



Context and Challenge: Redesigning Pre-Accession Support for a Larger Enlargement Agenda

1. Context

The introduction of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III (IPA III) for 2021–2027 represents a continuation of the EU’s structured support for candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and beyond. IPA III aims to strengthen governance, the rule of law, economic development, and alignment with EU policies, while providing a framework for gradual integration into the Union.

In 2024 - 2025 the EU launched three additional instruments: the Ukraine Facility the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (RGFWB), and Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova. All reflect a strategic shift toward a more conditional and gradual approach to integration. Unlike traditional pre-accession support, these instruments link disbursements directly to the implementation of national reform plans and broader EU priorities, combining grants, loans, and guarantees. This model introduces new budgetary implications and places greater demands on financial oversight and reporting to ensure both effectiveness and accountability.

The gradual integration approach allows candidate countries to access selected EU benefits prior to full accession, thereby creating tangible incentives to pursue reforms and align with EU standards. For instance, states may receive financial support for infrastructure, judicial reforms, or economic competitiveness, alongside opportunities to participate in EU programs.

However, this approach has raised concerns among policymakers and analysts. Without sustained institutional reforms, there is a risk that EU Member States may increasingly favor “gradual integration,” offering selective benefits and funding without delivering on the full accession process. This could result in a two-tier system, where candidate countries enjoy deep sectoral integration but remain excluded from the Union’s formal decision-making structures. Such a trajectory could undermine the credibility of the enlargement process, weaken incentives for comprehensive reforms, and create new challenges for governance, oversight, and the equitable distribution of EU resources.

Overall, while IPA III, the RGFWB and the RGF for Moldova demonstrate the EU’s adaptability in responding to geopolitical and regional challenges, they also underscore the delicate balance between supporting gradual integration and maintaining the ultimate objective of full EU membership.

2. Strategic Priorities for Policy and Programme Adjustment



Ahead of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034, the European Commission must ensure that EU policies and programmes are fully adaptable to enlargement and potential new accessions. Key principles for regulatory adjustments include:

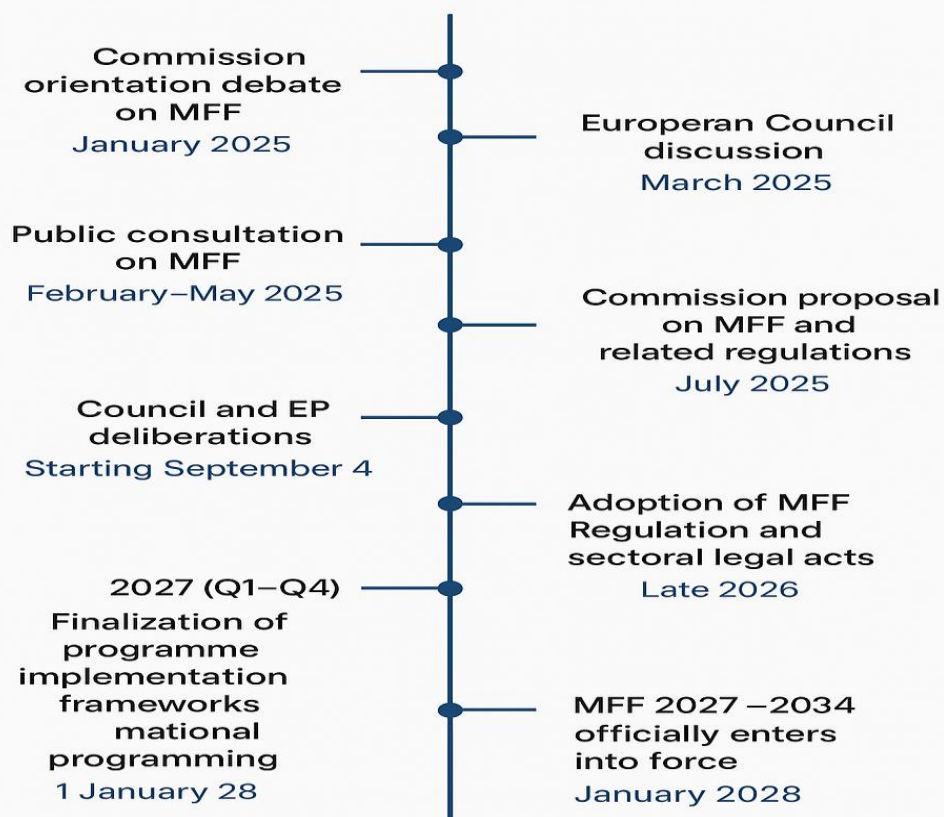
- All EU programmes should allow candidate countries to participate, at least as observers, in programme management committees.
- All draft regulations should contain clear and harmonized provisions enabling automatic and timely adaptations if new Member States join during the MFF period.
- Future policy proposals must account for pre-accession integration, in line with the objectives of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the principle of gradual integration.

