



**European Partnership for Democratic Resilience:**  
A Flagship Proposal for Credible, Resilient EU Enlargement  
created by Voice Of Youth for Change in Europe (VOYCE)

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## **Section I: Executive Summary**

EU Enlargement has returned to the centre of European politics. For the eight candidates today, accession is not an abstract aspiration but a question of long-term security, democratic resilience, economic stability, and prosperity. However, enlargement fatigue among the current EU members is real. It is driven less by opposition to enlargement itself rather than by persistent concerns over multifaceted issues like governance, rule of law, corruption, and the EU's integration capacity for more than thirty members.

The paper's central finding is that enlargement has consistently overestimated the stabilizing power of formal legal alignment while underestimating the importance of institutional depth. Past enlargement rounds demonstrate that the transposition of EU law, even when completed successfully, does not guarantee effective implementation or long-term compliance. Where administrative systems, judicial independence, and professional norms were insufficiently embedded prior to accession, post-accession backsliding became structurally difficult to address. Conditionality, while effective before entry, loses much of its force once political bargaining and unanimity dynamics take hold.

At the same time, resistance to enlargement among the EU members largely stems from perceived governance risks. Concerns over budgetary exposure, misuse of EU funds, and the enforceability of rule-of-law standards have shifted the political stance of the member states. The current sequencing of enlargement places these risks on the Union first, while corrective mechanisms remain limited and politically costly. This asymmetry has contributed to enlargement fatigue and undermined the credibility of accession commitments toward candidate countries.

Candidate countries face a parallel problem. The analysis highlights how uneven benchmarks, shifting political signals, and long vague accession timelines weaken domestic reform coalitions. When compliance does not translate into visible progress, reform incentives erode and trust in the process diminishes.

The current enlargement framework therefore suffers from a credibility gap marked by mutual scepticism. Member states doubt the sustainability of reforms and EU citizens doubt the Union's ability to enforce its own standards, while candidates doubt the reliability of the EU's commitments.

In response, this proposal advances the European Partnership for Democratic Resilience as a structural recalibration of enlargement. The underlying premise is that resilience must be built before accession, not corrected afterwards. Enlargement is reframed as a two-way contract in which both sides assume measurable obligations aimed at reducing long-term political and institutional risk: Candidate countries must demonstrably build resilient institutions, skilled administrations, and transparent financial systems before accession while the EU itself must adapt its governance, decision-making, and integration mechanisms to function effectively at 30+ members.

The framework relies on three mutually reinforcing capacity pillars. First, the analysis identifies human capacity as the missing link in many reform developments. Sustainable convergence depends on professional communities capable of operating autonomously within public administrations, judiciaries, and governance bodies. Long-term fellowships, peer embedding, and structured professional exchanges are found to be more effective than short-term technical assistance in shaping institutional practice and reform ownership.

Second, weaknesses in financial capacity emerge as a recurrent source of post-accession tension. While pre-accession funding has supported formal compliance, it has been less successful in strengthening transparency, accountability, and enforcement. The proposal therefore argues for a shift toward performance-based funding tied to verifiable institutional outcomes, enhancing credibility for both EU contributors and recipient states.

Third, the paper finds that enlargement cannot be insulated from the EU's own governance constraints. A Union of more than thirty members will require institutional modification to avoid decision-making paralysis and declining enforcement capacity. Integrating internal preparedness into the enlargement process itself reduces political resistance and distributes adjustment costs more evenly over time.

Taken together, these pillars are linked through a unified monitoring logic that connects progress to access, funding, and integration steps. This approach replaces ambiguity with predictability and aligns incentives across the accession process.

The proposal explores three individual policy alternatives namely a reform of the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance (IPA), a new Judicial Independence Track (JIT), and the European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience. Rather than just proposing a single alternative, the suggested unified architecture of the three initiatives tackles the systemic obstacles of EU accession as mapped out and aims to strengthen the credibility and resilience of the enlargement process. This policy proposal believes that the combination of three complementary pillars creates a synergy that enhances the effectiveness of each other, ensuring that financial incentives, rule of law standards, and administrative capacity-building work together.

Overall, the proposal concludes that enlargement remains indispensable to the EU's strategic future, but only if its credibility is restored. By embedding democratic resilience, institutional capacity, and professional competence before accession, the European Partnership for Democratic Resilience offers a pathway to reconcile geopolitical urgency with institutional caution. In doing so, it reframes enlargement not as a leap of faith, but as a managed, credible, and shared political project.

## **Section II: Introduction- Statement of the Problem**

Since its establishment in 1993, the European Union's enlargement policy has remained one of its most ambitious and transformative instruments. Enlargement has consistently been interwoven with the EU's own success, expanding peace, prosperity, and influence across the continent. Today, however, the Union finds itself at a difficult crossroads. Geopolitical momentum is undeniable: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were all granted candidate status between 2022 and 2023, while accession negotiations opened with Ukraine and Moldova in 2024 (European Commission, 2024a). The Western Balkans remain formally on track, but years of delay and stagnation have bred frustration in Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro (European Commission, 2024a). Yet optimism is tempered by a visible enlargement fatigue inside the Union, with Eurobarometer 2025 showing that citizens remain wary of admitting states perceived as corrupt, poor, or unstable (EEAS, 2025). Beyond the immediate political frictions, the credibility of enlargement today carries profound consequences for the Union's global posture and internal cohesion alike. The 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda identifies enlargement as one of the EU's central priorities, alongside security and competitiveness (European Council, 2024). The Union's ability to advance this process credibly will determine whether Europe can project stability, prosperity, and democratic values in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. Enlargement is therefore

not simply a continuation of past policy, it is the defining test of whether the Union can act with both vision and coherence at a time when its neighbourhood shapes its strategic depth.

This has produced what may be called a dual perception dilemma. Externally, enthusiasm is unmistakable. For Ukraine and Georgia, EU membership is not an abstract policy goal but an existential safeguard in the face of Russia's aggression. For the Western Balkans, accession remains the only credible horizon after decades of transition. Internally, however, Member States and publics fear that a precipitated enlargement could import instability, corruption, or uncontrolled migration flows, risks that are sometimes overstated, but politically decisive (European Council, 2024; Freedom House, 2024). The result is a widening gap between candidates' expectations of rapid accession and the Union's actual capacity and political willingness to deliver. Left unresolved, this gap risks creating disillusionment on both sides of the enlargement process. This divergence also raises deeper institutional questions. Every enlargement reshapes the Union's composition, decision-making balance, and fiscal order. A Europe of thirty or more members will need to revisit how cohesion funding, agricultural policy, and institutional representation function under greater strain. Enlargement fatigue is thus not purely political; it reflects legitimate concerns about administrative capacity, governance performance, and the sustainability of the Union's own model of integration. Addressing these structural anxieties is essential to preserving both public trust and institutional functionality.

The uneven record of past enlargements reinforces this skepticism. Success stories such as Poland and the Baltic states demonstrate how accession, paired with robust institutions and fund absorption, can drive growth, industrial upgrading, digitalization, and geopolitical strength (Bruegel, 2024a). Yet Romania and Bulgaria illustrate a different challenge: corruption and weak judiciaries persisted even after accession, requiring long-term monitoring through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (European Commission, 2024a). By contrast, Hungary represents a distinct phenomenon: deliberate democratic backsliding despite economic gains. This has not prevented the erosion of democratic standards or the politicization of EU funds, showing that the Union lacks sufficient means to enforce its standards once a state is inside (Carnegie Europe, 2023). Growth without adherence to common values has only deepened the Union's political fragmentation and weakened its credibility abroad. Croatia's accession in 2013 highlights the middle ground: stabilization was achieved, but modest economic performance and significant emigration demonstrated the limits of enlargement with the absence of strong resilience (World Bank, 2025). At the same time, it is important to recognize that candidate states are not passive recipients of conditionality but active reformers. Ukraine has established an independent High Anti-Corruption Court, Moldova has pursued sweeping judicial reforms, and Georgia has advanced

digital governance. These efforts show that enlargement is not only an EU-driven project, but a shared commitment to European values from both sides.

Taken together, these examples reveal a structural flaw. EU conditionality works relatively well before accession, when reforms are demanded, but weakens substantially once membership is granted. The Union's mechanisms to prevent democratic backsliding remain limited; the "once in, always in" dynamic leaves few tools to address cases such as Hungary or even Poland (Bruegel, 2024a; European Parliament, 2025). Instruments such as the annual Rule of Law Report and the IPA III framework exist, but their political leverage is insufficient once a candidate becomes a Member State. This creates a credibility gap: Brussels can insist on reforms before entry but struggles to guarantee long-term resilience afterwards. Enlargement is also inseparable from questions of budgetary and institutional capacity. Cohesion and agricultural funds, voting rules, and institutional balance will all be reshaped by a Union of thirty-plus members. These issues do not invalidate enlargement, but underline why credibility and resilience must be embedded from the outset. Citizens see this and question whether the EU can truly enforce its own standards, while candidates perceive a moving target that undermines their trust.

The consequence is a credibility challenge of the highest order. Enlargement has always been presented as a project of peace, democracy, and prosperity (European Commission, 2024a). When it works, as with Poland, the Baltics, or Spain and Portugal in earlier decades, it remains the Union's most successful foreign policy. However, failures to secure the rule of law and combat corruption undermine this narrative, in candidate societies and inside Member States alike. Eurobarometer 2025 illustrates this shift clearly: while a majority of Europeans support further enlargement, this support is conditional on credible reforms and governance guarantees (EEAS, 2025). Enlargement is still desired, but only if conducted carefully, rationally, and in alignment with the Union's long-term values and standards.

Failure to address these structural weaknesses will not be without consequence. If the EU accepts new members without ensuring institutional resilience, it risks importing corruption and weak governance, thereby undermining its own rule-of-law framework and cohesion. Romania and Bulgaria show how fragile institutions can persist if accession comes too early; Hungary demonstrates how deliberate backsliding can destabilize the Union from within. Croatia highlights the risk of brain drain, hollowing out candidate states while fuelling social tensions elsewhere. More broadly, a credibility deficit erodes the EU's geopolitical capacity: the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 warns that failure to anchor the neighborhood leaves space for rival actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey to expand their influence (European Council, 2024; Carnegie Europe, 2023). If the Union stalls enlargement altogether, publics in Ukraine, Georgia, and the Western Balkans may conclude that accession is an empty promise. Stronger safeguards

may inevitably slow the pace of accession, but speed without resilience would prove costlier in the long term. It is better to embed reforms before entry than to struggle with reversals once membership is granted.

Therefore, enlargement today is nothing less than a credibility test for the European Union. Without new instruments, co-designed with candidate countries, to embed prosperity and resilience, the Union risks losing the support of its citizens, the trust of its candidate partners, and its strategic leverage in the wider world. Enlargement that delivers membership without anchoring institutional resilience and tangible prosperity no longer strengthens the Union; it undermines it.

## **Section II: Introduction- Thesis.**

Addressing this credibility challenge requires a fundamental shift in how the European Union prepares states for membership. If enlargement is to strengthen rather than strain the Union, the process must no longer rely on conditionality alone. Pre-accession incentives have proven powerful, yet they cannot guarantee resilience once the leverage of accession disappears, particularly when existing tools such as the Rule of Law Reports or the conditionality regulation remain politically sensitive and inconsistently applied (EUI, 2019; EC Rule of Law Report, 2024). Enlargement 2.0, therefore, demands durable, embedded mechanisms capable of anchoring both prosperity and institutional resilience before accession.

Our research concludes that achieving this requires a three-layered architecture designed to reinforce the structural foundations of reform. The first layer, Human Capacity, strengthens administrations and judicial bodies by fostering long-term professional networks, administrative culture, and shared integrity norms. The proposed European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience operationalizes this through co-designed exchanges that embed EU and candidate civil servants within each other's institutions, ensuring that reforms are sustained by people, not just legal transposition.

The second layer, Financial Capacity, ensures that public funding directly supports governance quality and transparency. IPA III's limited impact, driven by weak performance incentives and persistent opacity (ECA, 2022), underscores the need for a redesigned, outcome-based approach. The IPA III Performance Reform, therefore, links funding to measurable benchmarks, anti-corruption safeguards, and empowered oversight bodies.

The third layer, Institutional Capacity, reinforces the rule-of-law ecosystem through a Judicial Independence Track, providing structured mentoring, training, and peer networks to courts, prosecutors,

and anti-corruption institutions. Governance weaknesses remain the central source of uneven enlargement outcomes (EC 2024a; TI 2024), and addressing them requires stable, embedded institutional support.

Individually, each instrument is valuable; together, they form the European Partnership for Democratic Resilience, a coherent flagship capable of delivering visible progress, institutional credibility, and durable reform. Enlargement 2.0 can only succeed if it embeds resilience and prosperity as pre-accession deliverables. This integrated architecture provides the tools to achieve that outcome, enabling enlargement to reinforce the Union's cohesion, legitimacy, and strategic depth.

### **Section III: Historic Context**

#### **1. A Brief Look into 40 Years of European Enlargement (1973-2013)**

From its origins as a post-war peace project to one of the world's most advanced supranational entities, the European Union (EU) went through a remarkable evolution. What began as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, uniting six founding members (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), has transformed into what is today a union of 27 member states with nearly 450 million citizens. Over the past five decades, the EU has expanded far beyond its original economic purpose to become a global actor not only limited to trade, but also in governance and in the promotion of democratic values.

The process of enlargement has been the driving force behind this transformation. Each wave of enlargement reflected its specific geopolitical context: the Southern Enlargement of the 1980s consolidated democracy after decades of authoritarianism; the Eastern Enlargement of the 2000s reunited a continent divided by the Cold War; and Croatia's accession in 2013 marked the EU's commitment to stabilizing the Western Balkans after the Yugoslav wars.

#### **The Southern Enlargement (Greece, Portugal, Spain – 1980s)**

In the 1980s, the European Community (EC) undertook a "Southern" enlargement to include Greece, Portugal, and Spain, substantially broadening beyond its initial Northern European industrial base and setting the precedent of the EU as a magnet for democratization.

From Greece's military junta (1967-1974) to Portugal's Estado Novo authoritarian regime (1933-1974) and Spain's Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), all these countries share a similar experience of emerging

from decades of authoritarian rule. In this sense, the EC membership was seen as their ideal solution in helping them to consolidate the fragile democracy and modernize their economies.

Indeed, from an economic point of view, the accession into the EU single market and structural funds allowed them to receive large-scale investment for infrastructure, agriculture, and industrial modernization. For instance, Spain's trade with the EC surged sharply after accession: in just one year, exports to the Community rose from 53% in 1985 to 60% in 1986, reflecting rapid integration (Real Instituto Elcano, 2025).

Politically, the enlargement benefitted both sides. For the new members, it guaranteed democratic and institutional stability. For the existing members, it helped to have neighbors aligned with NATO. However, structural challenges persist, ranging from regional disparities to high unemployment, revealing that economic convergence requires more than accession alone.

### **The Eastern Enlargement (Poland, Baltics, Romania, Bulgaria - 2004-2007)**

Often referred to as the “Big Bang Enlargement”, the Eastern Enlargement of 2004-2007 represents the largest enlargement in European history. On 1 May 2004, the Union welcomed 10 new members: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia; eight of which were former communist states. This historic milestone not only symbolized the reunification of Europe after the Cold war but also reaffirmed the EU's central role in promoting values of democracy, stability, and prosperity.

By adhering to the Copenhagen Criteria (1993), the EU10 strengthened the benchmark for EU accession based on stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy, and the adoption of the EU *acquis*.

Economically, the results were impressive. Over two decades, the EU10's GDP per capita (in PPS) rose from 59% of the EU27 average in 2004 to 81% in 2022, driven by foreign direct investment, trade liberalization, and cohesion funds (Eurostat, 2023). Among the success stories, Poland emerged as one of Europe's fastest-growing economies, with efficient absorption of EU funds and industrial integration into European value chains.

In January 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the Union, after longer negotiations due to concerns over corruption, weak judicial independence, and low administrative efficiency. To address these deficits, the European Commission introduced the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), a special tool monitoring progress in the fields of judiciary reform and anti-corruption, which formally ended only in 2023 (European Commission, 2023).

The mixed results of the Eastern enlargement underscore a key policy lesson, showing that while EU accession can enhance reform and modernization, it is not a guaranteed path to success. Instead, a long-standing prosperity depends mainly on domestic political will to sustain democratic standards and their ability to enforce EU conditionality.

### **Croatia's Accession (2013)**

After 10 years of negotiations, Croatia joined the EU in 2013, representing the second country of the former Yugoslavia to do so after Slovenia (2004). Due to the exhausting Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, Croatia's path towards EU membership had been particularly challenging. It had to implement comprehensive reforms in governance, combat corruption, overcome border disputes with Slovenia, ensure full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as restructuring its economy after the 2008 global financial crisis to meet EU standards (European Western Balkans, 2023).

