

Trends in the development of the regional economy of the European Union: institutional opportunities for Ukraine

S. A. Davymuka

Objective. To identify current trends in the development of the European Union's regional economy, to systematize the institutional and practical foundations for the implementation of EU regional policy, and to substantiate the possibilities for adapting European approaches to strategic planning for regional and local development in Ukraine in the context of European integration, reconstruction and structural transformation of the economy.

Methodology. The methodological basis of the study comprises a place-based approach to regional development, the tenets of institutional theory and the principles of strategic planning. Systematic, comparative and retrospective analysis were applied, along with a critical analysis of EU and Ukrainian regulatory and policy documents, the synthesis method for generalizing trends in regional development, and graphical methods for visualizing its parameters. Particular attention is paid to the institutional mechanisms of cohesion policy, strategic investment, innovation policy, the development of rural areas and the transformation of approaches to regional support in 2025–2026.

Results. It has been established that the EU's regional economy is developing against a backdrop of intensifying geopolitical, technological, demographic and structural challenges, which is driving the transformation of cohesion policy instruments and mechanisms for supporting territories. The key trends in the EU's regional development have been systematized: the orientation of strategic planning towards European values and territorial cohesion; the use of strategic investments to stimulate economic growth and improve quality of life; the adaptation of budgetary and program mechanisms to external and internal changes; the strengthening of the role of innovation, digitalization and the green transition; and the development of regional programs and interregional integration. It has been established that the effectiveness of the European model is ensured by multi-annual programming, the alignment of strategic priorities, a clear division of powers, uniform standards, transparency and the ability to adjust programs in line with the results achieved.

Originality. The paper elaborates on the transformation of the EU's regional economy under the influence of the interplay between geopolitical, innovation- and technology-related, green and digital factors. Current trends in the EU's regional development have been systematized, and the institutional possibilities for their adaptation in Ukraine have been identified, taking into account the objectives of European integration, post-war reconstruction, decentralization and the need to strengthen the capacity of regional and local institutions.

Keywords: regional economy, European Union, trends, strategic planning, state regional policy.

Introduction

The Association Agreement with the European Union, signed by Ukraine in 2014, among other things, gave impetus to a large-scale decentralization reform. The process of implementing the approved concept for reforming local self-government and the territorial organization of power in Ukraine, which was actively underway—including through the latest administrative and institutional mechanisms—created conditions under which endogenous growth became evident thanks to the involvement of a territory's human, natural resources and economic potential in the socio-economic development of their territories, which enabled local communities to withstand the early stages of the war and to demonstrate resilience and carry out reconstruction even under the current difficult conditions.

In times of war, when the Ukrainian economy is dependent on the state of the global economy as a whole and on its European partners in particular, the processes of decentralization and European integration – developing in parallel – have reached a new stage of development, taking into account the existing internal and external challenges. The receipt of key requirements from the European Commission regarding the development and implementation of a new format for regional policy

has become a key driver of Ukraine's regional economic development and brings the relevant issues to the fore for both partners, as European aid to Ukraine, export opportunities, the conditions for our country's reconstruction and recovery, and overall security all depend on the state of the EU's regional economy.

Literature Review

A retrospective review shows that the issue of regional economic development has been the most consistently and systematically studied in academic theory and practice by both foreign—particularly European—and Ukrainian scholars and experts. Among the most recent works, the following deserve attention: the results of an analysis of the experience of shaping and the mechanisms for implementing the EU's cohesion policy (Shults, 2025); an examination of the characteristics of the European Union's regional policy as a key mechanism for ensuring Ukraine's territorial convergence during the post-war reconstruction process (Marukhlenko, 2025); an analysis of the EU's experience in using regional policy instruments to reduce inter-regional disparities (Skrebkova, 2026), and others. However, global events are changing so rapidly that there is a need for the constant systematization of analytical information and the identification of trends in the development of the EU's regional economy, both for the drafting of integration documents and for the adjustment of specific areas of regional policy relating to economic development, taking into account current challenges and forecasts regarding Ukraine's recovery.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this article is to examine the institutional and practical foundations of the EU's regional economy, to identify characteristic trends and opportunities for adapting European approaches to strategic planning for regional and local development, and to formulate practical guidelines for updating the mechanisms for implementing Ukraine's state regional policy on the path to European integration.

Methodology

The methodological basis of the study comprises a place-based approach to regional development, the tenets of institutional theory and the principles of strategic planning. Systematic, comparative and retrospective analysis were applied, along with a critical analysis of EU and Ukrainian regulatory and policy documents, the synthesis method for generalizing trends in regional development, and graphical methods for visualizing its parameters. Particular attention is paid to the institutional mechanisms of cohesion policy, strategic investment, innovation policy, the development of rural areas and the transformation of approaches to regional support in 2025–2026.