Ensuring adaptability is critical for maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of the enlargement process. Without clear provisions for candidate participation, pre-accession integration risks being inconsistent, potentially delaying reforms and weakening the impact of EU funding. Flexible regulations also allow the EU to anticipate the budgetary and operational implications of new accessions, ensuring that programmes remain fully functional and aligned with EU priorities throughout the MFF period. By embedding foresight and flexibility into policy design, the Commission can support gradual integration while safeguarding the integrity and coherence of EU programmes.

3. Timing and Legislative Calendar -Key milestones:



TIMING AND LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR



This timeline underscores the **urgency of embedding enlargement-readiness in all new instruments and regulations.**

4. Introducing a Pre-Accession Transition Facility



Building on this adaptable framework, a new “Pre-Accession Transition” budget heading is proposed to address the gap between the conclusion of accession negotiations and formal membership (typically ~2 years). This mechanism would:

- Provide 200–300% of the last IPA annual budget to a country that has completed accession negotiations.
- Be disbursed over two years via the existing IPA management structures, leveraging the flexible programme architecture described above.
- Focus on last-mile reforms, including capacity building, public administration reform, procurement, and rule of law.
- Be performance-based, with dedicated support for NGOs and independent institutions.

By linking the Pre-Accession Transition directly to adaptable MFF programmes, the EU can ensure a smooth and well-resourced final phase of integration, support reforms and capacity building while maintaining policy coherence and accountability across candidate countries.

5. IPA IV – Redesigning the EU’s Pre-Accession Instrument

The next generation Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA IV, 2028–2034) should consolidate lessons from IPA I–III and from the new performance-based facilities introduced in 2024–2025, including the Ukraine Facility, the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, and the planned Growth Facility for Moldova. A three-pillar structure is proposed:

- 1. Reforms for EU Accession**
 - Envisage a “transition facility” to ensure gradual access to EU membership funds and institutions, helping prevent a stagnation phase between negotiation closure and full membership.
 - Performance-based grants, disbursed upon delivery of key reforms.
 - Linked to national reform and fiscal-structural plans.
- 2. Investments for Transformation**
 - Blended finance and guarantees for public and private investments aligned with EU standards.
 - Delivered through platforms such as the Western Balkans Investment Framework.
- 3. Governance, Capacity Building, and Society**
 - Support for public sector reform, civil service modernization, and civil society engagement.



- Involving local and regional actors, with cross-cutting priorities such as public procurement and rule of law.

Key design elements:

- Country-specific financial envelopes defined upfront.
- A regional envelope for cross-border cooperation and Common Regional Market objectives.
- A performance reserve allocated annually based on accession progress.
- Participatory planning, involving parliaments, civil society, and local stakeholders.
- Stronger alignment with EU economic governance tools (reform plans, fiscal benchmarks).

Indicative financial scope:

- €20 billion in grants for the Western Balkans.
- Up to €5 billion in loans, capped to avoid excessive debt.
- Dedicated budgetary support linked to reform milestones.

Conclusion: Urgency for Structural Readiness

As the Union prepares for its next wave of enlargement, the upcoming IPA framework must be redesigned to meet the evolving needs of both the EU and aspiring members. The new design should integrate reform-driven funding, investment support, and technical assistance in a more strategic, performance-based, and predictable manner. It should also contain a Pre-Accession Transition Facility for near-term joiners, and ringfenced civil society funding.

The 2028–2034 framework must deliver a significantly increased and flexible IPA IV. Funding should align with the EU’s strategic goals: digital and green transition, rule of law, youth, infrastructure, and social inclusion. Conditionality should be balanced with predictability and frontloading of support for frontrunners.

This redesign is essential to ensure that enlargement remains a credible and effective policy, that candidate countries are genuinely prepared for the obligations of EU membership, and that the EU budget is safeguarded through greater efficiency, accountability, and results-oriented programming.

The next MFF offers a critical opportunity to align EU policies, instruments, and funding structures with the demands of a new enlargement wave. A coherent, performance-based, and strategically phased approach, anchored in a redesigned IPA IV and a dedicated Pre-Accession Transition



facility will be key to delivering credible, manageable, and transformative EU integration. Enlargement is no longer solely a policy ambition; it has become a budgetary and institutional imperative, requiring anticipatory, integrated, and responsible planning.