Cross-Cutting Executive Curriculum

Rule of Law, Good Governance and EU Integration Tools



Europe Plus | 2026



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CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary 5
2. Background and Rationale 6
3. Overall Objective of the Cross-Cutting Curriculum 6
4. Cross-Cutting Design and Delivery Logic 7
5. Core Curriculum Pillars and Content 7

Pillar I 7
Foundations of EU Accession and the Fundamentals-First Principle
Pillar II 8
Rule of Law Conditionality within the EU Growth Plan and Reform Agendas
Pillar III 9
Governance Frameworks and Core EU Integration Instruments
Pillar IV 9
Regional Judicial Cooperation and the Common Regional Market
Pillar V 10
Civic Engagement, Media Freedom and Reform Sustainability

6. Embedded Linkages with REPACT Thematic Modules 10
7. Added Value for REPACT 11



ANNEX **12**
Background Information by Pillar
Cross-Cutting Executive Curriculum – Rule of Law, Good Governance and EU Integration Tools
Pillar I **12**
Foundations of EU Accession and the Fundamentals-First Principle
Pillar II **13**
Rule of Law Conditionality within the EU Growth Plan and Reform Agendas
Pillar III **14**
Governance Frameworks and Core EU Integration Instruments
Pillar IV **15**
Regional Judicial Cooperation and Its Relevance for the Common Regional Market
Pillar V **15**
Civic Engagement, Freedom of Expression and Media Pluralism as Reform Enablers



1. Executive Summary

The European Union's approach to enlargement has evolved from a predominantly legal and compliance-driven process into a performance-based, conditional and increasingly staged pathway to integration. In this framework, the effective functioning of democratic institutions, the rule of law and sound governance has become a decisive factor shaping access to EU funding, market integration, regional cooperation and overall accession credibility. Moreover, in the current geopolitical context, governance performance and rule of law have also become key determinants of the EU's strategic credibility and resilience in the Western Balkans.

This cross-cutting executive curriculum is designed to respond to that shift. Rather than treating rule of law and good governance as stand-alone reform areas, the curriculum positions them as operational enablers of EU integration and regional cooperation across all REPACT thematic modules. It aims to build a shared analytical understanding of how governance quality directly affects economic integration, the Common Regional Market, green and digital transitions, cybersecurity cooperation and enlargement-related financing.

The curriculum does not seek to develop specialized rule of law expertise. Instead, it equips senior officials, policymakers and practitioners with the conceptual tools needed to understand how horizontal governance conditions shape sectoral reform outcomes. By embedding rule of law perspectives across all modules, it ensures conceptual coherence, consistent terminology and a common reform narrative throughout the REPACT programme.



Structured around five core pillars-EU accession fundamentals, rule of law conditionality under the EU Growth Plan, governance frameworks and integration instruments, regional judicial cooperation, and the societal foundations of reform, the curriculum enables participants to link national reforms, regional cooperation and EU integration dynamics in a practical and policy-relevant manner.

Through its horizontal design, the curriculum strengthens participants' ability to identify governance bottlenecks, assess reform readiness and understand the interaction between institutional performance, incentives and integration outcomes. In doing so, it supports a realistic, performance-oriented understanding of EU accession and reinforces REPACT's role as a platform for strategic, regionally anchored integration capacity-building.

2. Background and Rationale

EU enlargement is now shaped by a conditional and staged logic, in which effective governance and rule of law performance are central determinants of accession progress, rather than formal legal alignment alone. This transformation has been shaped by several interlinked developments:

- the revised EU Enlargement Methodology (2020), with its fundamentals-first logic.
- the gradual introduction of staged and differentiated integration into selected EU policies and markets.
- the launch of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, explicitly linking reform performance to funding, incentives and market access; and
- the reinforced use of conditionality, monitoring and reversibility across EU financial and integration instruments.



This shift has been further reinforced by the extension of the EU Rule of Law Reports to the Western Balkans, placing candidate countries within a single, comparative monitoring framework alongside EU Member States. This development reflects the EU's move towards continuous, performance-based assessment of rule of law and governance, beyond accession chapters and formal negotiation milestones. Rule of law reporting increasingly functions as a horizontal reference point, informing conditionality, reform credibility and access to integration-related incentives, while also serving as an early warning mechanism for governance risks and backsliding.