Results and Discussion

In systematizing our understanding of the characteristics of regional development in the EU and assessing the chronology of the implementation of the new regional policy—which has contributed to the dynamic emergence of a Europe of regions—we note the following distinctive trends as at 2022: (1) the fundamental principle remains unchanged – adherence to established European values in the strategic planning of regional economic development; (2) the strategic objectives of the EU's regional and urban policy are achieved through the implementation of instruments designed to stimulate economic growth and improve quality of life by means of strategic investment; (3) there are periodic changes in approaches

to the formulation of the European budget, driven by the dynamic nature of external and internal processes. In particular, the draft proposed by the European Commission (EC) regarding the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021–2027 proportionally reduces funding for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy, and is aimed at funding priorities such as innovation, security and migration; (4) innovative determinants of the EU's regional development remain at the center of attention across all spheres of political, economic and social life and are regarded as a key factor in enhancing the quality of the European socio-economic system, the foundation for the modernization of the industrial sector and the formation of an inclusive model of society; (5) regional strategic programs have become one of the key instruments of public policy, reflecting a focus on internal development and the creation of a business environment based on regional potential and opportunities, and aimed at supporting innovative initiatives through a strategic approach and the principles of sustainable development; (6) increased external activity by the regions – regions are increasingly acting as independent participants in international relations and, as such, are becoming initiators of integration processes.

In general, it is worth noting the overall trend of that period: independent regional development was initiated on the basis of modern information technologies, the concept of the 'knowledge' economy, 'smart' policies and a new approach to assessing the use of the region's own resource base, as well as new organizational structures based on the development of integration processes, taking into account current global trends. Consequently, the socio-economic development of a territory is viewed as a continuous process of change in the material basis of the regional economy, as well as in the entire set of diverse relationships between its actors, guided by the principles of public administration. Consequently, the EU's new regional policy across all Member States is aimed at creating conditions that enable regions to fully realize their existing potential, gain competitive advantages, and increase their contribution to the development of the national economy – lessons that can be regarded as important for Ukraine (Kuybida, 2022). Research shows that the trends mentioned above continue to intensify, taking into account the introduction of the latest technologies for socio-economic development and the relevant influencing factors, the key ones being the development of the global economy, geopolitical changes and the growing role of the technological imperative in all spheres of political and socio-economic life.

In particular, *the main factors shaping the development of the global economy in 2026* (Hryhorenko, 2026a) are: geopolitical instability, creating a high level of uncertainty, primarily due to the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East; trade turbulence and protectionism – the US tariff war and other trade conflicts are creating structural barriers to global trade; the formation of regional trade blocs is intensifying, limiting the potential for global growth; the pressure of public debt – by 2029, global public debt could reach 100 per cent of global GDP, which for many countries means the need to fill budget gaps amid rising costs for debt servicing, defense, pensions and healthcare; the revaluation of technological assets. Under these conditions, there is intensifying economic competition between global centers of power, dynamic technological change and challenges to democracy, forcing the European Union to review its strategic priorities and define its new policy cycle (European Parliament, 2026). It is important to note that the European Commission has identified seven key policy areas that form the basis of its work during its new term, and a total of around 400 policy initiatives have been announced, half of which are aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of the European economy and its regions (including both individual countries and territories).

At the same time, as an analysis of strategic documents shows, *cohesion policy* remains one of the European Union's key policies, and its main objective is to reduce socio-economic disparities between regions (both within individual countries and across the EU as a whole), which can ensure more equal access to resources, narrow development gaps and create conditions for more active innovation and technological activity at local level. Indeed, the provisional overall budget for the period 2021–2027 exceeds one trillion euros, and approximately one-third of these funds is earmarked specifically for cohesion policy. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the funding is provided in the form of grants rather than loans, which is a major advantage for recipient countries (Kulchytskyi, 2026). However, there is a trend here too: *established cohesion policy* envisages a gradual shift from levelling out inter-regional disparities through the redistribution of regional budget funds to stimulating the effective use of territories' endogenous potential, taking into account their specific characteristics, that is, it is presented in the form of a place-based approach (European Commission, 2023), and among the main objectives of this policy are the promotion of job creation, business competitiveness and security. One thing remains constant: European policy is based on the premise that social welfare must be achieved through economic growth. Cohesion policy is implemented through a model of shared management between the European Commission and the national/regional authorities of the Member States, which requires Member States and their regions to strengthen their administrative capacity in order to manage European funds effectively. Analysis shows that, within the European Union, *the policy of supporting centers of economic growth is regarded as one of the key instruments of cohesion policy*, aimed at overcoming spatial imbalances, reducing barriers to development and removing structural and institutional constraints in accordance with EU rules and regulations. It is important to note that one of the key elements of EU regional policy is a focus on functional types of territories, where attention is centred not on the administrative boundaries of local authorities, but on the actual economic, social and spatial links between communities, which fosters cooperation and partnership between towns, villages and rural communities that share a common interest in implementing development projects.