By the time of accession, Croatia had achieved significant progress in institution-building and economic reforms. Yet its poor absorption of EU funds, with 2014-2020 ESIF absorption rate of just 39%, together with bureaucratic inefficiency and administrative fragmentation have prevented the country from taking full advantage of these opportunities, resulting in a rather slow economic convergence compared to peer countries such as Poland.

Moreover, emigration and demographic decline have become pressing challenges. A particular stark issue is brain drain. Since accession in 2013, Croatia has lost nearly 10% of its population (Euronews, 2022), primarily skilled young workers, who prefer moving to more developed EU countries. This "brain drain" has eroded the country's human capital, revealing a paradox of EU integration: while the EU membership offers mobility and opportunity, it can also exacerbate regional inequalities when domestic labor market and governance structure fell behind.

## **2. What We Can Learn from History: Stories of Success and Struggle**

The forty-year history of EU enlargement (1973-2013) shows that joining the Union is neither a uniform success story nor a guaranteed path to prosperity. From promoting democracy in formerly authoritarian regimes to stimulating investment and regional growth, enlargement has undoubtedly brought both political and economic benefits. Yet, if not well-managed, EU membership risks being a double-edge sword.

Where reforms were sustained, as in Poland, the Baltic states, or Ireland, EU integration can yield significant benefits. Conversely, when EU accession is treated merely as ticking the boxes, the initial momentum can rapidly fade, and governance can easily take a reverse path back to fragility, corruption, and illiberalism. The experiences of countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary show how rule of law and anti-corruption progress can erode even after accession, threatening to unravel decades of effort.

Stories of these divergent outcomes underline a crucial lesson: enlargement is a policy instrument, not a solution for all kinds of problems. Its success mainly depends on shared responsibility from both the candidate states, who must sustain reform beyond accession. At the same time, it is also important for the EU to enforce conditionality and post-accession monitoring in a consistent and credible way. Only through this mutual commitment can enlargement fulfil its initial purpose of being a transformative process that strengthens democracy and cohesion across Europe, rather than just a one-time institutional milestone.

### **Poland: Convergence through Cohesion and Industrial Integration**

Among widely recognized stories of success, Poland certainly stands out as a remarkable example that combined rapid economic convergence with industrial modernization and strong institutional performance.

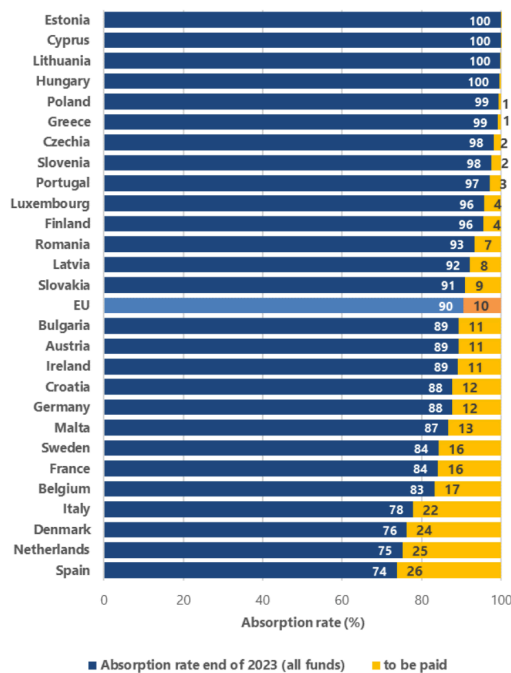
When Poland joined the EU in 2004, its GDP per capita was roughly 50% of the EU average; by 2024, this figure almost tripled, reaching nearly 80% and marking one of the quickest convergence paths in the EU (Eurostat, 2024). This transformation rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars:

## 1. An efficient absorption of EU cohesion funds

Among the largest beneficiary of EU cohesion and structural funds, Poland is estimated to have received €79 billion (Scope ratings, 2022), scoring a significant absorption rate of Cohesion Policy funds equal to 99.4% as of the end of 2023, well above the EU average of 90.4% (European Parliament, 2024).

Unlike many other new members, Poland distinguished itself with its strong administrative capacity to plan, co-finance, and monitor EU-funded projects (European Commission, 2022). These funds were directed strategically towards transport infrastructure, digitalization, education, and research, creating positive spillovers for domestic industries. Poland managed to leverage EU funds as growth multipliers, not as just mere subsidies, reinforcing its competitiveness and laying the foundation for long-term growth.

**Figure 12: Absorption rates of Cohesion Policy funds (including REACT-EU) as of the end of 2023, by country**



Source: [Cohesion Open Data Platform](#), database on [EU Payments](#)

## 2. Integration into European production networks

Industrial policies also played a crucial role. Poland successfully used EU integration to upgrade its industrial base and integrated itself into the European value chain, particularly in the automotive, machinery, and electronics sectors. German and Western European firms established extensive production

linkages with Polish suppliers, generating export-led industrial expansion which increased nearly 3.5 times since joining the EU (IMF, 2025). The combination of competitive labor costs, EU market access, and regulatory stability transformed Poland into a key near-shoring destination within the Single Market (CASE, 2024).

### 3. Social Stability and Institutional Modernization

Socially and politically, EU membership anchored institutional modernization and upward mobility through Erasmus+ programs. The rule-of-law and the EU *acquis* adoption process in the 2000s strengthened public administration, environmental standards, and judicial capacity. Despite some democratic backsliding events emerging last year (Centre for European Reform, 2024), Poland's pre-accession reforms left a robust institutional foundation that still underpins economic governance.

In conclusion, Poland's experience shows that EU membership delivers transformative growth when domestic institutions are capable of translating external support into structural change.

## **The Baltic States: Digital Modernization and Strategic Resilience**

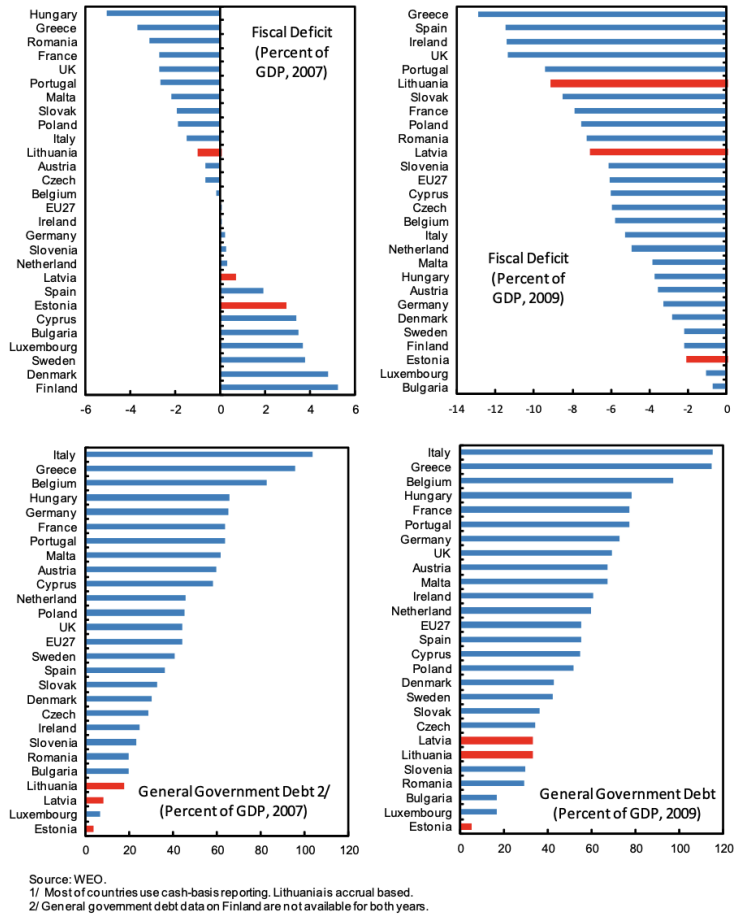
The Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, stand out as models of rapid modernization and digital transformation following EU accession in 2004. Emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, they leveraged EU membership as a steppingstone for modernization and geopolitical stability.

### 1. Deep Structural Reforms and Economic Convergence

Before joining, all three countries undertook radical liberalization and fiscal reforms during the 1990s in order to build economic resilience, diversifying from Russia's market dependence towards Western Europe, aligning with EU trade and competition rules. EU accession allowed the Baltics to open access to the Single Market, boosting trade and investment flows. From 2000 onwards, the three "Baltic Tigers" experienced extraordinary economic growth, expanding at an average of 8-9% every year, exceeding what would have been expected based on their initial income level (Eurostat, 2024).

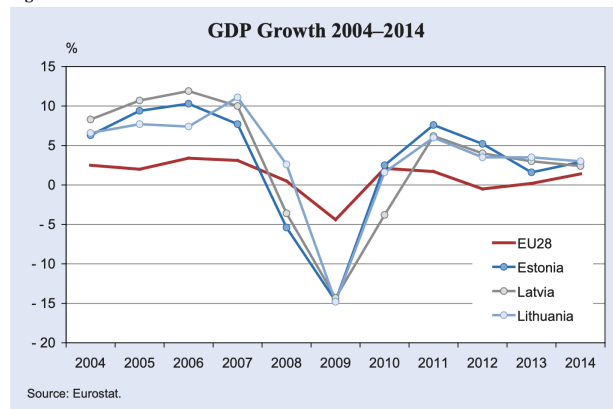
Despite the sharp rise of the debt-to-GDP ratios during the 2008 global financial crisis, all three countries still maintained a rather low public debt level compared to the EU average (IMF, 2010).

Figure 4. Fiscal Deficits and Debt in Europe, Pre and Post Crisis <sup>1/</sup>



They showed quick recovery (European Central Bank, 2017), experiencing an average annual growth rate of 4.1 percent between 2011 and 2014, compared to the 0.7% of the EU average (ifo Institute, 2015).

Figure 1



Moreover, the Baltics also became important European frontrunners in energy diversification, including the recent 2025 synchronization of their electricity grid with continental Europe which ended the energy dependency of the Soviet-era (European Commission, 2025).

## 2. Digital Transformation as a Development Strategy

The hallmark of Baltic success is digital governance, especially in Estonia, which became a global pioneer of the “e-state”. Indeed, supported by EU structural funds and the EU Digital Agenda, Estonia launched an extensive process of gradual digitalization. It digitalized public services, introduced mandatory e-ID, and launched the world’s first e-residency programs. As of 2023, over 99% of public services in Estonia were available online, significantly strengthening transparency and reducing administrative costs (Fintech Baltic, 2021). Similarly, Latvia and Lithuania leveraged EU funds to invest in broadband infrastructure, e-health, and e-government (EIB, 2023).

### **Ireland: From Peripheral Economy to European High-Tech Powerhouse**

Ireland’s integration story is another prototype of successful EU-driven development. From joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 as one of its poorest members, Ireland has transformed into one of the most dynamic economies in Europe, leveraging EU membership to achieve rapid industrialization.

#### 1. From Agrarian Periphery to Modern Economy: The Synergy between FDI and EU Single Market

In the 1970s, Ireland’s economy was heavily agricultural and dependent on the United Kingdom. EU accession broke this dependency by integrating the country into a much larger market by providing access to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Between 1973-2018, over €50billion EU funds were invested in infrastructure and education, aligning with national reforms like the 1987 Programme for National Recovery (EPP, 2023) . These policies, along with Ireland’s low corporate taxes and economic openness, attracted a massive inflow of FDI, particularly from the U.S. and pharmaceutical firms, who view Ireland as a gateway to the EU single market. This outstanding growth, often referred to as the “Celtic Tiger”, saw the Irish economy expanding at an average rate of 9.4% between 1995 and 2000 (Investopedia, 2025).

## 2. Governance and Social Transformation

EU membership also spurred social modernization and institutional reform. Ireland adopted EU environmental, labor, and gender equality standards that reshaped domestic policy. Educational attainment also rose sharply, supported by EU co-financed programs and university expansion.

### 3. Struggling Entries: What Didn't Work

#### **Romania & Bulgaria: corruption, weak judiciary, partial reforms.**

Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the European Union marked a historical step in the post-communist transformation of Southeastern Europe. While both countries have achieved macroeconomic growth and improved living standards, they illustrate how key democratic values and institutional reforms can easily backslide without constant commitment towards deeper convergence.

#### 1. Accession Under Conditionality and Delay

When Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on 1 January 2007, it was evident already before their accession that both countries fell short of fulfilling the fundamental criteria of rule of law, judicial independence, and anti-corruption enforcement. Yet strategic and political imperatives prevailed as the EU was seeking to consolidate democracy in Southeast Europe.

To address these unfinished reforms, the EU introduced the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). As a transitional post-accession monitoring tool, it aimed at ensuring continued progress through annual reporting and policy benchmarks. They include reforms of the judiciary, anti-corruption measures, and, in Bulgaria's case, also combating organized crime (European Commission, 2007).

However, while innovative, the CVM soon proved insufficient to secure lasting reform (European Studies Review, 2023). Some criticisms note how the CVM was a mechanism which lacked credible enforcement capability in reality: it can report deficiencies but impose no sanctions (Vassileva, 2020). In both countries, effective reform progress was rather limited, undermined by powerful opposition from political elites and judicial actors. In Bulgaria, the Prosecutor General retained unchecked power and broad immunity; while in Romania, the initial momentum of the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) faced significant political backlash in 2018 (PISM, 2018).

In December 2023, the European Commission formally lifted the CVM for both countries, citing "substantial progress" in judicial reform and anti-corruption frameworks (European Commission, 2023). Bulgaria had introduced legislations to hold the Prosecutor General accountable and reformed its

anti-corruption body (KPKONPI); while Romania had restructured its Judicial Inspection Service and adopted a new anti-corruption strategy (2021-2025).

The termination of the CVM is replaced with the broader Rule of Law Mechanism (2021) which addresses all countries and finally links rule-of-law breaches with access to EU funds, establishing credible financial leverage that was previously absent.

However, whether these improvements will be sustained in the long term still remains to be observed. According to data from 2024 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Romania and Bulgaria ranked respectively 65<sup>th</sup> and 76<sup>th</sup> over 180 countries, among the lowest in Europe.

## 2. Economic Convergence but Structural Weakness

Economically, both countries have grown significantly in aggregate terms. Between 2007 and 2023, Romania's GDP per capita (in PPS) rose from around 40% to 77% of the EU average, while Bulgaria's increased from 40% to 64% (Eurostat, 2025).

EU funds played a fundamental role for both countries in supporting infrastructure and regional development. Yet initial absorption has often been inefficient due to weak administrative capacity, corruption, and politicized fund allocation (European Parliament, 2013).

Indeed, the evolution of the absorption rate of EU funds in Romania was rather slow. For the Multiannual Financial Framework (2007-2013), Romania received about 30.7 billion euro from the EU budget. The estimated absorption rate is the following: 2.96% at 31.12.2009, 8.62% at 31.12.2010, 15.1% at 31.12.2011, 21.85% at 31.12.2012 and 36.5% at the end of 2013. In 2014, the absorption rate reached 52.3%, and at 31.12.2015 attained 74.3% (Gherghina, 2017).

Although slow, the absorption rate has increased gradually over the years as Romania has managed to overcome the initial difficulties related to the lack of expertise. This progress is evident in the following graph which shows a more specific level of absorption rate for each of the Operational Program during the next MFF (2014-2020).

**Table no. 5.** Absorption level of European funds in Romania by operational programs (19.04.2019)

Operational programs	Allocation 2014-2020 (euro)	Total amount received from the EC until 19.04.2019 (euro)	Absorption rate %
Technical Assistance	252,765,958	103,458,168	40.93
Human Capital	4,371,963,027	869,396,528	19.89
Competitiveness	1,329,787,234	287,884,890	21.65
Administrative Capacity	553,191,489	100,110,019	18.10
Regional	6,860,000,000	1,217,952,530	17.75
Large Infrastructure	9,218,524,484	2,085,459,514	22.62
Rural Development	8,127,996,402	3,888,288,081	47.84
Fisheries & Maritime Affairs	168,421,371	37,536,370	22.29
Total FESI	30,882,649,965	8,590,086,100	27.82

**Hungary: From Early Reformer to Democratic Backslider**

Having pioneered market liberalization and democratic reform in the 1990s, Hungary entered the EU in 2004 as a frontrunner among Central and Eastern European states. Yet two decades later, it stands as a case of gradual democratic backsliding, as an example of a country that undermined liberal democratic norms and rule of law. Its experience reveals how economic and political convergence can diverge sharply once domestic governance weakens and EU conditionality loses credibility.

1. Mixed economic results

Economically, Hungary is deeply integrated into the European markets, with almost 80% of the country’s total exports going to EU markets and nearly 70% of total domestic imports originating from EU countries (Eurostat, 2024). Over two decades, EU membership has consolidated Hungary’s dependent market economy model, built on foreign investment, EU transfers, and remittances. Together these three external sources have averaged around 10% of GDP per year..

Taking advantage of EU state aid rules, the Orbán government has increased state aid to foreign companies in the manufacturing sector, especially German automakers, reinforcing Hungary’s functional specialization in low value-added manufacturing (LSE Blog, 2022).