In this context, rule of law and good governance are no longer treated as abstract political values or stand-alone reform chapters. They have become operational enablers of economic integration, regional cooperation, access to EU funding, and credibility in the accession process. Deficiencies in judicial independence, regulatory enforcement, public administration capacity, media freedom or interinstitutional coordination now have direct and measurable consequences for a country's ability to participate meaningfully in:

- the Common Regional Market (CRM),
- the Green Agenda for the WB and environmental compliance,
- digital transformation and cybersecurity cooperation, and
- enlargement-related financial instruments and reform incentives.

This cross-cutting curriculum responds to this reality. It is explicitly designed to ensure that all REPACT thematic modules are grounded in a shared, functional understanding of how rule of law and governance shape EU integration and regional cooperation outcomes.

3. Overall Objective of the Cross-Cutting Curriculum

The objective of this executive-level, cross-cutting curriculum is to equip senior officials, policymakers and practitioners with:

- a strategic understanding of how rule of law and good governance function as enabling conditions for EU integration and regional cooperation.
- the ability to connect sectoral reforms (economic, green, digital, security-related) with horizontal governance requirements.
- a clear grasp of EU integration tools, conditionality mechanisms and reform incentives; and
- practical analytical lenses to identify governance and institutional bottlenecks that undermine reform delivery, market integration and regional cooperation.

The curriculum is embedded across all REPACT modules, ensuring conceptual coherence, consistent terminology and shared analytical reference points throughout the programme. It does not operate as a stand-alone module, but as a horizontal framework that informs how each thematic area is understood and delivered.

The curriculum, however, does not aim to provide technical or legal training in rule of law reforms, nor to substitute sector-specific expertise. Its added value lies in enabling senior decision-makers to understand how governance conditions shape reform performance, integration outcomes and access to EU instruments across policy areas.

4. Cross-Cutting Design and Delivery Logic

The curriculum follows a horizontal integration model, whereby:

- core rule of law and governance concepts are introduced through a dedicated executive foundation session.
- each REPACT thematic module explicitly revisits and operationalizes these concepts within its own policy domain; and
- participants are encouraged to analyze sectoral challenges through a rule of law and governance lens, using concrete EU and Western Balkan examples.
- This approach ensures:
- policy coherence across thematic areas; and
- a shared reform narrative linking regional cooperation, EU accession and institutional performance.



5. Core Curriculum Pillars and Content[1]

Pillar I

Foundations of EU Accession and the Fundamentals-First Principle

Purpose

To explain the fundamentals-first principle as the

[1] In the Annex I is included a background and orientation material.

organizing logic of the current EU enlargement framework, and to position rule of law, democratic institutions and public administration as preconditions that shape the pace, depth and credibility of integration, rather than as formal negotiation chapters.

Key Content

- Why the EU prioritized fundamentals: Lessons from previous enlargements: sustainability, reversibility and credibility gaps linked to weak rule of law and governance.
- Scope of the fundamentals-first principle: Core components: judiciary, anti-corruption, fundamental rights, democratic institutions and public administration, and why they are treated as a single reform cluster.
- Fundamentals as gatekeepers of integration: How performance in rule of law and governance conditions progress across all policy areas, not just Chapters 23/24.
- From formal alignment to institutional effectiveness: Distinguishing legal approximation from administrative capacity and real-world implementation as required under the fundamentals-first logic.
- Sequencing reforms under fundamentals-first: Why early and sustained progress on fundamentals determines access to staged integration, funding and market opportunities in the Western Balkans.

Learning Outcome

By the end of this pillar, participants will understand the fundamentals-first principle as the core logic of the EU's current enlargement framework, and how progress in rule of law and institutional performance conditions reform sequencing, staged integration and access to EU support across all policy areas in the Western Balkans.

Pillar II
Rule of Law Conditionality within the EU Growth Plan and Reform Agendas

Purpose

To explain how rule of law performance is translated into financial incentives, access and constraints, and how these mechanisms can effectively support reform implementation, accountability and public trust.

Key Content

- Rule of law conditionality under the EU Growth Plan: Ex-ante and ex-post conditionality as applied through Reform Agendas, milestones and disbursement decisions.
- Reform Agendas as the operational backbone of the Growth Plan: Structure, logic and role of milestones and indicators in triggering incentives or constraints.

- Governance performance and access to benefits: How judicial reform, anti-corruption and administrative capacity affect funding, market access and investment support.
- Monitoring, reporting and accountability mechanisms: The role of EU Rule of Law Reports and other performance assessment tools as comparative benchmarks informing credibility, verification and adjustment of support.
- Risks and limitations of formal compliance: Why box-ticking reforms undermine credibility and reduce the effectiveness of incentives under the Growth Plan.