Overall, trends in the development of the European Union's regional economy in 2025–2026 are shaped by geopolitical challenges, the implementation of the green transition and digitalization strategies, whilst geopolitical security is focused on reindustrialization and the relocation of critical production facilities closer to Europe (nearshoring); measures relating to military security and defense are becoming increasingly prominent. It should be noted that the European Union is nearing the end of the five-year cycle of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) (European Parliament, 2025), introduced in response to the pandemic and its challenges. These programs have become the instrument of the largest financial support in the EU's history, aimed at modernizing economies, the green transition and digitalization. However, despite the scale of the initiative, the actual pace of its implementation has been uneven. Some EU countries are already adjusting their plans: reducing the loan component or channeling resources towards more realistic projects. According to data available at the end of 2025, published by the European Parliament as part of its quarterly report on the EU's economic outlook (Eurostat, 2026), Europe is gradually moving towards growth, but is doing so against a backdrop of high uncertainty and ongoing geopolitical turbulence. Thus, among the key findings of the EU economic forecast are: (1) Europe is regaining momentum – all EU countries are on track for growth in 2025 for the first time in several years; aggregate EU GDP growth is expected to reach 3 per cent in 2026–2027, whilst that of the eurozone is forecast at 2.7 per cent; the highest growth rates are forecast for Malta, Poland and Croatia, whilst the slowest are expected in France, Italy and Finland; the

key driver of growth is domestic demand, which is offsetting weaker external trade figures; real GDP growth is heading towards 1.4 per cent in 2025–2026; (2) deficits are falling slowly: the EU budget deficit in 2025 stands at 3.1–3.3 per cent of GDP, with public debt at up to 81.7 per cent of GDP; nine EU countries are already subject to the excessive deficit procedure; the rise in defense spending has been one of the reasons for temporary deviations from fiscal rules; (3) the defense-industrial complex is being developed and strengthened: regional policy is aimed at bolstering the EU's defense capabilities in response to geopolitical challenges; (4) Adaptation to inflationary trends: despite the projected rise in inflation in 2025, price pressures are expected to ease in 2026 as supply-side pressures diminish. Regarding inflation: the EU is returning to its target level – in October 2025, it stood at 2.5 per cent, and in the eurozone at 2.1 per cent. The main inflationary pressures stem from services and food. The ECB is keeping interest rates unchanged. Overall, in 2025, the [European Union's](#) economy showed signs of recovery, recording real GDP growth of 1.6 per cent, and 1.5 per cent in the eurozone.

During this period, regional policy has been aimed at addressing the socio-economic disparities that have widened as a result of previous crises; the structural funds are undergoing transformation, in particular the evolution of instruments (the ERDF, the Cohesion Fund) with an emphasis on the effectiveness of shared management; strategies for 'green' and digital transformation are being implemented: regions must adapt their economies to environmental standards and digitalization, which is a requirement for receiving grant funding; Just transition for coal-mining regions: the focus is on supporting areas transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy; The process of establishing multi-level governance is continuing, in particular with the role of regional and local authorities in shaping development strategies being strengthened. Among the priorities of regional policy for 2025–2026 are: (1) local energy systems: strengthening the role of local authorities in the transition to clean energy, supporting energy communities and modernizing networks; (2) the circular economy (Circular Economy Act): the Circular Economy Act (2026) is expected to be adopted, aimed at increasing the use of recycled materials and developing local recycling centers (Meanwhile, the German federal government, in particular, has adopted a comprehensive action program to implement the National Circular Economy Strategy, which sets out 12 priority measures by the end of 2027, aimed at strengthening industry, reducing dependence on primary raw materials and cutting CO₂ emissions by 80 million tonnes by 2030. It is expected that, as a result of the reform, value added in this sector will rise from the current 60 billion to 125 billion by 2045 (Hryhorenko, 2026b)); (3) energy efficiency in buildings: mandatory renovation of at least 3 per cent of the total floor area of buildings owned by the public sector, extending to all levels of local government; (4) sustainable transport: funding for zero-emission public transport, development of infrastructure for electric vehicles, etc. *Key programs and grants* include the LIFE Program (2025–2027), which allocates 2.3 billion to support innovative environmental projects relating to clean energy, the circular economy and climate resilience; Horizon Europe (2025) offered over 636 million for research in the fields of climate, energy and mobility, and was approved by the European Commission (on 11 December 2025); The Horizon Europe Work Program for 2026–2027 allocates 14 billion for the final two years of the current financial cycle; the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change provides dedicated support to regions for the development of local climate adaptation plans, helping European regions, cities and communities to prepare for climate risks: as of 2026, over 330 regions had signed the Mission's Charter, and the program is funding over 60 large-scale projects to counter natural disasters (European Commission, 2026c). One of the long-standing trends in the EU is the widespread practice of *macro-regional strategies*

and programs, which aim to jointly identify and resolve problems in countries that belong wholly or partly to a single region, with a view to making more effective use of their shared potential (for example, in the fields of the environment, shipping, global competition, etc.). Thus, as of 2025, four transnational strategies for the development of macro-regions were in force: the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (since 2009); the EU strategy for the Danube region (since 2010); the EU strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region (since 2014); and the EU strategy for the Alpine region (since 2015) (European Commission, 2017).