However, at the same time, the country has focused its competitive advantage based on cheap, skilled labour, risking middle-income trap and struggling in shifting towards higher value-added activities. Rather than modernizing the economy, the Hungarian economy has remained in the European semi-periphery.

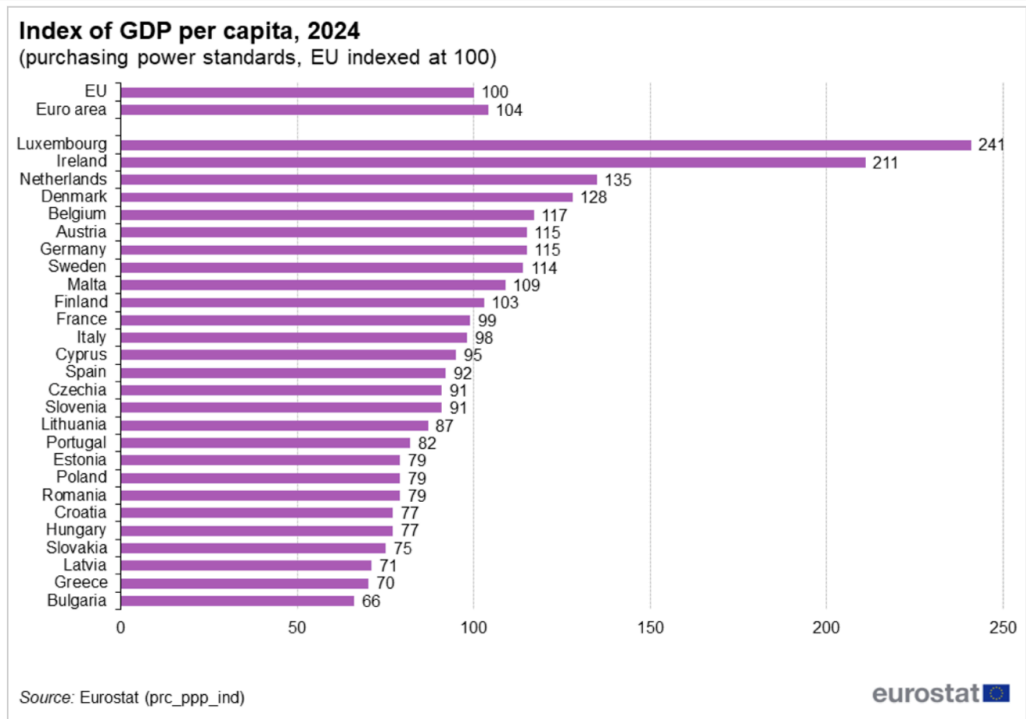
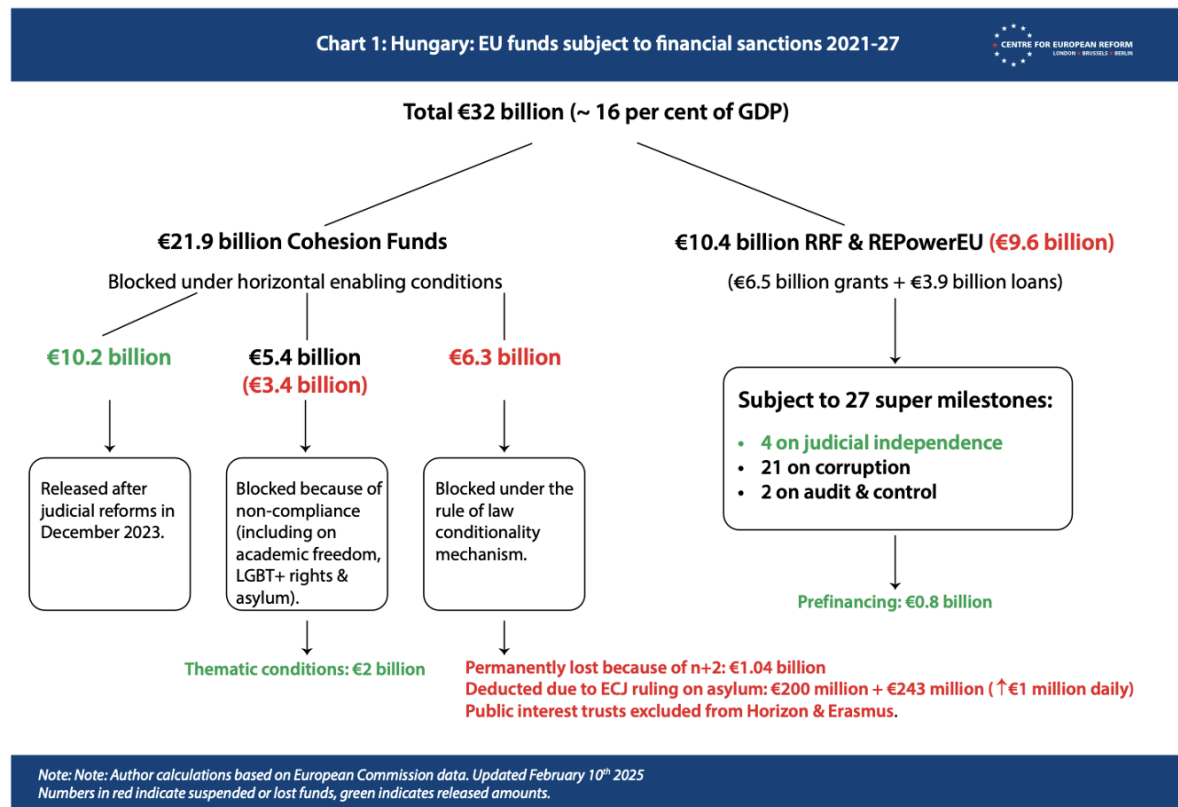


Figure 1: Index of GDP per capita, 2024, (EU=100)

## 2. Misuse of EU Funds and Corruption

EU structural and cohesion funds represent a key pillar of the regime’s economic model. Yet numerous reports by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) found systemic irregularities in procurement, often benefiting political oligarchs. Between 2015-2019, Hungary has the EU’s highest rate of financial corrections recommended by OLAF, estimating 3.93% of payment, compared to EU average of 0.45% (Statista, 2020). The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2024 assigned to Hungary a score of 42/100, ranking it 76th/180 countries on the global scale and placing it as the most corrupted among the EU countries.

In response, the EU activated the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism in 2022, suspending €6.3 billion in cohesion funds due to breaches of the rule of law and concerns around corruption (European Council, 2022). As of February 2025, approximately €18 billion in post-pandemic recovery and EU cohesion funds remained frozen, accounting for nearly 10.7% of Hungary’s GDP (Euronews, 2025).



## **Section IV: Background, Literature Review**

### **Economic Convergence and Divergence**

Enlargement has demonstrated that economic convergence is possible, but far from automatic. The experience of previous accessions shows that the decisive factor is not membership itself, but the institutional and administrative strength with which states enter the Union. Where governance has been robust, convergence has advanced rapidly (World Bank, 2025; Bruegel, 2024a). Where it has not, EU membership has generated opportunities without ensuring that these materialize into sustained prosperity (European Commission, 2024a).

Across the literature, two structural drivers emerge consistently. First, successful convergence depends on institutional and administrative quality: strong regulatory environments attract investment and facilitate productivity gains (Bruegel, 2024a), while high administrative capacity enables countries to absorb EU funds and deliver large-scale reforms effectively (OECD SIGMA, 2024; ECA Absorption Reports). Second, weak convergence is closely associated with governance fragilities. Corruption, politicized public administrations, and weak enforcement systems hinder economic upgrading and undermine the transformative potential of EU support (TI, 2024; EC Rule of Law Report, 2024). Limited administrative capacity further slows project implementation and reduces the effectiveness of EU funding (ECA, 2022), weakening the developmental impact of the Union's financial instruments.

Beyond these institutional factors, demographic pressures exacerbate divergence. High emigration in states with weaker governance environments constrains labour markets, erodes fiscal stability, and disrupts reform continuity (World Bank, 2025). This dynamic creates a structural risk: as long as governance weaknesses persist, demographic outflows reinforce economic gaps, producing long-term divergence rather than convergence.

The academic consensus is clear. Economic convergence is institutionally mediated, not generated by accession alone (Carnegie Europe, 2023; EP Study, 2025). Enlargement that proceeds without addressing underlying institutional weaknesses risks importing long-term divergence into the Union, with direct implications for public trust and the credibility of the enlargement process itself (Bruegel, 2024a; EEAS, 2025).

Therefore, Enlargement 2.0 must embed institutional, administrative, and financial capacity before accession. Without this, the Union cannot credibly guarantee that enlargement enhances prosperity, benefits citizens, or strengthens the resilience of the EU as a whole.

### **Governance, Rule-of-Law & Backsliding:**

Governance quality and the rule of law remain the decisive predictors of whether enlargement delivers sustained economic and democratic convergence. Across institutional and academic assessments, governance emerges as the central determinant of reform durability (Bruegel, 2024a; Carnegie Europe, 2023), while rule-of-law deficits continue to constitute the most persistent structural obstacle for candidate states (European Commission, 2024a). Conditionality functions powerfully before accession, but its influence weakens sharply once membership is secured. Pre-accession incentives drive rapid compliance, yet post-accession stagnation repeatedly arises from limited enforcement capacity and the structural "once in, always in" constraint (EP Study, 2025; Bruegel, 2024a).

This enforcement gap allows political interference and institutional fragility to take root. Oversight bodies and judicial institutions often lack the autonomy, resources, and safeguards necessary to operate independently (EC Rule of Law Report, 2024). Weak investigative and sanctioning environments enable corruption and diminish the credibility of reforms (TI, 2024). As a result, governance failures can reinforce themselves over time, generating a self-sustaining cycle that undermines institutional resilience.

Backsliding is therefore not an isolated deviation but a systemic vulnerability. Evidence shows that reversals occur where institutions entered the Union without sufficient resilience, revealing the limits of relying on conditionality alone (Carnegie Europe, 2023). While the EU possesses mechanisms to diagnose such deterioration, it lacks reliable tools to correct it decisively once accession has taken place (EUI, 2019).

These institutional weaknesses have direct political consequences. Inconsistent rule-of-law performance among Member States weakens public confidence in the enlargement process (EEAS, 2025), while candidate governments perceive uneven enforcement as a shifting benchmark, reducing long-term reform incentives (EP Study, 2025). This dynamic undermines both the credibility and sustainability of the accession framework.

As such, Enlargement 2.0 must recognize that sustainable integration cannot depend on conditionality as the primary guarantor of compliance. The process requires embedded institutional resilience before

accession if the Union is to avoid importing governance vulnerabilities and preserve the legitimacy of its enlargement policy.

### **Funding absorption and Financial Governance**

EU financial assistance has long been one of the Union's most powerful tools for supporting transformation, yet its effectiveness varies greatly. The literature consistently shows that EU funding generates meaningful impact only when states possess the administrative and financial systems required to manage it effectively (World Bank, 2025; European Commission, 2024a). Where those systems are weak, financial transfers tend to produce limited structural change, regardless of the resources allocated (Bruegel, 2024a).

Absorption capacity, therefore, emerges as the central determinant of financial effectiveness. High absorption correlates with strategic planning, stable project pipelines, and a professional public administration capable of delivering complex reforms (OECD SIGMA, 2024; ECA Absorption Reports). Conversely, staffing shortages, fragmented coordination, and insufficient administrative expertise undermine implementation and reduce the long-term value of EU investments (ECA, 2022). These constraints are compounded by persistent weaknesses in financial oversight. Procurement vulnerabilities, limited auditing capacity, and risks of political capture continue to affect the integrity of public spending (Transparency International, 2024), while oversight institutions often lack the autonomy or investigative tools needed to ensure credible control of EU-funded projects (EC Rule of Law Report, 2024).

These structural weaknesses also limit the effectiveness of pre-accession assistance. Evaluations of IPA III show that while it supports legislative alignment, it frequently falls short of driving institutional transformation or improving financial governance practices in a durable way (ECA, 2022; Carnegie Europe, 2023). As a result, pre-accession funding can deliver outputs without necessarily strengthening the systems responsible for long-term compliance and accountability.

Finally, the literature highlights the direct connection between financial governance and public confidence. Citizens within both the EU and candidate countries express higher support for enlargement when EU funds are managed transparently and produce visible, verifiable results (EEAS, 2025). Conversely, opaque or inefficient financial management fuels skepticism in existing Member States and reinforces perceptions of unpredictability among candidate governments.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Enlargement 2.0 requires a stronger focus on financial governance and administrative capacity as pre-accession deliverables. Without credible and transparent financial systems, neither the Union nor candidate states can ensure that EU resources translate into sustained institutional strengthening or public trust in the enlargement process.

### **Administrative and Human Capacity**

Administrative and human capacity consistently emerge in the literature as the structural foundation of sustainable reform. Analyses show that stalled or reversible reforms stem less from gaps in legislation than from weaknesses within public administrations themselves (OECD SIGMA, 2024; EP Study, 2025). Delivering effective governance requires stable, professional civil services and competent judicial actors capable of managing complex reforms and ensuring consistency across political cycles (European Commission, 2024a).

However, several structural constraints inhibit this continuity. Politicization of the civil service, through high turnover, political appointments, and weak merit-based systems, undermines institutional memory and disrupts implementation capacity (OECD SIGMA, 2024). Fragmented coordination across ministries further slows policy execution and reduces the effectiveness of EU-funded programmes, which depend on long-term planning and interministerial cooperation (EP Study, 2025). In parallel, judicial and oversight bodies often face acute resource and training shortages, limiting their operational capacity and weakening the broader enforcement ecosystem required for reform consolidation (EC Rule of Law Report, 2024; TI, 2024; ECA, 2022).

Existing EU-supported capacity-building tools have not resolved these structural issues. While technical assistance improves formal compliance, evaluations show that short-term exchanges, project-based support, and externally driven training rarely produce lasting internal expertise or institutional resilience (Carnegie Europe, 2023). Without embedded professional networks and co-owned capacity-building frameworks, reforms remain vulnerable to political turnover and administrative fragility (OECD SIGMA, 2024).

Importantly, the literature emphasizes that durable reform is achievable when administrative strengthening is embedded, long-term, and mutually owned. Peer-to-peer cooperation, sustained professional networks, and integrated administrative exchanges enhance the internalization of EU

standards and strengthen resistance to political pressures, supporting continuity even in volatile environments (EP Study, 2025; Carnegie Europe, 2023).

For Enlargement 2.0, the lesson is clear: sustainable reform depends on people, administrative culture, and institutionalized expertise, not solely on legal alignment. Embedding administrative and human capacity before accession is therefore essential to ensuring that reforms endure and can be credibly upheld once the leverage of conditionality fades.

### **Political and Social Legitimacy**

Throughout the literature, legitimacy emerges not as an additional policy dimension but as the condition that determines the political sustainability of all others. Reforms, whether economic, administrative, financial, or institutional, prove durable only when they generate predictable expectations among political actors and reduce volatility in the broader governance environment (Carnegie Europe, 2023). Legitimacy therefore operates as a stabilizing mechanism: it lowers the political cost of compliance, strengthens reform coalitions, and reduces incentives for governing elites to reverse course when facing domestic pressures.

This stabilizing function explains why legitimacy is frequently described as a precondition for long-term resilience. When reform trajectories are perceived as fair, consistent, and anchored in mutually understood standards, administrations can plan over multiple political cycles, internalize professional norms, and coordinate reforms across institutions. Conversely, when legitimacy is weak, political actors face strong incentives to delay, dilute, or instrumentalize reforms. Literature documents that under such conditions, reform coalitions fracture quickly, bureaucratic continuity erodes, and institutions become more vulnerable to political interference (EP Study, 2025).

A second insight is that legitimacy reduces the scope for politicization. When the principles guiding reform are transparent and widely accepted, political actors find it harder to weaponize EU integration for domestic competition or to frame compliance as an externally imposed burden. This lowers the risk that reforms become subject to electoral oscillation and helps insulate key institutions, judiciaries, regulators, and oversight bodies from shifting political agendas (OECD SIGMA, 2024). Predictability, not pressure, is therefore what sustains institutional behaviour over time.

Finally, legitimacy provides the connective logic linking the previous four dimensions: it is what allows economic reforms to be maintained through downturns, financial governance to withstand political

turnover, administrative systems to retain professional standards, and institutional safeguards to remain credible beyond the leverage of conditionality. Without legitimacy, even well-designed reforms remain vulnerable to reversal once external incentives weaken.

For Enlargement 2.0, the literature underscores that legitimacy is not an outcome of reform but a prerequisite for its durability. Embedding legitimacy, through fairness, predictability, and shared ownership, creates the political conditions under which institutional resilience can take root and endure.

## **Section V. Current situation and policy context**

### **1. Current EU Enlargement Status**

The EU Commission frames enlargement as the “key driver of long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe” (European Commission, 2025). However, the current EU enlargement landscape is shaped by overlapping crises, heightened geopolitical urgency, and uneven reform trajectories across candidate countries. Understanding each candidate's position requires considering both their domestic political dynamics and the broader strategic environment.