Learning Outcome

By the end of this pillar, participants will understand how rule of law conditionality under the EU Growth Plan translates governance performance into concrete incentives, access and constraints, and how Reform Agendas, milestones and monitoring mechanisms determine the credibility and sustainability of reform outcomes.

Pillar III
Governance Frameworks and Core EU Integration Instruments

Purpose

To highlight governance as the delivery system of EU integration, and to examine how institutional capacity, coordination and accountability shape reform implementation and integration outcomes.

Key Content

- Core governance principles as integration enablers: transparency, accountability, effectiveness and participation.
- Core EU integration instruments: acquis alignment, regulatory impact assessment, evidence-based policymaking and coordination mechanisms.
- Institutional roles in integration delivery: parliaments, independent bodies and public administration.
- Managing cross-sectoral reforms in multi-level and interinstitutional governance systems.



Learning Outcome

By the end of this pillar, participants will understand how governance frameworks and integration instruments function as the institutional delivery system of EU integration, and how weaknesses in coordination, capacity or accountability undermine reform outcomes.

Pillar IV
Regional Judicial Cooperation and the Common Regional Market

Purpose

To frame the Common Regional Market as a rules-based integration project, where judicial

cooperation is essential for legal certainty, trust and effective market functioning.

Key Content

- Legal certainty and predictability as foundations of regional market integration.
- Mutual recognition and enforcement of judicial decisions.
- Cross-border dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Links between judicial performance, competition policy and investment climate.
- Judicial cooperation as a regional public good supporting CRM implementation.



Learning Outcome

By the end of this pillar, participants will understand how regional judicial cooperation provides the legal certainty, enforceability and mutual trust required for the effective functioning of the Common Regional Market.

Pillar V
Civic Engagement, Media Freedom and Reform Sustainability

Purpose

To explain how civic engagement and media freedom function as operational enablers of rule of law, strengthening societal trust, accountability and the sustainability of integration-related reforms.

Key Content

- Civil society as an accountability and delivery partner: Monitoring reform implementation, flagging risks and contributing to policy design.
- Media freedom and pluralism as safeguards against state capture: transparency, scrutiny and public oversight of reform processes.
- Public participation in EU-related reforms: Involvement of citizens and stakeholders in policy design, implementation and monitoring.
- Civic space and EU integration credibility: How restrictions on civic and media space undermine reform sustainability and EU trust.

Learning Outcome

By the end of this pillar, participants will understand how civic engagement and media freedom reinforce accountability, public trust and the long-term sustainability of rule of law reforms linked to EU integration.

6. Embedded Linkages with REPACT Thematic Modules

The Rule of Law curriculum is designed as a cross-cutting and modular governance framework

embedded across all REPACT thematic modules, rather than as a cumulative learning track or a set of rule-of-law topics assigned to specific modules. Given that participants will not necessarily attend all modules, the curriculum is structured to ensure that each module can stand alone while applying a shared rule of law logic and analytical lens.

The curriculum sets out a common rule of law reference framework, including legal certainty, enforcement, institutional accountability, regulatory quality and performance-oriented governance, which is applied consistently across modules and adapted to their respective thematic focus. These adaptations do not depend on prior participation in other modules and do not assume progressive learning but instead ensure conceptual coherence and comparability across the programme as a whole.

In practice, this means that every REPACT module integrates the same rule of law foundations, with thematic emphasis adjusted to context: CRM and Single Market modules address legal certainty, enforcement and competition; green transition modules focus on regulatory governance and compliance capacity; digital transformation on data protection, trust and oversight; cybersecurity on legal frameworks and democratic accountability; enlargement finance and the MFF on conditionality, anti-fraud and performance management; and regional diplomacy on transparency, coordination and evidence-based decision-making. This approach ensures that rule of law considerations remain central across the entire REPACT curriculum, without relying on cumulative participation.

7. Added Value for REPACT



This cross-cutting curriculum:

- ensures horizontal coherence across all REPACT modules, despite non-overlapping participant groups.
- embeds rule of law and governance as functional enablers of policy delivery and integration, rather than as abstract reform areas.
- strengthens participants' capacity to connect reforms, financing instruments and integration outcomes; and supports a realistic, performance-oriented understanding of EU accession and regional cooperation.