We would now like to draw your attention to the following trends that have been identified:

1. Rural areas account for over 80 per cent of the EU's territory; they possess significant natural and cultural resources and play a key role in food security and environmental conservation. Currently, the EU's regional policy on *rural development* is characterized by a high degree of solidarity and cohesion, as these regions vary greatly in terms of population size and level of economic development, and therefore require different approaches. As it undergoes significant structural changes and reforms the directions and opportunities for rural development, this policy focuses primarily on digital solutions, innovation and empowering local communities, with the aim of maximizing the potential of every rural community. The EU's strategic vision for the development of rural areas up to 2040 (LTVRA – Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas) (European Leader Association for Rural Development, 2021) emphasizes that rural areas form the foundation of European society, and that investment in their development is a priority for overcoming today's challenges and crises. Thus, for the period 2021–2027, the main financial instrument supporting the development of rural areas is the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which operates within the framework of the *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)*. The legal basis is Regulation (EU) 2021/2115, which sets out the objectives, types of interventions and the planning framework, whilst the main priorities for rural development are enhancing the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, and supporting balanced territorial development and the viability of rural communities. To summarize, it should be noted that the European Union's experience demonstrates a shift from a sectoral, agriculture-oriented approach to *a comprehensive, territorially oriented model of rural development*, in which rural areas are viewed as multifunctional spaces, whose development is based on economic diversification, support for local entrepreneurship, the development of human capital and improved access to essential services. Local development tools play a key role in this, in particular LEADER/CLLD (LEADER (Links in Action for the Development of the Rural Economy) and CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) — European instruments that enable residents to develop their regions independently and implement program and project mechanisms that ensure the active participation of communities in shaping this policy.

In this context, it is important to note that in June 2025, the European Commission published a *draft Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034* (European Commission, 2025a), which proposes the creation of a single ‘ ‘mega-fund’ officially titled the ‘European Fund for Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural Development, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Prosperity and Security’ (European Fund for Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural Development, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Prosperity and Security), which is intended to combine traditional cohesion policy instruments with funds supporting agriculture, rural development and the maritime sector, and will bring greater flexibility to regional policy (European Commission, 2025b). Importantly, the main emphasis is shifting towards results-based payments

linked to specific milestones and the implementation of reforms, whilst particular attention is being paid to expanding rural communities' access to pre-financing and advance payments, which are critically important for small-scale projects initiated at local level. In particular, this will enable countries bordering Russia and Belarus – Finland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – to use part of their EU regional development funds to provide guarantees to the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Nordic Investment Bank and national investment promotion banks for investment in their eastern regions. The ultimate aim is to provide low-cost loans to businesses in regions bordering Ukraine, which would otherwise face difficulties in accessing finance. It is also important to note that the priority of the plan, officially titled the 'Communication on Eastern Border Regions' (Kostina, 2026), is to boost economic activity in border areas that have suffered an economic downturn as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (due to the lack of tourism, the dangers associated with living near the Ukrainian border, and so on).

2. Regarding the topic of smart specializations, which is popular in Ukraine – *the Smart Specialization Strategies (S3)*, which formed one of the cornerstones of cohesion policy for the periods 2014–2020 and 2021–2027, and the existence of which was a mandatory condition for receiving funding for innovative development. It is worth recalling that the S3 Platform: Smart Specialization is a dedicated platform for countries and regions to implement local approaches to identifying strategic sectors for smart specialization. According to the new proposal, S3 will lose its mandatory status, and this matter will be left to the discretion of Member States. At the same time, the mechanisms for community-led local development and the institutional framework of the EU Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 create the conditions for endogenous ('from within') development, support the LEADER approach and foster the emergence of new local strategies, in particular through specialized start-up tools. For example, the development of the *Smart Villages* concept demonstrates how a combination of digital solutions, social innovations and partnership-based collaboration can shape technologically equipped and socially active rural areas, enhancing their competitiveness and sustainability in the long term. *Smart Villages* form part of the broader 'Smart and Competitive Rural Areas' initiative, ('Smart and Competitive Rural Areas' was one of the key themes of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) in 2014–2020), which offers a modern perspective on the development of rural communities through the use of digital technologies, social innovations and inclusion policies. The focus is on creating a modern technological environment (a technological ecosystem) capable of supporting new forms of collaboration, local entrepreneurship and partnerships between citizens and the authorities. It is precisely this model that combines the experience of the LEADER program (launched in 1991, the LEADER program has become one of the most successful models of locally-led development in the EU, and its 'bottom-up' principle allows communities to identify their own needs and initiate projects) with the digital opportunities offered by Smart Village.

The European Union also actively supports the development of *smart cities* (a place that integrates physical, digital and human systems into traditional networks and services in order to make better use of energy and other resources for the benefit of citizens and businesses) as part of its digital and urban policy, aimed at improving quality of life, promoting sustainable development and enhancing the efficiency of urban services. Indeed, at the level of EU regulation, there are several important initiatives that directly or indirectly influence smart cities (European Commission, 2026b; European Commission, 2024a). It should be noted that a number of European cities (Zurich, Oslo, Geneva) top [the global Smart City Index 2025](#), whilst

many countries in Central and Eastern Europe rank lower, partly due to problems with outdated infrastructure, economic inequality and demographic changes.

