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Preparing for a wider Union

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Preparing for a wider Union

I. Preparing the Union for enlargement

Enlargement strengthens Europe. It is a long-term investment in Europe's peace, security, prosperity and global standing. It increases the Union's political and economic weight, its capacity to safeguard its interests and its ability to promote its values.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and wider threats to European security have made enlargement a geopolitical imperative. Europe has a direct and immediate interest in bringing enlargement countries into the Union. A more democratic, stable, and wider Europe also brings clear benefits to our citizens. By extending the rule of law, democracy and prosperity across our continent, enlargement can strengthen the Single Market, create new opportunities for trade and investment, and support economic growth through more consumers and greater innovation. For Europeans, this means more jobs, more business opportunities, better connected infrastructure and stronger supply chains. It would also bring mutual opportunities to boost energy security, transport links and environmental protection.

The accession process remains strictly merit-based and requires sustained progress in implementing the reforms necessary for membership. In parallel, the Union must advance its own preparations and further develop gradual integration, bringing tangible benefits to citizens and businesses ahead of accession.

In her 2023 State of the Union address, President von der Leyen called on the Union to match the determination of enlargement countries and announced pre-enlargement policy reviews.[1] The Granada Declaration that same year set out the parallel responsibilities of enlargement countries to advance their reforms and of the Union to undertake the necessary internal preparations.[2] The Union must also ensure that its policies, institutions and financing are ready for enlargement. Both tracks must advance so that the Union and future Member States are ready for accession.

The Commission's March 2024 Communication translated that principle into a work programme covering four areas: values, policies, the budget and governance.[3] In June 2024, the European Council adopted a roadmap for future work on internal reforms and invited the Commission to present in-depth policy reviews with operational elements in those four areas.[4] The Political Guidelines for 2024–2029 committed the Commission to proposals to strengthen the Union's capacity to act.[5] In parallel, the European Parliament set out its position through

[1] Von der Leyen, Ursula, *2023 State of the Union Address – Answering the call of history,* Strasbourg, 13 September 2023.
[2] European Council, *The Granada Declaration*, 6 October 2023
[3] European Commission, *Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews*, 2024, COM(2024) 146 final.
[4] European Council, 'European Council meeting (27 June 2024) conclusions', EUCO 15/24, 27 June 2024.
[5] Von der Leyen, Ursula, *Europe's Choice – Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029*, 18 July 2024.

its 2023 proposals for Treaty reform and its 2025 report and resolution on the institutional consequences of enlargement negotiations.[6]

This Communication responds to the European Council's mandate, draws on the Parliament's position and sets out the policy orientations and proposed actions arising from the reviews.

These proposed actions prepare the Union's governance, policies and budget for enlargement and strengthen the protection of its values and the rule of law.

Reinforced gradual integration supports candidate countries' preparations for membership through earlier participation in selected Union policies, provided conditions are met, helping to build administrative capacity and deliver tangible benefits to citizens and businesses ahead of accession. These efforts form part of a broader process of adaptation, as EU policies continue to evolve in response to new challenges and a changing geopolitical environment. The prospect of future enlargement is an integral part of this ongoing reflection on the Union's policies and their future development.

Roadmaps for the most advanced negotiating countries will set out clear priorities with timelines and deliverables, to help the most advanced candidates complete the necessary reforms and guide the work in the Council. This clarity will help us seize the momentum of enlargement and prepare for a stronger Union.

Safeguards in accession treaties should ensure continued fulfilment of commitments undertaken during accession negotiations and provide targeted remedies where serious shortcomings risk undermining the proper functioning of the Union. Together, these elements connect the Union's internal preparations with candidates' progress towards membership.

II. The pre-enlargement policy reviews

The Commission reviewed the full range of Union policies and areas where enlargement could affect policy design, implementation or financing. The policy reviews show that the Union can accommodate a larger membership through targeted adaptations within the existing Treaty framework and accession treaties.

The accompanying Staff Working Document presents the in-depth sectoral analysis and reform orientations.[7] The assessment does not prejudge the timing or sequence of future accessions, which will depend on each country's progress on meeting the conditions for membership and ratification of the accession treaty by all contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. It distinguishes the adaptations required by enlargement from ongoing reforms that already take account of the prospect of a larger Union. The Commission will continue to integrate enlargement considerations when developing policies and adapt existing frameworks as required. A larger membership adds specific requirements where it

[6] European Parliament, *resolution of 22 November 2023 on proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties, 2022 (2022/2051(INL)).* European Parliament, *resolution of 22 October 2025 on the institutional consequences of the EU enlargement negotiations (2025/2041(INI)).*
[7] SWD(2026) 705.

changes policy targets or allocations, increases the number of regulated entities, extends common networks and information systems or creates substantial investment needs.