ANNEX
Background Information by Pillar
Cross-Cutting Executive Curriculum – Rule of Law, Good Governance and EU Integration Tools



This annex is intended as background and orientation material. It does not aim to provide exhaustive legal or policy guidance. Instead, it serves as a shared analytical reference point across REPACT modules, helping participants situate technical discussions within the broader EU enlargement logic, governance architecture and reform delivery challenges. It is designed to support strategic understanding, cross-sector dialogue and informed decision-making rather than detailed technical instruction.

Pillar I
Foundations of EU Accession and the Fundamentals-First Principle

Background Context

The EU enlargement process has progressively moved beyond a narrow focus on formal legislative alignment towards a broader and more demanding assessment of institutional performance, credibility and reform sustainability. This evolution reflects concrete lessons from previous enlargement rounds, where extensive transposition of the acquis did not always result in effective enforcement, independent institutions or lasting governance change. As a result, enlargement has increasingly been reframed as a governance transformation process, rather than a purely technical or legal exercise.

The rule of law has been an explicit part of the EU enlargement framework since at least 2006, but its practical weight increased significantly during the accession negotiations with Croatia, where for the first time dedicated rule of law chapters (23 and 24) were introduced and monitored in a more structured and politically salient manner. This experience highlighted both the necessity and the limitations of treating rule of law primarily through chapter-based conditionality.

Building on these lessons, the introduction of the fundamentals-first principle in the 2020 Enlargement Methodology marked a qualitative shift rather than a conceptual break. It formalized

this shift by placing rule of law, democratic institutions and public administration reform at the centre of the accession process. These areas are opened first, closed last, and remain subject to continuous political and technical scrutiny. Crucially, insufficient progress, stagnation or backsliding in the fundamentals can directly block, slow down or reverse accession negotiations as a whole, regardless of progress in other policy chapters. This logic reflects a decisive move away from box-ticking compliance towards demonstrated track records, enforcement capacity and institutional independence as the core benchmarks of readiness.

In parallel, the EU has progressively strengthened horizontal governance monitoring tools that complement accession-specific conditionality. The gradual inclusion of the Western Balkans in the EU Rule of Law Reports reflects an effort to normalise rule of law assessment as a continuous governance exercise, rather than a procedure limited to negotiation chapters. By placing candidate countries within the same analytical framework as EU Member States, these reports enhance comparability, strengthen early detection of systemic risks, and reinforce the link between institutional performance, political credibility and access to EU integration benefits.

This evolution further confirms the shift away from box-ticking compliance towards demonstrated track records, enforcement capacity and institutional independence as the core benchmarks of readiness. In this context, rule of law reporting operates not as a parallel monitoring layer, but as a reinforcing instrument that anchors enlargement-related conditionality within the EU's broader governance architecture.

Pillar II
Rule of Law Conditionality within the EU Growth Plan and Reform Agendas

Background Context

The EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans represents a structural shift in how the European Union operationalizes rule of law conditionality in the enlargement process. Moving beyond traditional chapter-based monitoring and predominantly political benchmarks, the Growth Plan introduces national Reform Agendas as the central implementation tool, translating reform priorities into concrete commitments, measurable milestones, performance indicators and fixed timelines. This marks a transition from declaratory reform alignment to results-oriented governance conditionality.

Within this framework, rule of law reforms, covering areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement, public administration accountability and financial control, are no longer assessed only in the context of accession negotiations. Instead, they are increasingly triangulated through Reform Agendas, financial conditionality mechanisms and horizontal monitoring instruments, including the EU Rule of Law Reports. Together, these tools shape a more



credible and performance-oriented assessment of reform delivery, linking formal commitments to observable institutional outcomes.

At the same time, this model increases the political salience and credibility of conditionality, while introducing new implementation risks. The pressure to meet milestones may incentivize formalistic compliance, selective reform delivery or short-term fixes that do not translate into durable institutional change. For this reason, understanding the design, sequencing and enforcement logic of conditionality under the Growth Plan is essential. It enables policymakers and practitioners to align national reform strategies with EU expectations, anticipate compliance risks, and ensure that rule of law reforms function as enablers of sustainable growth and integration, rather than as transactional box-ticking exercises.



Pillar III
Governance Frameworks and Core EU Integration Instruments

Background Context

Successful EU integration depends not only on legislative alignment with the acquis, but on the existence of functioning governance frameworks capable of translating EU rules into consistent policy outcomes and enforceable practices. Experience from both past enlargement rounds and the Western Balkans shows that integration gaps frequently stem from institutional fragmentation, weak centre-of-government coordination, limited regulatory oversight and insufficient implementation capacity, rather than from the absence of formal legal frameworks.