3. One effective way of strengthening communities' capacity is to *develop research and innovation based on the principles of a sustainable and equitable approach*. Such work relies on the involvement of universities, digitalization and inclusive solutions. The proposed analytical tools and process modelling help to better understand spatial processes, and to identify links between economic, social and environmental factors, which ultimately enables the adoption of strategic management decisions that are not only scientifically sound but also open up new opportunities for the local economy — particularly in digital services, creative industries and renewable energy. The Horizon Europe Program (2025–2026), which we have already mentioned, is the European Union's main instrument for funding research and innovation, where research into regional development is integrated, through the concept of 'synergy', with EU cohesion policy and the development of local ecosystems. The combination of these instruments enables countries and regions to make more effective use of EU funds, to involve less developed regions in European research networks, and to avoid duplication of funding where different EU programs support similar activities separately but do not complement one another (Portal Decentralization, 2026). In particular, the 2026–2027 Work Program expands existing instruments, such as Teaming and the Research Management Facility, which are aimed at fostering cooperation, strengthening institutional capacity and supporting sustainable development in less developed regions. This is expected to facilitate the scaling up of research and innovation outcomes and help to reduce regional disparities within the European Research Area.

4. A separate trend is *the Green Deal for EU regions*. It is worth recalling that the European Green Deal is an EU strategy aimed at transforming Europe into a climate-neutral continent by 2050 through economic modernization, clean energy, sustainable industrial development, building renovation and the protection of biodiversity. The regional aspect involves empowering local communities and supporting industrial regions in their transition to green technologies. Among the key priorities of the EU's regional green agenda for 2025–2026 is a just transition: the main focus is on the Just Transition Fund (JTF), which supports regions most dependent on fossil fuels (coal-mining regions). In particular, around 75 per cent of JTF funding is to be allocated by the end of 2026, which will encourage the rapid implementation of projects at regional level. In this regard, the European Parliament has called for the creation of special economic zones within the JTF to support jobs, particularly for young people and vulnerable groups.

5. *The digitalisation of the regions of the European Union (EU)* is a key priority for ensuring competitiveness, effective public administration and sustainable development, and encompasses the implementation of digital technologies in the fields of business, education, healthcare and everyday life, based on four key aspects: digital skills, secure infrastructure, the digital transformation of business, and the digitalization of public services. The institutional foundation for the EU's digitalization is provided by strategic framework documents – the 'Digital Europe Program' and the 'Europe's Digital Decade 2030' policy. Research shows that, as of 2025–2026, the digital divide between regions of the European Union remains a significant challenge, despite the active implementation of digital transformation programs. The main focus is therefore on bridging the gap between high-tech urban centers and rural/remote areas, as well as between the countries of Northern/Western and Southern/Eastern Europe. Key digitalization tools for 2025–2026 include *the 'Digital Europe' Program (2025–2027)* – over 3.2 billion has been allocated to stimulate digital growth by investing in AI, cyber security and semiconductors, with the key aim of reducing the technological divide between regions; and the

development of 5G infrastructure: the plan is to provide 5G coverage across all cities and major transport routes. However, a significant proportion of areas in both the EU and Ukraine still face the problem of the digital divide, which manifests itself in unequal access to digital technologies, a lack of necessary infrastructure and an insufficient level of digital skills among the population. Despite large-scale EU investment in regional digitalization programs, such as ‘Digital Europe’ and ‘Horizon Europe’, as well as national initiatives by individual Member States, the problem of uneven digital development across territories remains a pressing issue, particularly for peripheral and rural regions, which are lagging behind in the implementation of digital solutions and in reaping the benefits of the digital economy

Against the backdrop of these challenges, the EU’s experience in implementing a comprehensive approach to the digital transformation of regions – based on the principles of subsidiarity, multi-level governance and territorial cohesion – is worthy of attention. For instance, the ‘EU Digital Decade 2030’ program aims to achieve EU digital sovereignty by developing the digital capabilities of regions and bridging the digital divide between territories (European Commission, 2021). We agree with the authors’ view that the critical factors for the success of regional digitalization strategies should be a balance of investment in infrastructure, human capital and digital services; diversification of funding sources with a predominance of national and regional resources; and a high level of institutional capacity at all levels of governance (Simkiv, 2025). Examples of successful cases: (1) Estonia (X-Road and e-Residency) – a decentralized data exchange system between registers, known as X-Road, has been established; and thanks to e-Residency, foreigners can remotely set up and manage European companies without being physically present in the country; (2) Wi-Fi4EU (Pan-European free internet) – an EU initiative under which 120 million has been allocated to provide free public Wi-Fi in parks, squares and administrative buildings across more than 8,000 local authorities; (3) the use of the CITYOPT tool in Vienna (Austria) to optimize urban energy systems, helping the city to achieve significant reductions in CO₂ emissions and in heating and other costs.

