view to European integration. This is because the implementation of many processes (for example, mutual recognition of qualifications, simplification of access of economic entities to markets, digital data exchange, preparation of cross-border infrastructure projects) does not require full membership in the EU. However, it is not possible without the institutional capacity of the states of the region to ensure mutual trust in official documents, maintain compatibility of administrative registers, implement agreed decisions and guarantee predictability of administrative procedures for citizens and businesses.

Analysis of the structural assessment of regional cooperation in the process of European integration of the Western Balkans states based on OECD data (Economic Convergence Scoreboard for the Western Balkans 2025) demonstrates the unevenness of European integration processes in the region and identifies countries and areas that have either the largest gap with the EU or a high level of compatibility. In particular, Montenegro has the strongest positions in human capital, infrastructure and business environment, but is not an absolute leader in digital transformation and green transition; Serbia demonstrates strong positions in digital transformation and infrastructure, but has weaker results in greening the economy; Albania is distinguished by a strong green profile, but weaker positions

in infrastructure, business environment and digitalization; Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest progress indicators and the lowest overall level of convergence [25]. Accordingly, the asymmetry of the capabilities of the economies of the Western Balkans regarding regional cooperation in the process of European integration requires a differentiated approach to determining management trajectories and adjusting regional integration platforms to specific areas.

Such heterogeneity in cooperation between the Western Balkans countries may be caused by factors that limit integration processes in the region. In particular, these are different management functions and administrative capacities of regional platforms: the effectiveness of regional cooperation and European integration processes depends both on the ability to apply a differentiated approach to determining management trajectories and tuning to specific areas, and on the ability to practically implement declarations, action plans and agreements through joint procedures, digital tools, infrastructure solutions, regulatory changes and measurable results. The implementation of regional management decisions can also be affected (slow down processes or even stop altogether) by political disputes and low executive discipline: bilateral contradictions, different paces of negotiations with the EU, internal political crises, lack of trust between administrations, etc. Experience for Ukraine. The applied value of the experience of the Western Balkans for Ukraine lies, first of all, in the combination of cross-border cooperation with European integration preparation. In modern conditions, the closest Ukrainian analogue to the Balkan logic of European integration is the formation of functional spaces of compatibility with the EU. These include transport corridors, energy markets, digital services, customs procedures, cross-border cooperation of communities, joint reconstruction projects, and labor markets in border regions.

Today, Ukraine is already integrating into the EU energy space, developing solidarity transport corridors, needs infrastructure reconstruction and has a significant array of border communities for which European integration manifests itself through specific border crossing procedures, logistics, labor markets, security and access to services. In modern conditions, the experience of regional cooperation of the Western Balkan countries through investment support through the WBIF is particularly relevant for Ukraine. These practices can be useful when developing management decisions regarding the design of post-war infrastructure reconstruction, because the quality of the project cycle and the creation of a competitive environment determine the trust of donors and the connection between the resource and the result. The experience of sectoral regional management through the Transport Community is valuable for Ukraine in the context of the development of transport corridors, border logistics and inclusion in the TEN-T (Trans-European Transport Network). The CEFTA experience is relevant in the context of modernizing border procedures between Ukraine and the EU, developing solidarity corridors, and moving customs integration from the level of political agreements to the level of a common operational procedure. At the same time, it is worth considering the inadmissibility of the managerial error of treating regional cooperation as peripheral to accession negotiations. The Western Balkan experience shows that regional platforms allow us to test the readiness of states for EU rules and standards in practical areas, where the result is tangible earlier than formal membership. It should also be understood that adapting the Balkan experience does not mean creating a direct analogue of the Common Regional Market for Ukraine. Ukraine has a different geography, scale of economy, and security context. The managerial logic itself is relevant: regional and cross-border formats should support the negotiation process through specific procedures of mutual recognition, infrastructure compatibility, energy approximation, digital services, and joint project financing.

6. Conclusions

Regional cooperation of the Western Balkans countries in the process of European integration serves as an intermediate administrative approximation to the European Union. It does not replace membership and does not eliminate the need for internal reforms, but creates a practical environment in which states test their ability to harmonize rules, recognize each other's documents, coordinate transport and energy policies, facilitate market access and manage joint investment projects.

The regional integration platforms Berlin Process, Common Regional Market, CEFTA, Transport Community, Energy Community and WBIF perform different but complementary functions. The Berlin Process supports political coordination; CRM and CEFTA reduce market and administrative fragmentation, Transport Community and Energy Community form sectoral compatibility with the EU, WBIF translates political priorities into investment projects. The most comprehensive framework for

such cooperation is the Common Regional Market 2025-2028, the key areas of which are management mechanisms for preparing for the EU single market, such as human capital, mobility, business environment, investment, competitiveness, digital transformation, green and energy transition. Together, these platforms form a framework for regional compatibility, where the management result depends on a combination of procedures, standards, digital channels, infrastructure, financing and monitoring.

Regional cooperation of the Western Balkan states in the process of European integration is not homogeneous and demonstrates an asymmetry of capabilities: individual economies have different (stronger positions or less effective manifestations) in human capital, mobility, business environment, investment, competitiveness, digital transformation, green transition and, in general, in convergence. This requires further policy regulation and a differentiated approach to defining the management trajectories of regional integration platforms with mandatory coordination by the relevant EU institutions.

For Ukraine, the experience of the Western Balkans is important as an example of transforming regional cooperation into a tool of European integration capacity. The most relevant lessons are on transport and energy compatibility, transparent prioritization of reconstruction projects, digital interaction, cross-border mobility and combining political coordination with measurable results. Ukrainian adaptation should be based on the creation of functional spaces of compatibility with the European Union, where each format of cooperation is checked by procedure, responsible body, source of funding, measurable result and contribution to the negotiation process. This reduces the risks of duplication of initiatives, separates real management results from declarations and includes cross-border cooperation in the process of preparing for EU accession.

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