Being fast-tracked for candidacy in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukraine and Moldova are now central to the EU’s enlargement agenda. Both have established reforms in the rule of law, public administration, and economic governance. Yet structural corruption, institutional fragility, and the pressures of ongoing conflict continue to limit progress. For these countries, accession is driven as much by strategic necessity as by institutional readiness.

Georgia presents a particularly challenging case. While formally recognized as a potential candidate, its domestic political trajectory has generated concerns in Brussels, with the enlargement report of 2025 giving Georgia the harshest assessment ever issued (European Commission, 2025). The ruling party’s tense relationship with pro-European civil society, uneven reform implementation, and fluctuating commitment to EU foreign policy values create uncertainty and pose the risk of losing Georgia from the European path.

The Western Balkans illustrate the challenges of lengthened enlargement. Montenegro and Serbia, negotiating accession for over a decade, continue to face rule-of-law deficits and weak institutional frameworks. Serbia’s balancing act between the EU, Russia, and China, coupled with domestic democratic erosion, has slowed progress to a near standstill. North Macedonia and Albania, despite completing reforms, are blocked by bilateral disputes and inconsistent support from member states.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains hindered by deep constitutional fragmentation, ethno-political divisions, and weak governance structures. Kosovo, meanwhile, remains outside official accession tracks due to recognition issues and ongoing normalization challenges with Serbia.

Türkiye is another outlier. The candidacy remains formally ongoing, yet negotiations have been effectively frozen since 2018. Democratic erosion, unresolved bilateral disputes, and diverging foreign policy stances have reduced the accession to a largely symbolic process. At the same time, strong economic ties and geopolitical security needs maintain strategic engagement without delivering normative alignment.

## 2. Existing EU Instruments

The EU has developed a diverse set of instruments to support candidate countries and facilitate EU enlargement, yet their design reflects decades of evolving priorities and falls short of many of today's hurdles.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) is the EU's main tool for supporting political, institutional, social, and economic reforms in candidate and potential candidate countries. In its third phase (2021–2027), IPA III has a budget of about €14.16 billion to help those countries align with EU rules, values, and standards, though some observers question whether the resources are sufficient given the breadth of reforms expected. Programming under IPA III is structured around five thematic “windows”: rule of law; governance and European acquis alignment; green connectivity; competitiveness; and cross-border cooperation, but the effectiveness can vary depending on each country's administrative capacity. IPA III is more performance-driven than earlier versions, with no fixed national allocation, which encourages reform but may risk uneven support if progress stalls. It tries to complement other EU instruments to leverage investment in infrastructure, connectivity, energy, green, and digital transitions.

Beyond IPA III, the EU relies on a patchwork of instruments that aim to support reform and convergence in candidate countries, but in aggregate, they risk falling short of the scale and ambition enlargement requires today.

The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, newly established for 2024–2027, channels €6 billion (grants + concessional loans) into Western Balkan reform agendas, aiming to offer selected benefits of EU membership to the region in advance of accession, boosting economic growth as well as socioeconomic convergence (European Commission, 2025).

Institution-building is further underpinned by TAIEX and Twinning, which deploy peer-to-peer expertise and civil servant exchanges. The TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) offers rapid deployment and short-term activities like workshops, expert missions, or study visits. Meanwhile, Twinning enables the institutional cooperation between public administrations in member states and partner countries with medium to long-term projects of a grant nature (European Commission, 2025).

Furthermore, rule-of-law instruments have been strengthened in response to democratic backsliding. The Rule-of-Law Conditionality Mechanism links EU funding to adherence to core values, while annual Rule-of-Law Reports highlight systemic challenges such as judicial independence, corruption, and media freedom. Meanwhile, the legacy Cooperation and Verification Mechanism demonstrates that post-accession monitoring remains possible, although it is not fully institutionalized.

Together, these instruments form a complex ecosystem capable of supporting reform. Yet coherence, sequencing, and credible enforcement remain inconsistent, limiting the overall transformative impact.

### **3. Gaps in Current Framework**

Despite the breadth of EU instruments, significant gaps persist.

Post-accession enforcement is limited, as seen in Hungary or Poland, creating hesitation among member states about admitting new members that might later challenge EU norms.

Financial governance monitoring also remains uneven, leaving corruption risks and politicized fund allocation insufficiently addressed. Without robust public financial management standards, pre-accession assistance risks failing to generate genuine structural reform.

Legitimacy concerns further undermine the process. Candidate countries being stuck in the process for decades increasingly perceive enlargement as unpredictable and politically influenced, while many EU citizens doubt the Union's capacity to integrate states with unresolved conflicts or authoritarian tendencies (euiss, 2025). This mutual mistrust erodes the credibility of enlargement as a transformative instrument.

Tying it all together, the whole accession process itself remains fraught with obstacles. Single member states can veto a candidate's accession, and the EU itself lacks budgetary and institutional absorption capacity, which poses challenges, especially for larger candidate countries like Türkiye or Ukraine. Several member states insist on reforming the EU's decision-making processes and institutions before admitting new members (Batchik, 2023). Reforming the Union's instruments for EU accession, therefore, remains the biggest conditionality for the future of EU enlargement.

#### **4. The Need for a New Enlargement Framework**

The current framework was designed for a different era, assuming long reform timelines, stable geopolitical conditions, and high political trust between Brussels and candidate governments, assumptions that no longer hold. Today, enlargement has become not just a normative endeavor but a strategic imperative. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the need for enlargement as a security measure. Yet existing instruments, conceived for gradual technical convergence, are insufficient to meet the speed and scale required under conditions of conflict, instability, and hybrid threats.

A credible strategy requires systemic reform. Monitoring, conditionality, financial governance, post-accession safeguards, and political dialogue must all be restructured. A new framework should provide early, tangible benefits to reforming countries while creating enforceable obligations that protect the Union from long-term democratic and institutional risks. In this context, a new enlargement framework is about more than speed or strategic clarity. It is about restoring enlargement as a credible engine for stability, democratic consolidation, and long-term European security, at a moment when delay carries serious geopolitical consequences.

### **Section VI: The Alternatives**

#### **Alternative 1: IPA III**

##### **1. Problem This Alternative Address**

The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) has been the European Union's flagship tool to support reforms in the enlargement regions with both financial and technical assistance. However, while it has undoubtedly yielded significant benefits over the years, several persistent issues have been identified leaving room for improvements.

A significant challenge lies in the low absorption capacity and slow implementation pace. Many IPA beneficiaries have struggled to fully utilize the funds, often due to administrative bottlenecks and weak capacity in managing projects. In some Western Balkans countries, EU auditors found it was difficult even to spend contracted IPA I funds because of low absorption ability in national administrations. For instance, Romania, in its early years of membership (2007-2013 programming period), managed to absorb only a small fraction of its allocated EU funds despite urgent development needs: just 2.96% in 2009, rising to 8.62% in 2010 and 15.1% in 2011 (Marcu et al., 2020). The cause for low absorption capacity

can be manifold, ranging from heavy procurement procedures, to frequent changes in domestic laws and institutions. These constraints can cause serious consequences that not only refer to the underutilization of funds, but more broadly to the missed development opportunities with projects that could have played a transformative role especially in the early phase of the candidate country.

Among other weaknesses is the insufficient performance-based incentives and the absence of hard conditionality. Although IPA III's programming is theoretically meant to reform progress (since it has abolished country's pre-set fixed allocation envelopes), critics argue that in practice the instrument has not fully operationalized the intended "performance-based approach and reform-oriented approach" (European Policy Center, 2023). Instead, the main criteria for approving IPA projects have remained their strategic relevance to EU objectives and their technical maturity for implementation, rather than tangible progress by the beneficiary country. Moreover, analysts note how countries experiencing reform stagnation or even democratic backsliding have not faced a proportional cut in IPA assistance. As a result, the IPA beneficiary governments lack both the predictability and a gradually increasing, sizable financial incentive to undertake the demanding reforms on the long road to EU membership. These can seriously reduce the overall leverage the EU exerts and undermines the credibility of conditionality.

Lastly, even where IPA-funded projects deliver their intended outputs, there is a legitimate concern about the enduring sustainability of these results. Especially regarding the judicial field, if national authorities are not committed to genuinely empower an independent judiciary or prosecuting high-level corruption, the improvements financed by IPA can easily stagnate or even erode, once EU pressure is off, as we are witnessing in several candidate countries already. This headache highlights a critical reality: financial assistance alone is not enough to solve deeply rooted political issues. Without strict conditionality, IPA projects can risk being one-off fixes rather than self-sustaining reforms.

## **2. Policy Idea**

This policy proposal supports a "hybrid model" that combines a more robust performance-based funding mechanism with a programmatic, development-oriented framework to gradually introduce candidates to the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) management system. Drawing inspiration from the staged accession model of recent expert recommendations (European Policy Centre, 2023), this policy

proposal suggests improvements in the remainder of the current financing period of IPA III and a fundamental design of IPA IV (2028-2034) in the next MFF.

In the short term, the EU should top-up to IPA III for the next few years based on experiences with Sector Budget Support (SBS), which has been used in the region since 2014. These performance-based contracts involve the transfer of financial resources to the National Treasury, following its fulfilment on the agreed results or milestones in a particular sector (European Commission, 2017).

Notably in the context of preparations for membership, the SBS would be a suitable instrument to support structural institutional changes. The EU could identify critical sectors (especially those linked to fundamental requirements of membership highlighted in Cluster 1) and design tailored performance benchmarks for each. A targeted top-up using SBS would be helpful to practice the administrative structures needed for managing larger EU funds in the post-accession future, such as having a solid public financial management system and transparency measure.

In order to ensure the correct use of these additional funds, the Commission should consider applying some of the experiences in the current implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The RRF, which is operated under the direct management by the European Commission, disburses money to Member States upon fulfilment of milestones, and it comes with stringent transparency and audit requirements. Notably, the RRF regulation empowers EU bodies such as the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Court of Auditors, and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) to scrutinize and protect the funds (European Policy Center, 2023). A similar approach can be taken for the IPA fund: the EU could extend the mandate of EPPO, which currently only covers EU member states, by requiring candidate countries to sign administrative cooperation agreements, allowing prosecutors to investigate fraud and crimes against the EU budget and financial interests and initiate court proceedings when needed. This innovation can be significantly transformative for increasing accountability and strengthening conditionality by targeting problems of EU funds misuses and corruption.

Moreover, to improve public trust and transparency, all IPA-financed projects should be published online on an open data platform. At a minimum, information should be available about the project objectives, amounts, implementing agencies or contractors, timelines, and beneficial owners of any companies awarded contracts. This real-time dashboard tracking funds and project results could be particularly useful in improving monitoring and exposing irregularities. Crucially, besides increasing transparency, it can link funding to reform achievement, signaling harsher conditionality in case of backsliding, and redirecting funds to civil society or independent institutions.

Without changing the fundamental structures of the instrument, these small innovations focus on proposing improvements to make the most out of the remainder of IPA III, setting the stage for the next stage.

Looking beyond 2027, the IPA IV (next MFF 2028-2034) aims at being a vehicle that truly prepares countries for membership; financially, administratively, and economically, by mirroring the processes and challenges they will eventually encounter as EU members.

Traditionally, IPA assistance has been mainly delivered through individual projects or contracts, often in favour of direct management by the Commission or by delegating implementation to “pillar-assessed” organisations, such as bilateral development agencies or international organizations. Under IPA IV, the EU should encourage and empower more advanced candidate countries to move towards multi-annual, programme-based financing, similar to the operational programs used for EU structural funds where projects are entrusted to beneficiaries’ governmental structures.

By imitating the mechanism of ESIF among Member States, this innovation would require beneficiaries to prepare multiannual partnership agreements with the European Commission outlining the objectives and purposes of financial assistance (European Policy Center, 2023). Such programmes should rely on multiannual budgetary commitments, securing requested funds with specific implementing decisions stipulated at the beginning of the programming process for a defined period of time. The amount of funds which a particular beneficiary is able to access should also depend on its capacity to make substantial progress, to plan ahead and develop a multiannual perspective. In this way, it trains candidate countries to design suitable roadmaps towards EU membership that combine the necessary reforms with the utilization of gradually increasing resources, in the spirit of the Staged Accession Model.

By managing projects on their own, this extension of ESIF-style programme management can consolidate experiences and build capacity for managing larger-scale EU funds upon future accession. This “learning by doing” outcome can be especially beneficial for the long-term integration of these candidates into the complex EU system.

### **3. Strengths**

The adoption of this hybrid model for the IPA, with short-term enhancements for the current IPA III and a deeper reform for the next cycle, aims at reinforcing the effectiveness of the instrument: not only as one

that disburses funds, but as an instrument that truly drives changes needed for a successful and sustainable EU enlargement.

Firstly, the direct linkage between performance and reform achievement ensures that EU funds can translate into actual progress. Indeed, by tying disbursements to clearly defined milestones, the Commission can delay or withhold funds whenever there are concerns about compliance or reforms lag. This “carrot and stick” mechanism can play a fundamental role in driving for crucial reforms, increasing the predictability of rewards under good performance and the conditionality of EU funds.

Secondly, the introduction of an open-access online platform where all IPA-funded projects and programs are regularly updated, ensures that the EU can fund verified results in a clearer way. This increased transparency can also help citizens to tangibly witness the benefits of EU-backed reforms as well as to improve the accountability of national governments by deterring corruption and misuse. Moreover, by introducing a rigorous oversight mechanism with the involvement of judicial bodies like the EPPO, it sends a strong signal that the misuse of EU funds will not be tolerated and any misuse or negligence will be exposed and punished.

Thirdly, by mirroring how EU member states access Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), it would be possible to gradually shift responsibilities to the candidate countries by building their administrative and institutional capacity on the way of learning. These advanced candidate countries will have the chance to formulate multi-annual development plans, prioritize investments, learn to manage complex projects, and uphold EU standards in the meantime. It will test their ability to develop long-term planning and coordination mechanisms across government ministries as well as to strengthen public procurement and financial management systems. Crucially, by directly managing these programs by themselves, candidate countries can gain ownership of the reforms and investments which can in turn improve the effectiveness of EU funds.

This innovation can be valuable as, among the most common challenges, new member states often face difficulty at managing a much larger scale of EU post accession funds. With the proposed model, by the time of accession, the candidate country’s civil servants and institutions would ideally be used to working with EU-funded programs, with officials already trained in EU procedures. This can be helpful in reducing the “entry-shock” that new members often face having to absorb huge funds or enforce complex rules without prior hands-on experience.

#### **4. Limits**

While the proposed hybrid model potentially offers many benefits, it is also important to acknowledge some of its limitations.

Firstly, its implementation requires strong domestic political will. In particular, extending the mandate of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) to non-member states via special agreements can result to be rather complex. It would require candidate countries to accept an external prosecutors' jurisdiction on national soil, which can raise sovereignty concerns. Similarly, requiring detailed transparency and open data might face significant political resistance from local officials.

Secondly, the proposed innovations to increase the administrative capacity of candidate countries can face several hurdles as it requires a certain level of capacity to get started. For instance, the shift to multiannual program management requires that candidate countries already have competent institutions and skilled personnel in the first place. However, some smaller or less developed administrations might struggle to plan for multi-annual programs. If the EU wants to hand over more responsibility but without ensuring a minimum standard, it will risk causing further inefficiencies of slow absorption or procedural bottlenecks that it aimed to solve.

Thirdly, it should not be overlooked the risk of creating additional political tension. By introducing stricter conditionality and oversight, these innovations could strain relations with some beneficiary governments. If the EU were to freeze a portion of IPA funds due to democratic backsliding on the rule of law, it could lead to diplomatic fallout or domestic political exploitation. While intended to protect EU funds, they can be portrayed by the opposition as external interference, especially in candidate countries with weak political will.

## **5. Conclusion**

By acknowledging these limitations, it is clear that financial assistance alone is not enough. It cannot solve deep political issues or fully bridge the development gap. Instead, its effectiveness is heavily contingent on the absorption capacity of domestic countries as well as their political will to preserve this progress and engage in further integration. As the countries move closer to the EU, the central role of support played by the IPA goes beyond any doubt. It aims not only to strengthen democratic institutions and public administrations by enhancing their capability and accountability, but also to enforce judicial reforms and the respect for fundamental rights required in the EU acquis. The recognition of its weaknesses is also a call for action, for structural reforms that actively work toward reforming it into a better instrument to achieve its objectives.

## **Section VI: Alternative 2: The Judicial Independence Track (JIT)**

This alternative introduces a fellowship-based secondment system for junior judges and prosecutors, linking long-term mentoring to concrete institutional reform benchmarks.