In the European Union, the assessment of digital transformation at regional and local authority level in 2025–2026 is based on the integrated indicators of the ‘Digital Decade 2030’ program, which we have already mentioned. The main monitoring tool remains the *Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*, which has been included in the annual ‘State of the Digital Decade’ report since 2023. Thus, the ‘State of the Digital Decade 2025’ report (European Commission, 2025c) assesses four key components: digital skills, infrastructure, the digitalization of business, and public services. The EU average score is 43 points (out of 100). The pan-European ranking highlights a gap between Member States: the leaders (>55 points) are Ireland, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden; the laggards (<35 points) are Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Greece and Latvia. The overall picture is as follows: infrastructure – steady progress is being made in basic (5G) coverage and fibre-optic networks, but the roll-out of fully-fledged standalone (5G) networks and edge computing is lagging behind schedule; skills: the EU’s target for 2030 is for 80 per cent of the adult population to have basic digital skills, but the forecast for 2025–2026 indicates a slower rate of growth (around 55.6 per cent in 2025); public services (e-Government): the proportion of citizens and businesses using electronic public services is rising, but challenges remain regarding security and digital identity (European Commission, 2024a). With regard to the digital development of local communities, no ranking assessment is carried out in the EU (some of the key indicators relate to the assessment of innovative development). As for Ukraine: in 2025, the average level of digital development of

communities in Ukraine rose from 30 to 44.9 out of 100. The leading regions were Lviv (57 points), Ternopil (55 points) and Rivne (52 points). Among the frontline regions, the highest scores were recorded in Dnipropetrovsk (57 points), Kharkiv (49 points) and Chernihiv (47 points) (Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, 2026). It is important to note that Ukraine has entered the top five countries in the world in terms of the development of digital public services according to the Online Services Index — an international study of the E-Government Development Index (United Nations, 2024) (developed by the UN and assessing 193 countries). It is important to note that in recent years Ukraine has made a significant breakthrough, climbing 97 places from 102nd position in 2018. Ukraine also ranks *first in terms of citizen engagement in government processes via online services*, and Ukraine's digital experience is attracting the attention of EU countries seeking to integrate similar services.

The analysis shows that the development of digital public services in the EU is being held back by four main challenges: a lack of basic digital skills among 44.4 per cent of citizens, a low level of cross-border eID integration, a shortage of IT specialists, and a critical dependence on US cloud technologies, which jeopardizes the bloc's technological sovereignty. Indeed, almost half the population faces barriers when using e-government services, and the gap is particularly pronounced in the field of e-health amongst older people and residents of remote regions; a significant proportion of government portals do not meet high cybersecurity standards or accessibility requirements (WCAG); The European Union spends billions of euros a year on cloud services and software from the US, which hampers the development of its own solutions and sparks debates about the protection of citizens' data (European Union, 2026).

6. *Innovative community development* is a key driver of EU policy implementation for the period 2025–2026, focusing on strengthening regional resilience through the 'green' and digital transitions, as well as bridging the innovation gap between different territories (European Commission, 2026a). According to the Second Strategic Plan for the 'Horizon Europe' program (2025–2027) (European Commission, 2024b), the main priorities for communities are: accelerating decarbonization, reducing dependence on fossil fuels and developing a circular economy at the local level; building digital sovereignty; introducing artificial intelligence into governance and strengthening cybersecurity; creating inclusive and democratic ecosystems capable of addressing global challenges such as an ageing population and climate change. *Institutional innovations and tools* for implementing these processes include: (1) *Regional Innovation Valleys*: an initiative aimed at bringing together less developed regions with leading centers to jointly tackle energy, food and healthcare challenges. Six new major projects in this area are scheduled to be launched in 2026. (2) *The European Innovation Act*: a legislative initiative expected in the first quarter of 2026, designed to simplify the financing of innovation and remove barriers to bringing technologies to market. (3) *Blue Carpet Initiative (2025–2026)*: a program to attract and retain highly skilled talent within the EU's regional ecosystems. (3) *European Business Wallet*: the introduction of a single digital identity to simplify interactions between entrepreneurs and local authorities (European Commission, 2025d).

Further details on Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs): these aim to strengthen the leading role of EU regions in shaping a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable innovation landscape, and bring together less innovative regions with more innovative ones to tackle the most pressing challenges facing the EU, such as reducing dependence on fossil fuels, enhancing global food security, mastering the digital transformation (including cybersecurity and artificial intelligence), improving healthcare and achieving a circular economy. In 2025, this was an EU