Across policy areas, administrative capacity and implementation are the most recurrent requirements, both within the EU and in the enlargement countries. Skills, regulatory and supervisory capacity, interoperable systems and cooperation between administrations must and will be strengthened before accession. The reviews also point to the benefits of strengthened gradual integration during the accession process, including for the administrative capacity of future members.

Given the geopolitical environment, it is imperative for the EU to adapt its governance and make its decision-making swifter and more effective. By making the most of the possibilities under the Treaties, the Union will enhance its capacity to act, prepare for future members and become, in general, fit for the future.

1. Governance

The Lisbon Treaty was designed to improve the functioning of an enlarged Union and to cater for further enlargements. It extended qualified-majority voting and the ordinary legislative procedure, introduced the double-majority system in the Council, set the ceiling and principles for the composition of the European Parliament and provided rules for the composition of the Commission. It also provided mechanisms through which decision-making can be further adapted, including passerelle clauses, and facilitated recourse to enhanced cooperation.

These provisions give the Union a broad basis for preparing future enlargements. The Commission supports Treaty change where needed. In parallel, the Union should make full use of the possibilities offered by the existing Treaties to strengthen its capacity to act and prepare for future enlargement.[8]

Extending qualified-majority decision-making

Qualified-majority voting is already the general rule under the Treaties, but unanimity remains applicable in several key policy areas.

Passerelle clauses allow the European Council or the Council, subject to the conditions in the Treaties, to replace unanimity with qualified-majority voting or a special legislative procedure with the ordinary legislative procedure. Their activation requires unanimity and, in certain cases, the consent of the European Parliament and national Parliaments. They nonetheless offer the most direct route to more effective decision-making within the existing Treaty framework.

As set out in previous Communications, the Commission will continue to advocate their use in areas such as restrictive measures (sanctions), human rights and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions; measures against tax fraud, tax evasion and tax avoidance; fiscal measures in energy policy; and social protection.[9]

[8] European Commission, *Communication on Putting Vision into Concrete Action, 2022,* COM(2022) 404; European Commission, *Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, 2024,* COM(2024) 146.
[9] See Communications 'A stronger global actor: a more efficient decision-making for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy' – COM(2018) 647; 'Towards a more efficient and democratic decision making in EU tax policy'

The Treaties provide further flexibility in areas where unanimity applies. In the Common Foreign and Security Policy, for instance, Member States may use constructive abstention instead of blocking a decision. Article 31(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), in turn, permits qualified-majority voting within the Council in defined circumstances, including for initiatives based on a European Council decision defining the Union's strategic interests and objectives and decisions implementing a Council decision defining a Union action or position. Making full use of these provisions, subject to the conditions laid down in the Treaties, would enable the Union to act more swiftly and effectively, including on sanctions and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions.

Greater use of qualified-majority voting could be accompanied by appropriate safety measures for essential national interests. The Union's legal and political framework already provides mechanisms that combine more effective decision-making with respect for national sensitivities:

- **Emergency brake provisions** enable a Member State to refer a matter subject to qualified-majority voting to the European Council where it considers that essential national interests are at stake, in the areas where the Treaties provide for such a possibility.[10]
- The **Ioannina mechanism** requires the Council to continue discussions and seek a satisfactory solution where several Member States oppose a decision, without creating a right of veto.

These mechanisms can make decision-making more effective while respecting Member States' essential national interests. The Commission stands ready to engage with the European Parliament and the Council on appropriate and proportionate safeguards to accompany the activation of passerelle clauses, taking account of the specific policy area and the essential national interests concerned.

Optimising current practices

Beyond formal voting rules, the Council often seeks consensus even where qualified-majority voting applies. Consensus may strengthen political ownership, but it can also delay action.

The Commission therefore invites the Council to make fuller use of qualified-majority voting where the Treaties provide for it. Clearer timetables, earlier identification of outstanding issues and timely referral to ministers should facilitate agreement and enable decisions to be taken without undue delay. The Commission invites the Council to consider reflecting these objectives in its working methods, in full respect of its institutional autonomy.