### **1. Problem This Alternative Addresses**

Judicial independence constitutes a persistent structural challenge within the EU's enlargement policy. Candidate states like the Western Balkans consistently show a staggering difference to the EU average in public trust in courts and resistance to political influence (OECD, 2025). On average, only 33% of Western Balkan citizens have trust in the judiciary system and courts compared to 56% in the EU. On top of that, only a third of people in the region believe in equality before the law, and 74% think that the main influences for judges' decisions are powerful private interests or the government. On the other hand, in a recent Eurobarometer report on EU citizens' attitudes towards EU enlargement, most respondents (44 %) consider measures to ensure candidate countries uphold the rule of law, fight corruption, and protect fundamental rights to be the largest priority for successful enlargement (Eurobarometer, 2025). Therefore, the perception gap in candidate countries must be reduced while continuously ensuring ongoing reforms of the judicial systems.

While existing reforms identify weaknesses of the judicial systems, they often fail to generate sustainable behavioural change within the institutions. The Rule of Law Report 2025 shows that proposed changes are often met with more attempts at undue interference and pressure on the system (European Western Balkans, 2025). If not mitigated, these risks will threaten the accession process as the rule of law enshrined in Art. 2 TEU has been established as a *conditio sine qua non* for successful accession, which is reflected by Chapters 23 and 24 of the accession negotiations.

The current monitoring frameworks, such as the Rule of Law Reports and GRECO evaluations, document deficiencies but have been criticized for not directly cultivating internal reform capacity and for not being sufficient as an enforcement tool (Liberties, 2024). Twinning projects have often been used for administrative and regulatory reforms, and, while some projects target judicial training, the mechanism's structural constraints make it challenging for generating systemic, career-spanning judicial reform.

### **2. Policy Idea**

In this context, the **Judicial Independence Track (JIT)** emerges as a potential alternative approach for the detailed assessment and fostering of the rule of law. The JIT combines long-term capacity building with direct exposure to EU judicial governance, seeking to adopt reform agents within domestic institutions rather than relying solely on external evaluation. It aims to support core state functions: the

independence of courts and prosecutors, as well as the absence of corruption. This specific fellowship model, in contrast to existing instruments, aims to nurture a cohort of junior judicial actors who carry new norms back into their respective institutions and maintain structured ties to EU-level mentors over multiple years.

The underlying assumption is that durable institutional change occurs when three conditions are met: (1) young, malleable actors (the fellows) are systematically exposed to EU judicial standards and practices; (2) those fellows return to their home institutions with concrete, institutionally-anchored reform mandates; and (3) their return is supported by structural protections and incentive mechanisms. In short knowledge coupled with hands-on practice and protected reintegration lead to altered incentive structures and thereby changed institutional behaviour. This causal chain is to be tested and verified through diverse monitoring indicators described below.

The concept sees junior judges, prosecutors, auditors, and court administrators from candidate countries being seconded to EU institutions such as the CJEU, EPPO or ECA for 6-12 months. The secondments consist of integration to real teams, workflows and decision-making environments. Key is for the fellows to be dealing with relevant projects which can be applied to their home institutions. This ensures sustainable and continuous outcomes rather than generic learning.

The fellows are to be nominated by their respective national bar councils or judicial associations and vetted jointly by the EU and domestic authorities. After successful selection, they are placed in EU courts, bar councils, audit institutions or anti-corruption bodies. The selection will occur against the following criteria: (i) minimum 2 years of professional experience; (ii) demonstrable independence (no ongoing disciplinary proceedings); (iii) a written reform mandate tied to a concrete benchmark project; and (iv) transparent nomination procedures (public call to applications and oversight by an independent selection committee). The selection committee will include representatives from an independent national judges' association, an EU-appointed experts panel, and the EU delegation in the country. Each nomination must be accompanied by a binding declaration from the competent national authority guaranteeing that dismissal or disciplinary measures will not be initiated against the fellow during the reintegration period without due process.

The program does not end after the secondment, as the fellows return home for reintegration with designated EU mentors who support them for the following two years. During this time, each fellow shall be tasked with implementing one judicial benchmark inside their home institution. Example benchmarks could include (i) transparent appointment and promotion procedures (introduction of publicly accessible selection criteria and procedures; publication of scoring tables and selection outcomes); (ii)

ECtHR-compliance mechanism (implementation of a standardized review and training workflow ensuring timely and consistent execution of ECtHR judgments, including documentation and monitoring protocols); or (iii) disciplinary transparency (publication of aggregate disciplinary statistics and anonymized reasoning for disciplinary decisions). For each benchmark a milestone plan with evaluation points must be established before the fellowship begins.

Young professionals can be considered both the most suitable and the most vulnerable participants in a fellowship: they are reform oriented as they are not so much shaped by established customs, yet also constrained by these established hierarchies. Reintegration success, therefore, depends on insulating fellows from retaliation and aligning their reform projects with institutional incentives rather than individual patronage. Protection measures are to include (i) temporary “protected positions” or guaranteed re-entry options upon return (time-limited, non-removable posts or equivalent arrangements); (ii) anti-reprisal and whistleblower clauses embedded in the agreements between the EU and partner authorities; (iii) rapid legal assistance (pro-bono counsel) coordinated through the EU Delegation; and (iv) anonymous reporting channels to document and escalate cases of pressure, interference or retaliation.

The JIT model draws on a broader set of secondment-based training strategies implemented in various governance settings. Examples include the European Judicial Training Network and the EU Twinning projects.

a) European Judicial Training Network: The EJTN has demonstrated that structured transnational placements can scale across diverse legal systems and foster sustained professional networks and knowledge transfer. In 2024 alone, more than 10,000 judges, prosecutors and court staff participated, with hundreds of cross-border exchanges conducted annually (EJTN, 2024). While the EJTN does not embed reintegration mechanisms or mandate institutional reform projects, the proposed JIT is designed to fill this gap by linking fellowships to concrete benchmarks, multi-year mentoring, and protected reintegration pathways. In this sense, the EJTN proves that transnational judicial training can operate effectively at scale, while the JIT extends the model from knowledge acquisition toward institutional change within the context of EU enlargement.

b) EU Twinning projects: Twinning has been widely used in accession countries to transfer administrative expertise, support legal approximation, and provide training in areas like anti-corruption, judiciary procedures, and public procurement. It has been demonstrated that sustained institutional cooperation across borders is feasible and can provide positive outcomes. At the same time, its impact is frequently constrained by budgetary limitations on staffing levels in public administrations and shortcomings in the

legal and regulatory framework which becomes even more evident in more complex sectors with many contributory factors, like the judicial system (European Commission, 2019). For the JIT, these findings underscore the importance of transnational fellowships with carefully designed reintegration and mentoring structures. The JIT builds on Twinning's proof of concept, while extending it toward deeper, reform-oriented objectives that directly target judicial independence, institutional trust, and long-term behavioural transformation.

Effective implementation of the JIT will require a robust institutional design based on coordinated action across a broad set of institutions. At the EU level, DG NEAR and DG JUST would steer overall governance and align the fellowship with enlargement objectives, supported by EU Delegations, which manage political feasibility and reintegration on the ground. This steering board is supplemented by representatives from participating countries ensuring a co-owned program and governance without unilateral decisions from Brussels. Judicial bodies such as the CJEU, EPPO and ECA would act as host institutions, exposing fellows to operational standards in adjudication, prosecution and financial oversight. Networks like the EJTN and the European Law Institute would provide training infrastructure and normative grounding. On the domestic side, judicial councils, high courts, prosecutorial offices, ministries of justice, bar associations and judicial academies would determine the quality of fellow selection, establish reintegration processes with incentives for fellows, and the institutional uptake of reform projects. This creates a multi-layered governance constellation in which the effectiveness of the JIT depends on collaboration between EU-level standard-setters, domestic judicial hierarchies and independent professional networks - each shaping a different stage of the fellowship's lifecycle.

Finally, for measuring the effectiveness of the program, the assessment requires both process and outcome indicators. Process measures could include the number of fellows placed; quality of reintegration; number of reform pilots launched; and frequency of mentor–fellow interactions. Outcome measures might track improvements in CEPEJ efficiency data; GRECO recommendation compliance; publication rates of judicial decisions; disciplinary transparency; and changes in public trust surveys. Contribution analysis could help attribute changes to fellowship interventions despite complex institutional environments.

### **3. Strengths**

If implemented under the adequate circumstances, the JIT model could offer a structural solution to a structural problem. It cultivates internal reform actors rather than relying exclusively on external compliance pressure. It strengthens ties between domestic judiciaries and EU institutions, which may foster trust and legitimacy among EU citizens who remain sceptical about enlargement. The two-year

mentoring period creates continuity and stability that many other instruments lack. Moreover, fellows tasked with implementing a single judicial benchmark can produce tangible, measurable outcomes in areas such as appointment transparency or ECtHR compliance procedures.

Candidate countries will potentially profit from a new generation of reform-minded judicial leaders. Learned attitude shifts impact behaviours, and by investing in the youth today, the judicial capacity and institutional trust are being built for years to come. Thereby, the EU's concerns regarding enlargement could be mitigated as they are directly addressed, and a new path to accession within the rule of law can be provided.

#### **4. Limitations**

For the EU, administrative feasibility poses its own constraints due to the resource-intensive nature of the program. Large-scale secondments would require harmonization of stipends, workplace supervision, language expectations and internal security clearances. EU institutions have limited capacity to absorb high numbers of external fellows. A realistic design might therefore involve multi-institutional rotation or rely on national courts in EU member states as host institutions.

For candidate countries, there is a risk of struggling to release staff for extended periods, particularly in understaffed courts with high case backlogs, which has also been shown in similar programs like twinning, even though the number of participants still is substantial (European Commission, 2019).

Also, reintegration poses another risk, as fellows could face resistance from colleagues who interpret their fellowship as foreign interference or personal ambition. Without safeguards, the initiative may generate institutional rivalry instead of reform consensus. Some states may also politicize nominations attempting to use the fellowship to reward loyalists rather than promising reformers. In the same context, if mentoring teams are insufficiently independent, domestic actors may accuse the EU of intrusive monitoring, undermining legitimacy.

Lastly, the risk of brain drain for candidate countries remains. Highly motivated fellows may seek employment in international organisations or outside their home country, rather than return and try to reform their respective environments.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the JIT offers a credible addition to the current set of enlargement instruments by directly addressing the structural causes of weak judicial independence rather than merely documenting them. Its focus on long-term development, reintegration support, and benchmark-driven reform goals allows it to bridge the persistent gap between formal and actual institutional compliance. By building a group of

professionals who return home with stronger skills and a mandate to use them, the initiative strengthens both the resilience of judicial institutions and the legitimacy of the enlargement process. At the same time, it draws on proven elements from existing models like Twinning and the EJTN while introducing missing mechanisms needed to establish systemic change. Implemented carefully, the JIT could provide a sustainable pathway for improving judicial integrity in candidate countries and thereby help sustain the credibility of EU accession as a whole. However, challenges remain, such as administrative burden, reintegration risks, unclear outcomes, and potential politicization, which limit the program's success chances. Therefore, the JIT is not to be seen as a stand-alone program but rather as an embedded initiative into a broader reform of EU enlargement policies.

## **Section VI: Alternative III The European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience (The Fellowship)**

### **1. Problem This Alternative Addresses**

The central problem addressed by this alternative is the persistent absence of a durable administrative and professional core within many candidate countries, an operational weakness that sits beneath legislative alignment and financial compliance, yet decisively shapes whether reforms endure beyond accession. Past enlargements demonstrated that even where the *acquis* was fully transposed and judicial or financial safeguards were formally established, institutions too often proved unable to internalize, coordinate, and implement these reforms consistently. Administrative units varied widely in competence, and parliamentary committees struggled to exercise oversight. What's more, regulatory bodies lacked the organizational routines required to enforce standards, while high turnover eroded institutional memory as quickly as it was built.

This is not a problem of laws on the books, nor exclusively a problem of political will. It is a problem of everyday state capability, the quiet, progressive, and cumulative practices through which policy is drafted, budgets are managed, oversight is exercised, and reforms are translated into operating procedures. This layer is where most enlargement successes have been solidified, and where most disappointments have ultimately taken root. It is also the institutional stratum least supported by the EU's existing toolbox. Instruments such as Twinning and TAIEX provide valuable injections of expertise, but their short time horizons, one-directional format, and project-based logic do not generate the professional ecosystems, shared standards, or long-term administrative cultures that resilient governance actually requires.

The consequence is a recurrent pattern: candidate countries improve on paper, sometimes significantly, yet remain vulnerable in practice. When administrations lack the capacity to coordinate policy coherently, to maintain procedural discipline, or to insulate themselves from political shocks, reforms degrade quickly after accession—precisely when EU conditionality weakens. This operational fragility undermines the credibility of enlargement as a whole. It feeds the scepticism of Member States wary of importing instability, frustrates citizens in candidate countries who see reforms evaporate, and constrains the EU's ability to rely on new members as effective partners in decision-making.

The Fellowship alternative exists to target this specific layer of the enlargement problem. It recognizes that human capital, professional identity, and embedded administrative competence are not by-products of legal approximation but are themselves preconditions for reform durability. In that sense, it responds to a gap that neither financial governance reforms nor judicial independence measures can reach: the cultivation of a stable, skilled, and interconnected administrative cadre capable of sustaining reforms long after the accession ceremony has passed.

## 2. Policy Idea

The European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience proposes a structural shift in how the European Union cultivates administrative capability in candidate countries. Rather than relying on short-term technical assistance or episodic expert missions, the fellowship establishes a sustained, reciprocal system of institutional embedding. Its central premise is simple but transformative: the EU and candidate states should train the future custodians of enlargement together, inside each other's institutions, and with reform agendas defined locally rather than exported.

The fellowship is built around mixed cohorts of mid-career professionals drawn from EU institutions, Member State administrations, and the core public bodies of candidate countries, including parliaments, ministries, audit offices, regulatory agencies, and strategically relevant civil-society organizations. These individuals are not deployed as consultants or external advisors. They become temporary members of the institutions they join, integrated into real teams, real workflows, and real decision-making environments. This embedded design allows them to absorb not only formal procedures, but the informal organizational cultures, problem-solving methods, and professional norms that shape public governance in practice.

A defining feature of the model is its reciprocity. Candidate-country fellows rotate through Brussels, Strasbourg, and selected Member State ministries, gaining first-hand exposure to the routines of EU

lawmaking, policy coordination, and financial governance. At the same time, EU officials and experts undertake parallel placements within the institutions of candidate countries, working alongside their peers on institution-driven priorities. This two-way circulation is central: it avoids the asymmetry inherent in traditional capacity-building instruments and replaces it with a genuine administrative partnership in which both sides learn, and both sides adapt.

Crucially, the reform agenda is not scripted in Brussels. Host institutions in candidate states determine the thematic focus of each placement cycle, whether strengthening parliamentary scrutiny, improving budget oversight, modernizing procurement processes, upgrading case-management systems, or embedding ethical and integrity procedures. Fellows are assigned not to generic projects, but to concrete institutional challenges identified by those who understand them best. This ensures relevance, reduces resistance, and aligns the fellowship with domestic reform trajectories rather than imposing external templates.

The programme's governance reflects the same logic of co-ownership. A joint steering board, comprising the European Commission and representatives of participating candidate governments, with Member States, the European Parliament, and independent oversight bodies in supporting roles, sets the strategic direction and supervises implementation. Its role is not to micromanage but to guarantee transparency, quality, and continuity while respecting national priorities.

By bringing together professionals who will one day constitute the administrative backbone of both the EU and its future members, the fellowship aims to build something the existing toolkit has never achieved: a shared European administrative community that grows before accession rather than after it. In doing so, it seeks to replace episodic assistance with embedded cooperation and conditionality with genuine co-creation, laying the human foundations for resilient governance once accession is achieved.

### 3. Strengths

The principal strength of this alternative lies in its ability to address a dimension of enlargement that has consistently eluded the EU's institutional toolkit: the cultivation of an administrative ecosystem capable of translating legal convergence into durable, day-to-day governance. While legislative approximation and financial safeguards are indispensable, they remain inert without an operational cadre able to interpret rules, coordinate policy, and maintain institutional continuity. The fellowship directly targets this foundation by embedding mixed cohorts of practitioners within the organs of state that ultimately determine whether reforms succeed or unravel.

A second strength stems from the fellowship's capacity to generate horizontal professional networks long before accession. Past enlargements demonstrate that enduring reform depends as much on relationships and shared professional identities as on formal procedures. By enabling auditors, policy officers, committee staff, regulators, and analysts from both sides of the accession line to work together as peers, rather than as trainers and recipients, the fellowship creates a framework of trust and familiarity that can outlast electoral cycles and buffer institutions against politicization. These networks, once formed, become informal channels for collaboration, problem-solving, and early warning, assets that no regulation or funding programme can manufacture.

Third, the fellowship enhances domestic legitimacy, a factor often overlooked in enlargement debates but essential for the durability of reforms. As the thematic priorities of each placement are defined by host parliaments, ministries, and oversight bodies, the programme avoids the paternalism associated with externally designed conditionality. For candidate-country officials, participation is an investment in their own institutions rather than compliance with outside demands. For citizens, it provides a visible, credible signal that reform is not merely symbolic, but anchored in concrete improvements in administrative practice.