strategic initiative (as part of the [New European Innovation Agenda](#)) aimed at creating innovation ecosystems that bring European regions together to bridge the innovation gap, promote resilience and sustainable development, and support business scaling, notably through funding of up to €8 million per project. In particular, in 2025, proposals were implemented under the work programs of the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE – €35 million) and WIDERA (€24 million). It is worth noting that 147 regions were selected to receive the RIV label and have committed to strengthening their research and innovation ecosystem, in particular by improving the coordination and alignment of their research and innovation policies and investments with key EU priorities; to foster research and innovation cooperation between less innovative and more innovative regions with complementary smart specialization (S3) strategies. *Key features and objectives of RIV for 2026:* (1) the initiative is expanding in its second wave (2026), supporting six new projects with total funding of nearly €160 million from [Horizon Europe](#). The program involves around 100 participants from 16 EU Member States and 5 associated countries, working together to tackle critical challenges. The projects focus on five key challenges: accelerating the green transition, food security, digital sovereignty, healthcare and the circular economy. A distinctive feature is that, rather than a centralized approach, RIV emphasizes the importance of local innovation potential. The projects are implemented by the European Innovation and Enterprise Executive Agency (EISMEA). For example, in Poland, at the voivodeship level, experts most frequently analyze rankings of innovation and digital infrastructure. Thus, the regions with the highest concentration of IT companies, a well-developed [5G/fibre-optic](#) network and the highest level of innovation integration into business include (MM Magazyn Przemyslowy, 2017): Mazovia Voivodeship (leading thanks to Warsaw) — the largest IT market and a center of the digital economy; Ma opolska Voivodeship (center: Kraków) — one of Europe's largest technology hubs; Lower Silesian Voivodeship (center: Wrocław) — a focus on modern technologies and R&D (research and development); Pomeranian Voivodeship (centered on Gdańsk, Sopot and Gdynia) — known as an IT cluster; Silesian Voivodeship (centered on Katowice) — an industrial region actively implementing digitalization in industry.

Ukraine. Ukraine's current state regional policy draws heavily on the experience of decentralization reforms in EU countries, which have ensured the transfer of significant powers and resources to the local level. For years, European experts and their Ukrainian counterparts have been providing methodological and practical support to implement the principles and instruments of the new regional policy at local level. However, much remains to be done, as the Ukrainian model faces institutional and legal challenges that highlight the need to introduce strategic planning and mechanisms for its implementation based on a coherent approach, where all objectives, actions and resources are logically interlinked and provide for the strengthening of the effective application of the 'bottom-up' principle and partnership, which are fundamental to EU policy. Key lessons include the following: Ukrainian local authorities with high-quality human resources, accumulated expertise in project management and a favorable geographical location are more actively mobilizing resources through support instruments such as European cooperation programs. Most regions of Ukraine meet the criteria for receiving the maximum level of co-financing — up to 85 per cent of project costs — meaning that local budgets need only provide 15 per cent of the funding. However, access to these funds is hampered by a complex system of bureaucratic governance. Therefore, the key task is to establish an effective institutional framework for managing the funds, whilst fulfilling the conditions set out in the established set of benchmarks for regional policy will enable the conclusion of negotiations on the relevant chapter and confirm readiness for EU membership in this area (Kulchytskyi, 2026).

Among the positive aspects observed in the process of Ukraine's European integration are: the introduction of a statistical classification of territorial units in accordance with the NUTS standard (Order No. 189 of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, dated 18 July 2024, approved the statistical classification of territorial units, under which the territory of Ukraine is divided into eight territorial units at NUTS-UA1 level, 27 territorial units at NUTS-UA2 () level and 138 territorial units at NUTS-UA3 level); an approach is being introduced whereby 50 per cent of the State Fund for Regional Development's resources are to be channeled towards supporting frontline regions, which is in line with the European principle of territorial concentration and targeted funding, focused on less developed or problem areas with the aim of achieving convergent and balanced regional development. For its part, the European Commission highlighted a number of practical steps that demonstrate the targeted efforts of the Ukrainian government and regions (European Commission, 2025e): An Action Plan for 2025–2027 has been adopted to implement the updated State Strategy for Regional Development for 2024–2027, which was drawn up following mandatory consultations with the regions, local authorities and experts; the Inter-ministerial Coordination Commission on Regional Development has resumed its work, ensuring policy coherence at national level; progress has been made in the field of urban planning, in particular through the adoption of Government resolutions on the creation of an urban planning cadaster; Ukraine participates in seven Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes and is part of the European Macro-Regional Strategy for the Danube Region; management and control systems have been developed within the State Audit Service that meet the requirements for the administration of EU programs.

Whilst Ukraine continues to fight for its freedom and European future, the EU's strategic decisions in the fields of the economy, energy and investment have a direct impact on our country. The pace of Ukraine's post-war recovery and the prospects for its full integration into the single market depend on the pace of these reforms. *Ukraine is actively integrating EU principles into its regional policy:* the updated State Strategy for Regional Development is being implemented; the creation of an office to coordinate community recovery and European integration is under discussion; targeted programs (or targeted advertising campaigns) are being rolled out for reconstruction areas, rural and mountainous regions; the process of digital integration with the EU is being stepped up; and access to *the ‘ ‘ program under Horizon Europe* and grants for the development of open and responsible innovation continues. In particular, it is expected that communities will be able to attract significant resources (over 50 billion UAH in 2026) through joint EU recovery and modernization programs. For Ukraine, this presents an opportunity to: strengthen economic integration; expand cooperation in the fields of investment and recovery; focus more actively on EU domestic demand; and utilize the EU's interim findings to shape its own budgetary and industrial policies.