EU integration relies on a set of core governance instruments designed to address these systemic weaknesses. These include acquis transposition accompanied by effective implementation and enforcement mechanisms, regulatory impact assessments to improve policy quality and proportionality, and interministerial coordination structures that ensure coherence across sectors and levels of government. When properly applied, these instruments support policy consistency, accountability and evidence-based decision-making, and help prevent contradictory or unsustainable reforms.

However, the effectiveness of these instruments is not automatic. Their impact depends on clear institutional ownership, professional and depoliticised public administration, reliable data and monitoring systems, and sustained political commitment. In the absence of these conditions, integration tools risk becoming formalistic exercises that satisfy procedural requirements without improving outcomes. This pillar therefore frames governance frameworks as the delivery infrastructure of EU integration, highlighting that delays, reversals or failures in the accession process are more often the result of governance and capacity deficits than of missing legislation.

Pillar IV
Regional Judicial Cooperation and Its Relevance for the Common Regional Market

Background Context

The Common Regional Market (CRM) represents a cornerstone of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and a practical stepping stone towards gradual integration into the EU Single Market. While CRM is often framed primarily in economic and regulatory terms, its effective functioning is fundamentally dependent on legal certainty, enforceable rules and mutual trust between judicial institutions across the region. Without these elements, market integration remains largely formal and its economic benefits uneven and fragile.

At present, regional judicial cooperation in the Western Balkans remains underdeveloped, fragmented and largely indirect. There is no comprehensive framework for the mutual recognition and enforcement of civil and commercial judgments, limited judicial cooperation in cross-border disputes, and uneven standards in commercial justice and contract enforcement. These gaps directly undermine the CRM by increasing transaction costs, prolonging dispute resolution, discouraging cross-border investment and weakening confidence among economic actors. In practice, businesses operating regionally face legal uncertainty precisely where market integration is expected to deliver predictability and scale.

This pillar therefore frames regional judicial cooperation not as an aspirational add-on, but as a functional prerequisite for the credibility and sustainability of the CRM. It highlights the untapped potential of judicial cooperation to support mutual recognition of decisions, improve dispute resolution, and strengthen trust between legal systems—mirroring, in a gradual and adapted manner, principles underpinning the EU Single Market. Persisting in this agenda is essential not because such mechanisms are already in place, but because without progress in judicial cooperation, economic integration risks outpacing legal integration, creating structural vulnerabilities in the regional market. Strengthening judicial cooperation thus directly links justice reforms to tangible economic integration outcomes and positions the rule of law as an enabling condition for a functioning Common Regional Market.



Pillar V
Civic Engagement, Freedom of Expression and Media Pluralism as Reform Enablers

Background Context

Experience from EU enlargement and democratic transition processes demonstrates that institutional and legal reforms alone are insufficient to ensure sustainable integration outcomes. Reforms that lack societal anchoring, public scrutiny and informed debate tend to remain fragile, reversible or selectively implemented. Civic engagement,

freedom of expression and media pluralism therefore function not as parallel democratic values, but as core enabling conditions for accountability, credibility and long-term reform sustainability.

Within the EU enlargement context, civil society organizations, independent media and investigative journalism play a critical role in translating formal reform commitments into societal oversight. They contribute to monitoring implementation on the ground, identifying governance risks such as state capture or selective enforcement, and providing evidence that complements official reporting. Their engagement strengthens transparency and helps ensure that rule of law reforms is assessed not only through institutional outputs, but through their real-world impact on citizens, businesses and public trust.



At the same time, the enlargement process has shown that restrictions on civic space, political pressure on media, concentration of ownership and disinformation directly undermine reform credibility. Such trends weaken public accountability mechanisms, distort policy debates and raise concerns regarding democratic backsliding often triggering negative assessments under rule of law benchmarks and conditionality frameworks. In this context, shrinking civic space and reduced media pluralism are not peripheral issues, but early warning indicators of systemic governance risks with direct implications for accession progress and EU support.

This pillar therefore situates civic engagement and media freedom as functional components of the rule of law ecosystem, essential for both EU integration and regional cooperation. It emphasizes the role of civil society and media actors as partners in reform delivery, contributors to evidence-based policymaking and safeguards of reform legitimacy. By strengthening participatory governance, transparency and informed public discourse, these actors help ensure that integration-related reforms are not only adopted, but understood, contested and sustained over time, reinforcing the democratic foundations of EU accession and cooperation in the Western Balkans.