Finally, the fellowship strengthens future EU capacity in a way that other alternatives cannot. By exposing candidate-country officials to the internal workings of the EU and exposing EU officials to the administrative realities of candidate states, it prepares both sides for the operational demands of a Union of 30 or more members. It builds familiarity with EU procedures, reduces coordination frictions, and equips future Member State administrations with the fluency required to participate effectively from day one. In an era where the EU's own administrative bandwidth is stretched, this is not a marginal advantage but a structural one.

#### 4. Limitations

Despite its strategic value, the fellowship cannot, on its own, resolve the deeper structural vulnerabilities that have impeded past enlargements. Its first and most evident limitation is that it does not address the integrity of financial governance. Administrative professionalism is necessary for effective absorption of pre-accession assistance, but it is not sufficient. Without rule-based incentives, transparent procurement systems, independent oversight mechanisms, and enforceable anti-fraud safeguards, even the best-trained officials remain constrained by systemic weaknesses beyond their control. The fellowship strengthens the

human capacity to manage EU funds, but it cannot substitute for the financial architecture required to deploy them responsibly.

A second limitation lies in the relationship between administrative capacity and judicial independence. While the fellowship can improve procedural discipline and managerial competence, it cannot ensure impartial courts, insulated prosecutors, or effective anti-corruption enforcement. The vulnerabilities exposed in earlier enlargements, such as selective prosecution, political interference in appointments, or inconsistent case management, are institutional pathologies that require legal and constitutional remedies, not administrative exchange programmes. In the absence of a parallel commitment to judicial resilience, administrative improvements risk being overshadowed or reversed.

A third limitation concerns leverage. The fellowship is intentionally cooperative and host-driven. This is one of its strengths, but it also means that it does not generate the kind of conditionality necessary to correct entrenched political resistance or to deter democratic backsliding. Participation creates opportunities for reform-minded officials, but it cannot compel political elites to adopt or respect those reforms. In contexts where vested interests are strong and reform coalitions fragile, this lack of binding force limits the programme's capacity to secure systemic change.

Finally, the fellowship is operationally demanding. Its reciprocal structure, long-duration placements, and embedded design require sustained coordination between the Commission, Member States, and candidate governments. This is considerably more complex than dispatching short-term experts or funding discrete technical projects. It also makes the programme more vulnerable to fluctuations in political commitment, administrative bandwidth, or diplomatic constraints.

## 5. Conclusion

Taken on its own terms, the European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience offers a compelling answer to one of the most underestimated determinants of enlargement success: the strength and continuity of the administrative actors who are responsible for implementing, coordinating, and sustaining reforms long after accession. By embedding EU and candidate-country professionals within each other's institutions, the fellowship cultivates precisely the kind of shared administrative language, professional ethos, and cross-border networks that no legal approximation or compliance checklist can generate. In doing so, it provides a foundation for reform resilience that is both deeper and more politically durable than traditional technical assistance.

Yet the very features that make the fellowship valuable, its cooperative logic, its reliance on institutional ownership, its focus on human capability rather than conditionality, also define its limits. It cannot correct systemic weaknesses in financial governance, nor can it insulate judicial authorities from political pressure. It does not create the enforcement or incentive structures needed to shift entrenched patterns of institutional behaviour. For these reasons, the fellowship is best understood not as a self-standing solution, but as a crucial component of a broader transformation in how the EU prepares future members to enter and operate within a Union that will soon include thirty or more states.

Strategically, this matters far beyond the administrative domain. A Union seeking to maintain geopolitical credibility, uphold democratic values, and manage the pressures of enlargement cannot rely on legislative alignment alone. It requires candidate countries whose institutions function with the professionalism, transparency, and resilience expected within the EU. Furthermore, it requires an EU that understands the operational realities of the states it seeks to integrate. The fellowship is uniquely positioned to advance this goal. It strengthens the human infrastructure of enlargement and helps rebuild trust between the EU and its partners at a moment when that trust is both fragile and geopolitically consequential.

In this sense, the fellowship is not merely a capacity-building tool. It is a strategic investment in the future coherence of the Union. It is powerful, distinctive, and indispensable, yet incomplete without the financial and institutional reforms addressed in the other alternatives. Only when combined with those measures does it become part of a coherent architecture capable of delivering the resilient, credible, and future-ready enlargement that Europe's current moment demands.

## **Section VII: Recommendation**

While each of the three individually proposed initiatives; reform of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), the Judicial Independence Track (JIT), and the European Partnership Fellowship for Democratic Resilience, offers unique perspective on longstanding weaknesses in the EU enlargement process, a deeper examination reveals that the structural challenges in their practical implementation are not isolated issues.

Rather, these persistent challenges due to weak administrative capacity, judicial integrity, and the fragile sustainability of reform progress are strategically interconnected: they reinforce each other in a way that undermines the overall efficiency of EU alignment and conditionality.

The recognition of this interdependence led to the creation of a unified response that brings these three pillars into a coordinated framework. Together, they provide a coherent and mutually reinforcing strategy that tackles the systemic obstacles hampering EU accession and aim to strengthen the credibility and resilience of the enlargement process.

The core logic of this unified architecture lies in its ability to transform overlapping vulnerabilities into strategic complementarities. Indeed, this policy proposal believes that the combination of three complementary pillars creates a synergy that enhances the effectiveness of each other, ensuring that financial incentives, rule of law standards, and administrative capacity-building work in concert.

Starting from the explanation of the functional interaction of this comprehensive approach, we proceed to analyse their risks and mitigation strategies.

#### a. Architecture of our unified recommendation

Starting from the IPA, it represents the financial engine that motivates candidate countries to pursue structural reform to gradually achieve EU integration. The alternative proposed aims at strengthening the EU's pre-accession funding tool by building a more robust performance-based funding mechanism while gradually introducing beneficiaries towards the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) management system, where projects are entrusted to beneficiaries' governmental structures. Mirroring the ESIF-approach for EU member states, advanced candidate countries would be able to plan multiannual Partnership Agreements with the European Commission, outlining the objectives and purposes of financial assistance. The role of the Commission would ideally pivot from direct implementation to advising, monitoring, and ensuring compliance with EU standards. However, while it is true that this managed transition builds local capacity in the respect of a staged accession that allow candidate countries to "learn by doing" by assuming more responsibility and autonomy, the access to this advanced phase is conditional on candidate countries having already built a solid administrative preparedness and a robust public financial management system. This can become a crucial constraint. Recent analysis indicates that many Western Balkans IPA beneficiary countries face persistent struggle with low absorption rates, delayed procurement, and regulatory instability (Open Society Foundations, 2024). These structural

weaknesses have serious consequences that undermine the efficient and prompt use of funds, leaving potentially transformative projects either incomplete or unsustainable.

Having financial motivations is not merely sufficient to solve the deep institutional vulnerability. If there is not a solid institutional foundation, reforms risk being fragmented. If there are no firm administrative and professional capabilities to coordinate policies coherently and to maintain procedural discipline, progress risks dismantling and crumbling into pieces. In the context where the EU's credibility is under unprecedented threat, this risks further exacerbating the fragility of EU conditionality.

This is where other pillars step in, with the Judicial Independence Track (JIT) and the European Partnership Fellowship representing respectively the anchor of the rule of law and the backbone in building administrative resilience.

On one hand, the JIT targets one of the most critical requirements among the EU Clusters of negotiating chapters which is also one of the key areas for the distribution of IPA funds: the establishment of an independent judiciary and robust anti-corruption capacity. By embedding promising junior judges, prosecutors, and court staff from candidate countries in EU justice institutions, fellows are able to learn EU standards of judicial conduct and case management. This new cohort of judicial professionals returns back with concrete reform missions and benchmarks for their home institutions, such as setting up a monitoring system for the enforcement of corruption rulings or enhancing a better enforcement of anti-fraud measures in managing EU funds, aligned with OLAF and EPPO standards.

This track thus has the potential to create an enduring channel for norm transfer: it is not only about building individual capacities, but rather about cultivating active change makers within the domestic judiciary system, complementing IPA's high level conditionalities. The JIT fellows, insulated by reintegration protections, become internal guardians of the rule of law, driving durable changes while upholding EU values. Indeed, in synergy with IPA reform, the presence of an independent judiciary is fundamental in ensuring a credible conditionality, reinforcing the deterrence effect of EPPO's extended reach, and pushing for the creation of an open data dashboard where all IPA-financed projects should be published.

On the other hand, the European Partnership Fellowship completes the architecture by targeting a frequently neglected but essential condition for sustained reform: the everyday administrative and professional capacity in government bodies, parliaments, and agencies. While IPA funds and laws may be put in place, reforms will not sustain if there are no competent and motivated people in the system who can carry them out in a consistent way.

Different from the usual “one-sided teaching”, the Fellowship goes even farther than existing instruments like Twinning as it fosters co-learning exchanges between candidate countries’ officials who will be able to gain first-hand insights into EU policy coordination and regulatory implementation, and EU officials who can better understand the domestic challenges and adapt support accordingly.

During this reciprocal experience, fellows will have the opportunity to work together on a policy challenge defined by the host institutions that identifies a specific reform or capacity gap where an embedded expert could help. These assignments allow both parts to identify context-specific bottlenecks and generate tailored solutions.

In the unified architecture, this Fellowship creates an important space for lasting professional relationships and shared problem-solving ethos needed to carry forward reforms and absorb EU funds effectively. For instance, as advanced candidate countries in the IPA Reform gradually shifts aid into programmatic, multiannual funding, fellows would be already prepared on planning and managing complex investment programs thanks to practical insights and experiences gained from EU institutions.

With the JIT enhancing integrity at the judicial core, the Fellowship diffuses professional norms and administrative competencies across the broader governance structure. Their combination helps mitigate the absorption capacity gap that has traditionally plagued IPA beneficiaries by ensuring that it is no longer a bottleneck because trained personnel and efficient procedures are already in place.

In summary, each pillar compensates for the limitation of the others, each filling a gap that the others cannot address by their own. The IPA Reform brings financial incentives but depends on the presence of competent institutions and credible accountability mechanisms to be efficient. The JIT provides the legal safeguards and judicial integrity that are necessary for conditionality to be credible. The Fellowship ensures institutional resilience by building the capability to design, implement, and sustain the reforms. Only by working together, they are able to form a robust architecture that tackles enlargement from all aspects.

#### b. Risks and Mitigation

Implementing this ambitious, multi-faceted approach entails certain risks. We identify these key challenges, along with their strategic mitigation measures.

##### Political resistance and sovereignty concerns

A primary risk arises regarding political resistance from candidate countries who might perceive some of the aspects of this package – such as the extension of EPPO’s jurisdiction or the acceptance of foreign officials in domestic institutions – as intrusive and a violation of their national sovereignty. Indeed,

stricter conditionality, transparency requirements of the open data dashboard, and external prosecution of fraud can all face potential pushback from domestic political actors who portrayed it as an attempt to impose further external pressure.

To mitigate this risk, it is important that the EU frames these measures as part of a partnership aimed at improving their road towards deeper EU integration rather than unilateral enforcement from Brussels. For instance, the reciprocal nature of the Fellowship is a clear example of mutual learning and joint problem-solving between the EU and candidate country officials. Moreover, the sequencing of this package allows candidate governments to progressively engage with its components, reducing political shock and enabling gradual trust-building.

#### Administrative overload and institutional capacity constraints

Due to the extensive nature of multiple interlinked accession instruments, the administrative burden has to be considered carefully. Both EU and candidate country institutions may face capacity constraints when coordinating IPA reform, judicial secondments, and fellowship programs in parallel. The risk therefore lies in implementation bottlenecks or reduced effectiveness, considering the JIT and Fellowship program rely on participation on a larger scale.

This issue is addressed through a phased implementation strategy and a clear allocation of institutional responsibilities, as outlined in section VIII below. Rather than launching all components simultaneously at full scale, our proposal prioritizes pilot phases with limited geographical and thematic scope. Existing administrative structures and delivery channels are leveraged wherever possible to avoid duplication, while coordination mechanisms ensure coherence across pillars. By embedding learning and adjustment cycles early on, administrative overload is contained and managed proactively.

#### Uneven impact across candidate countries

The proposed integrated package may initially benefit more advanced candidate countries with higher baseline administrative and judicial capacity, raising concerns about differentiated accession trajectories or a perceived “two-speed” enlargement process, amplifying trends we have seen over the past decade. Less advanced candidates may struggle to meet the entry conditions required to fully benefit from the proposed instruments.

To mitigate this risk, the proposal's architecture is deliberately modular and scalable. Each pillar can be accessed independently and at different levels of intensity, allowing candidate countries to engage according to their institutional readiness. Importantly, early engagement through the Fellowship pillar provides a pathway for less advanced candidates to build the foundational administrative capacity necessary to progressively access more advanced components of the package. The first steps are not dependent on institutional capacities as the Fellowship is a scalable model adapting to the needs and specifications of each country.

#### Limited measurability of long-term impact

A further challenge lies in measuring the long-term impact of capacity-building and norm-transfer instruments, particularly those relying on human capital development such as fellowships and judicial secondments. Without clear indicators and KPIs, there is a risk that the effectiveness of these measures could be questioned by stakeholders of budgetary authorities.

This risk is addressed through a structured monitoring and evaluation framework combining cross-pillar and pillar-specific indicators as outlined in section VIII in detail. Quantitative metrics are complemented by qualitative assessments, peer reviews, and ex-post evaluations to capture institutional change over time. Clear exit options and adjustment mechanisms are also built into the design, ensuring that underperforming components can be adjusted or discontinued if deemed necessary. By linking evaluation outcomes to future funding and participation decisions, the proposal strengthens accountability while preserving flexibility.

#### Overall assessment

In combination, these mitigation strategies ensure that the proposed integrated approach does not amplify risk through complexity, but instead manages it through sequencing, modularity, and institutional learning. While the unified package is more ambitious than any single alternative, its design successfully addresses political, administrative, and operational challenges in today's EU accession procedures. As a result, the remaining risks remain proportionate to the strategic gains in resilience, credibility, and sustainability of EU enlargement.

## **Section VIII: Implementation and Evaluation**

### **a. Governance Structure**

The successful implementation of this comprehensive architecture requires a clearly defined governance framework that ensures accountability, transparency, and sustained cooperation across all levels of the EU enlargement process. Given the multi-pillar nature of the proposal, governance must combine central strategic oversight with decentralized operational responsibility.

At the EU level, the European Commission is central to this structure, which will play the key role of coordinator who monitors and administers funding and proposes increases in pre-accession assistance as candidate countries advance. Through its Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), in close cooperation with DG JUDT and DG BUDG, the Commission will design the reform roadmaps with each candidate country, integrate the instruments into the accession framework, and ensure coherence with existing enlargement tools. The Commission will conduct an annual assessment of beneficiaries' progress using its established five-point scale for readiness (from "early stage" to "well advanced") across fundamental reform areas of the Cluster 1 fundamentals. These evaluations will be used by the Commission to recommend moving countries through the various phases based on measurable reform milestones and strict conditionality. In case of serious democratic backsliding or anti-reform actions, funding disbursement may be suspended or reversed in accordance with safeguards inspired by the Recovery and Resilience facility (RFR) model.

Based on these recommendations, the Council of Ministers will decide when to launch the pilot and its future expansion. To prevent politicized blockages, Member States should consider streamlined decision-making arrangements, by using, for instance, qualified majority voting (QMV) for intermediate steps during the process, while preserving unanimity for core accession decisions.

On the national side, the governments, judicial authorities, and administrative bodies of each participating country will be the primary actor in implementing required reforms, in alignment with EU acquis. In the pilot phase, the chosen country's government will work in partnership with the European Commission to carry out the reform roadmap. It is important that domestic institutions demonstrate the capacity and political will to implement EU acquis in practice, especially focusing on Cluster 1 fundamentals (judicial reforms, anti-corruption, public administration).

Each pillar is supported by dedicated operational governance arrangements. The reformed IPA pillar is administered under the responsibility of DG near, in cooperation with national coordinating structures and

the relevant ministries. Where applicable, OLAF and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) provide oversight and enforcement support for the protection of the EU's financial interests.

The Judicial Independence Track is implemented in coordination with EU judicial institutions, national judicial councils, and the relevant professional bodies. Host institutions within the EU are responsible for mentoring and training fellows, while reintegration and follow-up responsibilities are shared with domestic judicial authorities to ensure that acquired expertise translates into institutional reform upon return.

The European Partnership Fellowship is jointly managed by the Commission and participating host institutions within EU administrations, parliaments, and agencies. Sending institutions in candidate countries retain responsibility for defining reform-relevant placements and ensuring the reintegration of fellows into positions where learned skills can have systemic impact.

Overall, this governance structure balances EU-level strategic steering with national ownership and operational flexibility. By clearly allocating responsibilities across institutions and pillars, it reduces coordination failures while preserving the adaptability necessary for a diverse set of candidate countries.