Overall, the EU's experience highlights the importance of simplifying the regulatory instruments of regional policy, aligning strategic priorities and developing institutional capacity – approaches that Ukraine can utilize to attract EU funding more effectively and build a sustainable innovation ecosystem at the level of each specific region. The application of the latest mechanisms can contribute to the country's recovery, deepen its integration into the European Research and Innovation Area, and create conditions under which Ukrainian regions will be able to realize their full potential, drawing on a combination of effective regional policy and modern digital ecosystems.

Prospects for further research. Among the key issues relating to the implementation of state regional policy, taking into account the experience of the EU, which merit attention and more in-depth study, are the quality of governance

at regional level, the existence of systemic mechanisms for achieving strategic objectives, the development of the cultural environment, and the influence of social processes within society.

Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

1. Today, issues relating to Europe's economy, security, democracy and social policy are being re-examined in the light of new challenges and potential threats, as the European Union's global role depends on this. 2. Faced with problems related to regional disparities, which have not yet been resolved, the EU is actively implementing programs and investment projects to support the economic development of regions, drawing on instruments for realizing local potential. 3. Within the EU, regional policy functions as a coherent, systematic mechanism, the implementation of which is based on multi-annual programming with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, mandatory preconditions, uniform standards, transparency regarding beneficiaries, and opportunities for adjustment. 4. In the context of its progress towards European integration, Ukraine is guided by legislative provisions, as well as practices and approaches to territorial development in the EU, and seeks to secure an appropriate share of economically oriented projects within the structure of expenditure allocated to support regional development. 5. Ukraine's process of European integration requires the further transformation of domestic institutions for regional economic development and the adaptation of best practice regarding the harmonization of the administrative-territorial structure and the strengthening of decentralization processes during the period of reconstruction and recovery.

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Давимука С. А. Тенденції розвитку регіональної економіки Європейського Союзу: інституційні можливості для України

Мета. Визначити сучасні тенденції розвитку регіональної економіки Європейського Союзу, систематизувати інституційні та практичні засади реалізації регіональної політики ЄС й обґрунтувати можливості адаптації європейських підходів до стратегічного планування регіонального та місцевого розвитку України в умовах євроінтеграції, відбудови та структурної трансформації економіки.

Методологія. Методологічну основу дослідження становлять територіально орієнтований підхід до регіонального розвитку, положення інституційної теорії та принципи стратегічного планування. Застосовано системний, порівняльний і ретроспективний аналіз, критичний аналіз нормативно-правових і програмних документів ЄС та України, метод синтезу для узагальнення тенденцій регіонального розвитку та графічний метод для візуалізації його параметрів. Особливу увагу приділено інституційним механізмам політики згуртованості, стратегічному інвестуванню, інноваційній політиці, розвитку сільських територій та трансформації підходів до підтримки регіонів у 2025-2026 рр.

Результати. Установлено, що регіональна економіка ЄС розвивається в умовах посилення геополітичних, технологічних, демографічних і структурних викликів, що зумовлює трансформацію інструментів політики згуртованості та механізмів підтримки територій. Систематизовано ключові тенденції регіонального розвитку ЄС: орієнтацію стратегічного планування на європейські цінності та територіальну згуртованість; використання стратегічних інвестицій для стимулювання економічного зростання і підвищення якості життя; адаптацію бюджетних і програмних механізмів до зовнішніх і внутрішніх змін; посилення ролі інновацій, цифровізації та зеленого переходу; розвиток регіональних програм і міжрегіональної інтеграції. З'ясовано, що ефективність європейської моделі забезпечується багаторічним програмуванням, узгодженістю стратегічних пріоритетів, чітким розподілом повноважень, єдиними стандартами, прозорістю та можливістю коригування програм відповідно до досягнутих результатів.

Оригінальність. Розвинуто положення щодо трансформації регіональної економіки ЄС під впливом взаємодії геополітичного, інноваційно-технологічного, зеленого та цифрового чинників. Систематизовано сучасні тенденції регіонального розвитку ЄС та визначено інституційні можливості адаптації їх в Україні з огляду на завдання європейської інтеграції, післявоєнного відновлення, децентралізації та необхідності посилення спроможності регіональних і місцевих інституцій.

Ключові слова: регіональна економіка, Європейський Союз, тенденції, стратегічне планування, державна регіональна політика.

Давимука Степан Антонович – доктор економічних наук, професор, провідний науковий співробітник відділу регіональної фінансової політики ДУ «Інститут регіональних досліджень імені М. І. Долишнього НАН України» (e-mail: davymuka.s@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4840-2100>).

Davymuka Stepan Antonovych – Dr.Sci. (Econ.), Prof., Leading Researcher of the Department of regional financial policy of the Dolishniy Institute of Regional Research of NAS of Ukraine».

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