These considerations are particularly relevant to the negotiation and conclusion of international agreements. Recourse to mixed agreements, which require ratification by Member States as well as conclusion by the Union, can make the process more complex and lengthy. Where an agreement can be concluded by the Union alone, unnecessary recourse to a mixed agreement

- COM(2019) 8; 'A more efficient and democratic decision making in EU energy and climate policy' - COM(2019) 177; and 'More efficient decision making. in social policy: Identification of areas for an enhanced move to qualified majority voting' - COM(2019) 186.

[10] See Article 48 TFEU, Article 82(3) TFEU, and Article 83(3) TFEU.

should be avoided, in full respect of the allocation of competences under the Treaties. Appropriate arrangements should ensure Member States' involvement, including in the work of bodies established under the agreement. Similarly, when endorsing non-binding arrangements with third countries or international organisations proposed by the Commission, the Council should apply qualified majority voting as its default decision-making rule. The Council's current practice of requiring a consensus unnecessarily hinders the EU's ability to act swiftly and effectively on the international stage.

The same issue arises in accession negotiations. Under Article 49 TEU, the Council acts unanimously on applications for membership. As a matter of practice and under the current negotiating frameworks, the Council also acts by unanimity when taking intermediate decisions. The Commission recommends that the Council agree to use qualified-majority voting for the opening of negotiating clusters and other intermediate decisions in accession negotiations. Accession would continue to require a unanimous decision by the Council after consultation of the Commission and consent of the European Parliament, together with ratification of the accession treaty by all contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.

Moving forward through enhanced cooperation

When the objectives of a Union policy cannot be attained within a reasonable period by the Union as a whole, the Treaties provide another means of advancing these objectives: enhanced cooperation.

Enhanced cooperation enables a group of at least nine Member States to establish closer cooperation in a specific policy area, subject to the conditions laid down in the Treaties.[11]

Enhanced cooperation has already proved its value. It notably enabled the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the Ukraine Support Loan for 2026-2027. These examples show that differentiated integration can advance common European objectives within the Union's institutional framework. The European Public Prosecutor's Office also shows that successful cooperation can attract additional Member States over time.

Drawing on this experience, the Commission will review pending proposals to identify where enhanced cooperation could help overcome a persistent blockage, while allowing delivery on the objectives of the underlying proposals. The review will assess compliance with the Treaty conditions, and the readiness of potential participants.

Preparing the institutions for a larger Union

Effective governance also requires institutions that remain fit for purpose. The Treaties and future accession treaties provide the framework for integrating new Member States and making the necessary adjustments.

For the Commission, the Treaties provide for a College comprising two thirds of the number of Member States, based on strictly equal rotation, unless the European Council decides

[11] The mechanism is set out in Article 20(2) TEU and Articles 326 to 334 TFEU.

otherwise. The European Council has so far retained one national from each Member State,[12] and the Commission has adapted accordingly, notably through the introduction of the role of Executive Vice-President. Both models offer advantages. A smaller College allows broader portfolios and simpler coordination. The current model gives the College first-hand knowledge of political, economic and administrative realities across the Union. The Treaty default solution of a smaller College remains available as the Union grows.

The Treaties limit the European Parliament to 750 Members plus the President and require degressive proportionality. The composition of the European Parliament for the 2024–2029 parliamentary term leaves some scope to accommodate representatives of new Member States within the Treaty ceiling. Further enlargements will nevertheless require a review of the allocation of seats. The Parliament will need to balance their representation with its capacity to function effectively. It is responsible for proposing its future composition, with the final decision taken unanimously by the European Council.[13]

The European Council and Council face no equivalent numerical ceiling: each Member State retains its seat. A larger membership, however, increases demands on Council formations and preparatory bodies. Working methods, coordination and operational capacity will need to adapt accordingly.

The Commission will work with the European Parliament and the Council to identify the decisions required before each accession. This work will aim to reconcile effective functioning with appropriate representation of citizens and Member States, while respecting each institution's responsibilities and procedural autonomy.

These preparations will extend to the practical capacity to operate in a larger Union. Staffing and recruitment, translation and interpretation, legal revision, secure digital systems and meeting facilities all require advanced planning. Union agencies must have the expertise and operational capacity to work with additional national authorities, while Union delegations will have to cater for additional coordination and external representation needs. The Commission will coordinate these preparations with the other institutions and bodies.

The Commission's wider examination of its internal functioning through the ongoing Large Scale Review will also support enlargement readiness.