#### **b. Phased implementation**

The proposed policy rolls out in three phases: pilot, expansion, and integration, each governed by specific objectives, criteria, and decision points. It aims at starting with a frontrunner candidate country (Phase 1), followed by a gradual scaling up to include other countries (Phase 2), and culminating in the approach becoming a permanent pillar of the EU accession framework (Phase 3). This sequencing allows the EU to test, adapt, and gradually institutionalize the framework while managing risks.

##### Phase 1: Pilot (Learning Phase)

The first phase of this long-term plan involves launching the reform architecture in a single, advanced candidate country in order to test the concept on a small scale. The objective is to pilot the combined IPA reform, Judicial Independence Track, and European Partnership Fellowship functioning together so as to generate concrete insights on institutional, procedural, and political feasibility. This initial phase prioritizes learning over scale. It seeks to identify strengths, bottlenecks, and unintended effects related to institutional coordination, administrative capacity, political acceptance, and implementation costs, before the broader rollout and therefore providing the opportunity of adjustments to the measures.

The pilot should be conducted in one well-prepared candidate country. It is important to choose a country with demonstrated solid progress on the rule of law and administrative capacity as well as in Cluster 1 fundamentals in general. These countries with relatively high readiness scores provide a controlled environment for testing the framework. For instance, among the Western Balkans, Montenegro is widely considered as the frontrunner in EU accession. By December 2025, it has provisionally closed a total of 12 out of 33 negotiating chapters, more than any other regional candidate (European Council, 2025). In terms of the level of preparedness, Montenegro scores highest among Western Balkans candidates in a ranking based on the quantification of the Commission's 2023 annual assessment that rates it at 3.07 (on a 5 point scale) in Cluster 1 reforms (CEP, 2024).

In this phase, the selected test country will begin to participate in specific EU institutions, programs, and policy areas on a limited scale as envisioned in the Fellowship Partnership. These exchanges will foster familiarization with EU decision-making dynamics as well as create peer relationships and dialogue channels. Simultaneously, substantial technical and administrative assistance will be provided to build local capacity to manage IPA top-ups through Sector Budget Support (SBS) instruments.

The Commission should establish a steering committee to oversee the pilot, composed of representatives from DG NEAR, DG JUST, OLAF, EPPO, and the beneficiary government. This committee will meet quarterly to review progress and identify areas of improvements and gaps where the framework can be refined before expansion. A clear set of performance indicators and reform milestones will be agreed upon from the outset, against which results will be evaluated. All findings and lessons learned will be documented in a report shared with all Member States and other candidates to ensure transparency and knowledge transfer.

## Phase 2: Expansion (Upscaling and Adaptation)

In this second phase, the EU will expand the staged integration program to additional candidate countries that meet the established readiness requirements. The goal of this expansion includes not only upscaling, multiplying the impact by covering more countries and more policy areas, but also adapting the approach to different national contexts. The lessons and the experiences learned at the previous phase are crucial for the transformation of the pilot from a single-country experiment to a structured regional reform mechanism.

Eligibility for expansion will be based on clear criteria which will determine which additional candidates can join and when. The primary benchmark remains progress on fundamental reforms (Cluster 1), since the credibility of expansion depends on rewarding those who have seriously committed to EU values and standards. As a guideline, countries entering into Phase 2 should have at least achieved a “moderately prepared” rating (3/5) in the Fundamentals cluster of the Commission’s report. In practice, this result would signal both institutional maturity and political commitment to EU values, representing improvements in judicial independence, rule of law, and democratic institutions. Expansion decisions are informed by Commission evaluations and approved by the Council.

During this phase, instruments are adjusted to reflect country-specific needs and administrative capacities. While the core architecture remains consistent, the intensity, sequencing and scope of each pillar may vary. Continuous monitoring ensures that expansion does not dilute standards or overburden administrative systems.

### Phase 3: Integration (Institutionalization as an Accession Pillar)

This final phase of this staged integration approach marks the transition from a temporary initiative to a formal, permanent pillar of the EU accession framework. At this stage, the process is fully institutionalized: it becomes the standard pathway for all candidate countries, and it is integrated into the EU enlargement policy supported by stable legal and budgetary arrangements.

Phase 3 will initiate once the previous expansion phase has shown to be a success and there is consensus that gradual integration should be a permanent feature of this new approach. Preconditions may include: (1) participating countries have maintained progress resilience and no major backsliding had occurred, and (2) the EU has internally adapted to welcome enlargement, ranging from decision-making process reforms to budget adjustments for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034.

Once institutionalized, the framework provides a predictable and structured model for staged integration, linking financial support, judicial integrity, and administrative capacity-building throughout the accession process. This ensures continuity, reduces uncertainty, and strengthens the credibility of enlargement as a long-term policy commitment.

### **c. Monitoring and evaluation framework**

The effectiveness of the proposed enlargement policy package depends not only on its design, but on the EU's ability to monitor progress, assess impact, and adjust instruments accordingly. Given the multi-pillar structure of the proposal, the monitoring and evaluation framework combines cross-pillar indicators that capture systemic change with pillar-specific indicators tailored to the distinct objectives of the IPA reform, the Judicial Independence Track, and the European Partnership Fellowship.

The framework follows three main principles. First, evaluation focuses on institutional outcomes rather than formal compliance alone. Second, quantitative indicators are complemented by qualitative assessments and peer reviews to capture complex governance effects. Third, monitoring results are directly connected to funding decisions, scaling-up choices, and participation conditions, thereby reinforcing accountability and credibility throughout the accession process.

#### Cross-pillar indicators

Cross-pillar indicators measure whether the combined architecture achieves its overarching objective: strengthening institutional resilience and reducing the risk of post-accession backsliding.

A first key indicator is reform continuity and stability. This indicator captures whether core reforms adopted in the areas of judicial independence, anti-corruption, and public administration remain intact over time or are subsequently weakened through legislative amendments or institutional restructuring. Measurement is based on the number of reform reversals or dilutive amendments affecting Cluster 1 fundamentals within a defined period, as well as the average time between the adoption and modification of key reform measures. Data sources include European Commission enlargement reports, national legislative records, and opinions issued by bodies such as the Venice Commission. A low frequency of reversals and longer reform durability signal that reforms are embedded within domestic institutions rather than being driven by short-term political incentives.

A second cross-pillar indicator assesses administrative execution capacity. This indicator measures whether public administrations are capable of translating reform commitments and EU funding into timely and effective implementation. It focuses on the average delay between planned and actual implementation of EU-funded programs, as well as the proportion of projects completed within their original timelines. Data are drawn from IPA implementation reports, Commission monitoring data, and

national managing authority records. Improvements in execution capacity indicate that financial incentives, administrative training, and institutional safeguards are reinforcing each other as planned.

Third, the framework evaluates the integrity of public financial management. This indicator examines the prevalence and handling of irregularities in EU-funded programs by tracking the number and financial volume of detected cases, as well as the proportion of cases that result in financial corrections, recovery of funds, or judicial follow-up. Relevant data are provided by OLAF annual reports, EPPO activity reports, and findings by the European Court of Auditors. A decline in irregularities per volume of funds disbursed, combined with higher follow-up rates, reflects the effectiveness of strengthened judicial oversight and administrative accountability mechanisms.

Finally, absorptive sustainability measures whether reforms and investments remain functional after their initial implementation phase. This indicator tracks the share of EU-funded projects that remain operational two years after completion and assesses whether national budgets provide adequate resources for maintenance and operational costs. Project evaluations and national budget execution data serve as primary sources. High sustainability rates suggest that administrative capacity, legal safeguards, and financial planning are aligned to produce lasting outcomes rather than short-lived compliance.

#### Pillar-specific indicators

In addition to these systemic indicators, the framework includes tailored evaluation criteria for each individual pillar to assess whether they perform their intended functions within the integrated architecture.

A key indicator of the IPA Reform pillar is the operationalization and effectiveness of performance-based allocation. This indicator assesses the degree to which IPA disbursements are tied to demonstrable progress in fundamental reforms, especially those falling under Cluster 1 (including judiciary, anti-corruption, and public administration reform). The credible implementation of performance-based logic strengthens the logic of conditionality and enhances incentives for sustained reforms.

A second important indicator for IPA reform concerns national ownership and programmatic planning capacity. This is evaluated by comparing the share of IPA funding managed through multiannual sector programmes, such as Sector Budget Support (SBS) or Partnership Agreements, to ad hoc project funding. An increasing number of programmatic funding indicates the candidate countries' progress in acquiring the institutional maturity required for eventual transition to ESIF-style fund management. Evidence of such transitions would include the establishment of national managing authorities, independent audit

systems, robust financial oversight bodies, operational fraud detection mechanisms, and the functionality of open data portals for IPA-funded projects.

A third performance indicator for IPA reform measures the disbursement efficiency and fund absorption capacity. Metrics can include the average time between project approval and actual disbursement, the proportion of allocated funds executed every year, and the timeliness of procurement and contract execution. Improvements in these areas would suggest that candidate countries are developing the procedural discipline and institutional competence necessary to manage EU instruments in an efficient way.

The Judicial Independence Track is evaluated primarily in terms of its institutional impact and the rule of law anchoring rather than individual training outputs. A core indicator is reintegration and retention, measuring the number of fellows who return to reform-relevant judicial or prosecutorial positions and remain in such roles for a defined period following their return. Data are collected from program records and national judicial councils. Institutional spillover effects are measured by tracking the introduction of new judicial procedures, monitoring mechanisms, or compliance units linked to fellows' reform mandates. In addition, alignment of judicial practice with EU standards is measured through indicators such as case backlog reduction, consistency in corruption-related rulings, and conviction rates in high-level corruption cases, drawing on court statistics and peer review assessments.

The European Partnership Fellowship is evaluated based on its contribution to administrative resilience and policy implementation capacity. Indicators assess the relevance of fellowship placements to predefined reform priorities, the completion of assigned policy tasks, and the post-fellowship institutional impact of returning participants. This includes tracking the number of reform initiatives initiated by fellows, their integration into IPA planning or coordination units, and their continued engagement with EU counterparts. Network sustainability is measured through the extent of ongoing professional interaction between fellows and host institutions, including joint initiatives or advisory exchanges, as recorded in program alumni networks and Commission coordination data.

### Evaluation cycle and mechanisms

Monitoring data are collected semi-annually and reviewed by the European Commission in cooperation with relevant EU bodies and national authorities. A unified Resilience Scoreboard identifies and evaluates all the data. The results directly inform decisions on progression between implementation phases,

adjustments to funding modalities, and eligibility for expanded participation. The Scoreboard relies on a three layer framework:

- Green: Milestones have been met → Next tranche or integration step is released.
- Amber: Partial progress → Corrective plan is being put in place (6-month window).
- Red: Failure → Funds are being re-channeled to alternative implementers.

At the end of each implementation phase, independent evaluations combine quantitative indicators with targeted qualitative assessments to capture institutional dynamics that may not be fully reflected in numerical data.

Where monitoring reveals persistent underperformance, reform reversals, or misuse of funds, corrective measures include recalibration of instruments, targeted capacity support, or temporary suspension of participation. By linking evaluation outcomes directly to conditionality and phase progression, the framework ensures that the integrated approach remains adaptive, credible, and firmly oriented toward measurable institutional change rather than formal compliance alone.

#### **d. Budgetary and capacity considerations**

The financial and administrative feasibility of the proposed integrated policy on EU level depends on its ability to operate largely within existing budgetary structures while reallocating resources toward higher impact instruments. Rather than requiring the creation of a new standalone funding envelope, the proposal is designed to build on the current IPA framework complemented by targeted reallocations as portrayed above.

From a budgetary perspective, the IPA remains the central financial vehicle through which the integrated framework operates. While an additional top-up funding would be beneficial, it is not strictly necessary for its viability. Instead, the unified architecture is deliberately designed to work primarily within the existing IPA framework by strategically reorienting present allocations towards mechanisms that deliver higher impact. This includes a gradual expansion of Sector Budget Support (SBS) contracts and Partnership Agreements, as well as the progressive decentralization of implementation responsibilities to national administrations as their capacities mature, reflecting the principle of “learning by doing”. All these changes focus on redistributing existing resources from a fragmented project-based approach to performance-based modalities. Over time, this shift is intended to reduce systemic inefficiencies such as low absorption rates, delayed procurement cycles, and complex administrative tasks.

The Judicial Independence Track and the European Partnership Fellowship complement this financial architecture through targeted investments in institutional integrity and administrative resilience. Their budgetary profiles are deliberately modest and scalable, reflecting their function as catalytic rather than resource-intensive instruments. By relying on temporary placements within existing EU institutions and national administrations, these programs minimize fixed costs while maximizing exposure to EU governance practices. Budgetary requirements are largely confined to stipends, mobility, and coordination costs, allowing expenditures to remain proportionate to participation levels and adjustable across implementation phases. Budgetary details would not divert heavily from existing similar instruments like Twinning.

Administratively, potential challenges are addressed through the proposal's phased design as mapped out in section 8 b) with limited demands in the pilot phase on both EU and national levels. The proposed sequencing avoids premature decentralization due to the overseeing coordinating role of the European Commission and therefore does not lead to inconsistent administrative procedures. As the proposal moves into the expansion phase, administrative responsibilities increase proportionately with anticipated capacity gains due to human capital training in the respective Fellowship programs.

In the medium term, the integrated approach is expected to generate efficiency gains by reducing project delays, lowering the incidence of financial irregularities, and increasing the sustainability of funded investments. By addressing administrative capacity, judicial integrity, and financial incentives simultaneously, the framework aims to reduce the need for ex post corrective measures that have historically imposed significant costs on both the EU and candidate countries. Moreover, early exposure to EU budgetary and administrative standards is intended to smooth the transition to post-accession fund management, reducing the risk of capacity shocks following membership.

Finally, the institutionalization of the framework in Phase 3 is explicitly linked to the EU's internal budgetary and administrative readiness for enlargement. Integration into the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework ensures long term predictability while anchoring the approach within the EU's broader fiscal governance architecture. This alignment reinforces the proposal's core premise: that credible enlargement requires not only reforms in candidate countries but also reforms within the EU itself.

#### **e. Political feasibility**

The political feasibility of the proposals relies on its ability to reconcile the diverse interests of EU members and institutions and candidate countries all while maintaining credibility and integrity of the enlargement process.

With continuous enlargement being a topic of significant political sensitivity among the member states themselves, the proposal may be confronted from within the EU. To address potential concerns, the proposal emphasizes a performance-based approach, tying all inputs to measurable reform outcomes as detailed above. This aligns with the principles of the European Council's conclusions on enlargement, which stress that progress should be merit-based and that the EU's own institutional readiness should be balanced against the pace of accession. Moreover, the framework's integration into the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 ensures that any financial reallocations are transparent and strategically aligned with the EU's broader fiscal planning. This helps to mitigate fears of unexpected budgetary burdens and ensures that Member States are fully informed and involved in the decision-making process.

For candidate countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans, the proposal's success depends on genuine commitment to reform and the perception of fairness. To maintain political feasibility, the framework incorporates clear, objective benchmarks that are publicly available, ensuring transparency. The use of performance-based funding and conditionality is designed to be a positive incentive rather than a punitive measure, encouraging candidate countries to embrace reforms as a pathway to EU integration rather than a forced compliance. Additionally, the Fellowship and Judicial Independence Track are designed to support candidate countries by providing technical expertise and capacity-building, rather than imposing external control.

## **Section IX: Conclusion**

This policy proposal has argued that the central weakness of the EU enlargement process does not lie in the absence of instruments, but in their fragmented application and limited capacity to reinforce one another. Financial incentives, rule-of-law conditionality, and administrative capacity-building have long been treated as parallel tracks, resulting in reforms that are formally adopted but institutionally fragile, unevenly implemented, and vulnerable to political reversal. The recurring patterns of delayed implementation, low absorption capacity, and post-accession backsliding underscore the need for a more integrated approach.

By unifying the reform of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the Judicial Independence Track, and the European Partnership Fellowship into a single, coordinated architecture, this proposal advances a model of enlargement that is both stricter and more supportive. Stricter, because conditionality is anchored in measurable outcomes, institutional safeguards, and credible enforcement mechanisms. More

supportive, because increased responsibility and financial autonomy are systematically preceded by capacity-building, professional exchange, and judicial reinforcement. Conditionality therefore is no longer an abstract principle.

The phased implementation strategy reflects a realistic understanding of both candidate country constraints and EU internal limitations. Rather than frontloading expectations or accelerating integration prematurely, our model prioritizes learning, adaptation, and evidence-based scaling. By linking progression between phases to clearly defined benchmarks in the fundamentals cluster, the policy restores credibility to the merit-based nature of enlargement.

Equally important, the proposal recognizes that sustainable enlargement depends not only on reforms in candidate countries, but also on the EU's willingness to adapt its own governance and budgetary structures. Embedding the integrated framework into the next Multiannual Financial Framework and aligning it with internal readiness reforms situates enlargement within the EU's broader strategic planning rather than treating it as an external policy add-on. This alignment strengthens political feasibility while reinforcing the Union's long-term capacity to absorb new members.

Ultimately, the proposed architecture reframes enlargement as a process of progressive institutional convergence rather than a binary transition from candidate to member status. By fostering administrative resilience, judicial integrity, and accountable financial governance before accession, the framework reduces the likelihood that formal membership will outpace substantive readiness. In doing so, it contributes not only to the stability and credibility of future enlargements, but also to the protection of the EU's legal order and democratic standards.

In a geopolitical environment in which enlargement is increasingly treated as a strategic imperative, this proposal shows that accelerating the process does not require lowering institutional standards. A unified, phased, and conditional framework allows political momentum to be channeled into reforms that are both credible and durable. If applied consistently, this approach can reduce the structural uncertainty surrounding enlargement and reposition it as a predictable and resilient component of European integration.

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## **Annex A – New dataset on EU enlargement-related financial assistance (1990–2010)**

To complement the qualitative argument and provide a transparent empirical backbone for comparative claims across countries and time, we constructed an original cross-country panel dataset that tracks, on an annual basis, the allocation and payment of EU enlargement-related financial assistance over 1990–2010 for the Eastern enlargement cohort; available at: [Dataset on EU enlargement-related financial assistance \(1990–2010\)](#)

### **A1. Contribution to the literature and novelty of the dataset**

To the best of our knowledge, there is currently no publicly available dataset that reconstructs annual allocations and annual payments for the main enlargement-related instruments over the full pre-accession horizon, harmonized across multiple countries, in a consistent country-year structure, and linked within the same panel to basic macroeconomic context (population, GDP per capita, and FDI). The dataset was built from scratch using annual reports and financial documents published on EUR-Lex and in the European Commission’s enlargement and eastern neighbourhood document repositories. These sources were systematically collected, cross-checked across reporting years, harmonized, and converted into a machine-readable format suitable for replication and future extensions.

The dataset covers the period 1990–2010 for the following countries: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The resulting structure is a country-year panel that enables both within-country temporal analysis and cross-country comparison over a period that spans early transition, accession preparation, and the immediate post-accession years for the 2004 and 2007 entrants.

### **A2. Dataset structure, variables, and comparability across instruments**

The dataset is organized at the country-year level and includes instrument-specific and aggregate measures of EU financial support, distinguishing between allocations (commitments) and payments (disbursements). The variables capture (i) membership status to differentiate pre-accession from post-accession years; (ii) pre-accession assistance by instrument, including Phare allocations and disbursements for 1990–1999; the consolidated pre-accession package Phare + SAPARD + ISPA (allocated and paid); (iii) post-accession funding (allocated and paid) where it is reported within the same reporting architecture; and (iv) totals (overall allocations and overall payments/disbursements). The dataset also includes population, funding per capita and total disbursements per capita, GDP per capita, and FDI with corresponding per-capita measures.

Two clarifications are important for interpretation. First, this dataset is intentionally focused on the pre-accession architecture that applied to the 2004/2007 enlargement cohort, and in particular on PHARE. For this reason, the dataset does not aim to reconstruct the later, IPA-based programming framework, which is primarily designed for the subsequent candidate and potential candidate countries. Second, zeros in the dataset should be read straightforwardly as true zeros for the instruments included in the dataset: they correspond to years in which a country did not receive allocations or payments under the specific programmes recorded (rather than indicating missing data or unobserved funding). In other words, the dataset is designed to provide a consistent country-year series for PHARE and pre-IPA pre-accession funding, and the absence of values reflects the absence of those programme flows in the corresponding year.

### **A3. Descriptive patterns relevant to the policy argument**

Even without imposing strong causal claims, the dataset yields descriptive regularities that are directly relevant to the proposal's claims.

First, funding is markedly front-loaded around accession preparation: both allocations and, more visibly, payments increase in the run-up to accession and then drop when the classic pre-accession pipeline ends. This pattern is consistent with the institutional logic of conditionality, which concentrates incentives and monitoring capacity prior to membership.

Second, the gap between allocations and payments is non-trivial across countries and years. This divergence reflects the multi-year nature of programming and project cycles, contracting and procurement delays, and constraints in administrative performance. Interpreting allocations alone risks overstating realized support, while payments provide a closer proxy to implementation and absorption. The allocation–payment gap therefore offers a simple descriptive window into why administrative capacity is central for translating financial objectives into effective investment.

Third, cross-country differences are substantial, and population scaling changes the interpretation of “who received more.” Large countries may dominate total envelopes, while smaller states can appear more intensively supported when measured in per-capita terms. For policy interpretation, totals speak to scale and fiscal magnitude, whereas per-capita values are more informative about intensity and programming effort.

Finally, linking funding measures to GDP per capita and FDI creates a transparent empirical basis for the proposal's broader claims about convergence and economic modernization. While the dataset is not designed to identify causal effects on its own, it enables future research to test whether higher paid

amounts per capita (as a proxy for implemented support) are more strongly associated with specific variables of growth, democratization and governance.

#### **A4. Reusability and research applications**

By harmonizing allocations and payments across instruments and countries in a single annual panel, the dataset can support several lines of inquiry that have been constrained by fragmented reporting and inconsistent time coverage. These include (i) comparative analysis of instrument design and sequencing, distinguishing early transition assistance (Phare) from later components and subsequent frameworks; (ii) absorption and implementation studies that use the allocation–payment gap as an operational proxy for administrative capacity and program execution; (iii) political economy analyses of conditionality and incentives, testing whether funding intensity correlates with convergence outcomes conditional on institutional quality; and (iv) historically grounded assessments of how enlargement-era assistance was structured and delivered, which can inform policy design debates about performance incentives, transparency, and capacity-building in future enlargement or neighbourhood contexts.

#### **A5. Limitations**

Different shortcomings of the dataset should be highlighted.

First, fully comparable country-year series for disbursed (paid) PHARE amounts are not consistently available for the entire 1990–2010 horizon in a way that allows a clean annual allocation–payment matching at the country level. Additionally, a non-trivial share of payments is executed in subsequent years relative to initial commitments, which makes an “overall” annual picture of disbursements by country-year difficult to reconstruct without imposing an unrealistic assumption that the total disbursement for that year allocations are actually realized in the same year. For this reason, when discussing implementation performance we rely on country-level evidence on the shares contracted and disbursed reported in the PHARE ex post evaluation final report, rather than attempting to force a mechanically complete country-year disbursement series from heterogeneous annual sources.

Second, the macroeconomic series used for GDP per capita and FDI (and their per-capita transformations) are drawn from the World Bank, which reports these indicators in current U.S. dollars. To ensure comparability with funding variables expressed in euros, we converted the World Bank values into euros using annual averages computed from daily USD/EUR exchange rates sourced from the Bank of England’s daily spot reference-rate database (accessed through a historical series interface that reproduces the Bank of England daily reference rates). This conversion introduces an additional measurement layer

and should be interpreted as a practical harmonisation choice rather than a claim about the “true” transaction currency of the underlying national accounts or balance-of-payments values.

A further interpretive caution concerns the unit of account used in EU financial reporting prior to the euro. Before the introduction of the euro, the relevant unit of account in EU documentation was the ECU (European Currency Unit), which was replaced by the euro at a one-to-one rate on 1 January 1999. In practice, however, the underlying economic transactions in the beneficiary countries were denominated in domestic currencies until euro adoption, and historical series can therefore embed additional conversion conventions. In this dataset we adopt the standard ECU-to-euro one-to-one continuity for harmonisation purposes; readers should nonetheless treat very fine-grained cross-year comparisons in the pre-1999 period with appropriate caution, as they necessarily rest on simplifying assumptions about units of account and exchange-rate translation.

## **A6. Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, the dataset provides a transparent and replicable country-year reconstruction of PHARE-era pre-accession assistance for the 2004/2007 enlargement cohort. We hope that this work will serve as a starting point for future research on the political economy and effectiveness of EU enlargement-related financial support, and as a foundation that can be extended as additional harmonised sources on contracting, payments, and post-accession funding become available.

## **Annex B – Comparative descriptive evidence on pre-accession EU financial assistance (1990-2010)**

This annex reports descriptive cross-country patterns derived from the country-year dataset constructed for this policy proposal. The figures document timing and dispersion in pre-accession EU funding and provide visual benchmarks for comparison across countries. Unless otherwise stated, the benchmark line labelled 'AC average' corresponds to the unweighted mean across the ten sample countries in each year.

Each panel displays annual values for a single country (bars) against the sample benchmark (line). Per-capita indicators are constructed by dividing annual amounts by population. All figures should be interpreted descriptively;

Total EU pre-accession funding allocated (1990-2010)

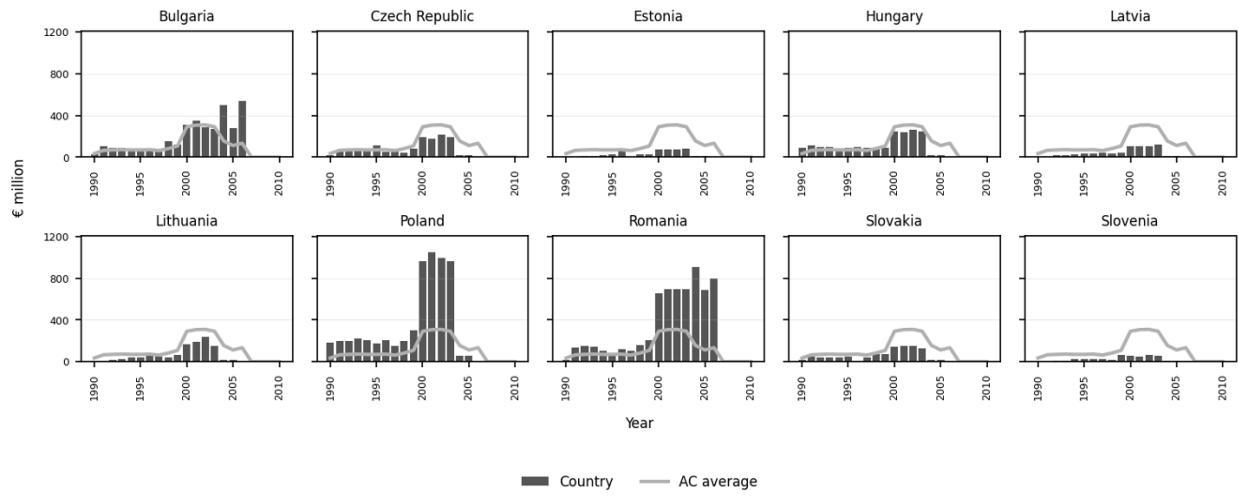


Figure B1. Total EU pre-accession funding allocated, 1990-2010 (EUR million).

EU pre-accession funding allocated per capita (1990-2010)

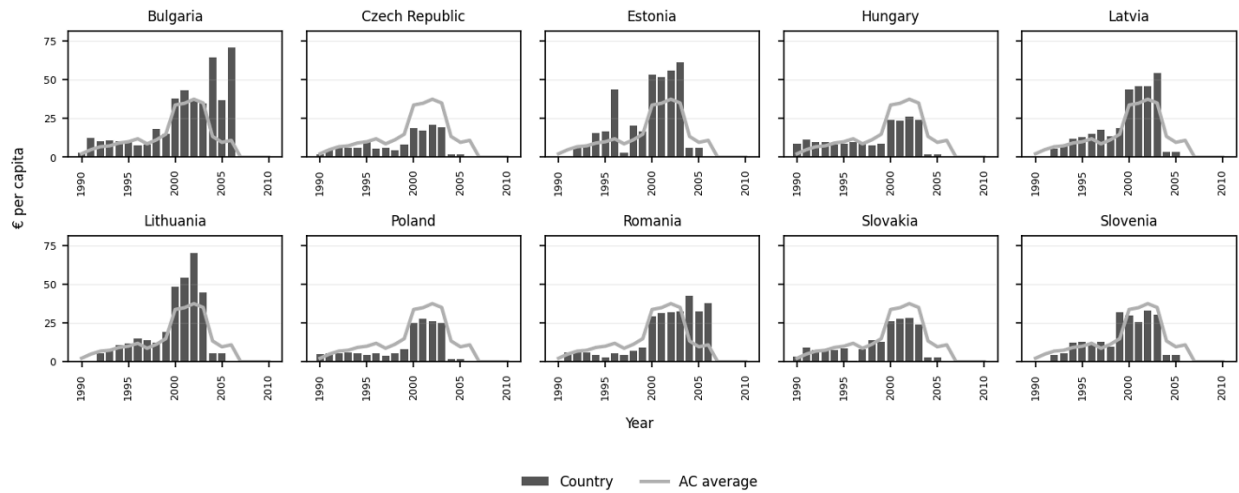


Figure B2. EU pre-accession funding allocated per capita, 1990-2010.

EU pre-accession funding paid per capita (1990-2010)

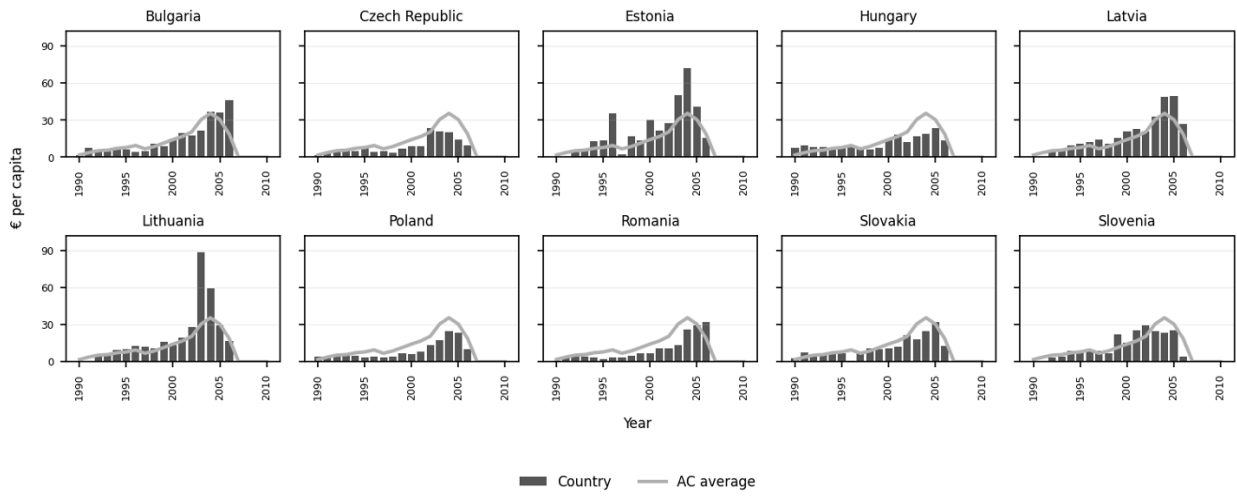


Figure B3. EU pre-accession funding disbursed per capita, 1990-2010.

GDP per capita (1990-2010)

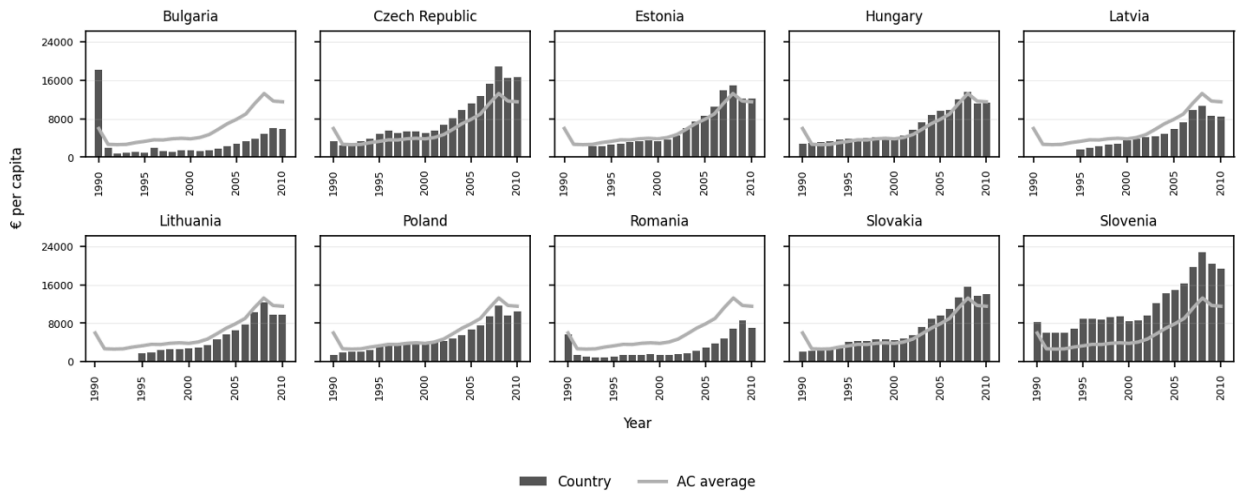


Figure B4. GDP per capita, 1990-2010