Next steps

The Commission will:

[12] European Council Decision (EU) 2024/2997 of 28 November 2024 appointing the Commission. Based on Article 17(5) TEU, the European Council decision of 2013 (Decision 2013/272/EU) sets the number of members of the European Commission equal to the number of EU Member States. Article 2 provides that the European Council will review the decision in advance of either of these two milestones, whichever comes first: (1) the appointment of the subsequent Commission: Decision 2013/272/EU was renewed in 2019 (Decision 2019/1989) and 2024 (Decision 2024/2997) maintaining the 1-to-1 member ratio; or (2) the accession of the 30th Member State (if a new country joins the EU and increases the total number of Member States to 30, the European Council is legally obligated to review the decision before the first Commission following that enlargement takes office).

[13] The current practice is that the number of seats for each Member State (and therefore the total number of MEPs for each legislature) is decided ahead of each election of the European Parliament. At the request of the European Council, the Parliament is currently preparing a report on a permanent system for the distribution of the seats, see https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFCO-PR-758177_EN.pdf .

- Systematically identify policy initiatives where passerelle clauses should be activated and issue recommendations to the Council accordingly.
- Encourage greater use of qualified-majority voting where the Treaties allow.
- Review pending proposals and encourage recourse to enhanced cooperation where policy objectives and legal conditions are met.
- Work with the European Parliament and the Council on the institutional and operational adjustments required for future accessions.

2. Values and the rule of law

Respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy are conditions for membership and foundations of the Union's functioning.[14] These foundations must be effectively protected in every Member State to ensure mutual trust, judicial cooperation and sound management of Union funds. Independent courts and effective remedies also protect citizens' rights and give businesses confidence that common rules will be applied throughout the Single Market.

To provide this protection, the accession process must establish more than legal alignment. Institutions must work effectively in practice and reforms must endure. Monitoring, incentives and enforcement should therefore form a continuous framework extending beyond accession. This is a responsibility shared by current and future Member States: the Union must apply its instruments effectively, while enlargement countries establish a sustained record of reform before accession.

Safeguarding the rule of law before and after accession

This requirement is reflected in the Fundamentals cluster, which opens first, closes last and determines the overall pace of negotiations.[15] Enlargement countries must notably establish functional democratic institutions, independent and effective justice systems, prevent and prosecute corruption, uphold fundamental rights including non-discrimination, gender-equality, and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, protect media freedom and pluralism and maintain effective checks and balances. In addition, the 2020 revised enlargement methodology requires anti-corruption work to be mainstreamed through a strong focus in relevant negotiating chapters.[16] Legislative and institutional reforms must produce credible results.

The annual Enlargement Reports assesses progress made in these reforms and the state of preparedness in meeting the conditions for membership. The Rule of Law reports complement that assessment by involving some candidate countries in the same preventive cycle as Member States on the basis of objective and merit-based criteria. Building on the participation of

[14] Articles 2 and 49 TEU.

[15] The fundamentals cluster covers the core values and principles on which the EU is built. It includes the EU *acquis* related to the rule of law and fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform, and economic criteria.

[16] European Commission, *Communication on Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, 2020, COM(2020) 57 final.

Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, the Commission will progressively include further candidates as and when they become ready.

The recommendations in the enlargement package should guide Union support and gradual integration. Financial assistance and access to selected benefits should remain linked to measurable progress, notably through objective-based financing instruments.[17] Follow-up will identify the outstanding reforms and responsible authorities, target technical assistance at identified implementation gaps and assess results in the next reporting cycle. Incentives must reflect verified progress, including the independence and effectiveness of the institutions concerned. This approach has already been implemented under the current objective-based facilities for Ukraine, the Western Balkans, and Moldova. For the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the objective-based plans will remain the main implementation vehicle for enlargement partners, linking payments to the delivery of reforms (including in the area of the rule of law and anti-corruption) and investments, and, once they become Member States, also in line with the relevant provisions of the National and Regional Partnership Plans.

The European Public Prosecutor's Office now forms part of the acquis. This entails that new Member States must also participate effectively in the office from the date of their accession. The Commission will assess and, where possible, facilitate countries' progress in the legal and operational preparations needed during the negotiations. These include, in particular, preparatory steps for the appointment of the European Prosecutor and the European Delegated Prosecutors, as well as any necessary alignment of national criminal rules and procedures so as to allow the European Public Prosecutor's Office to effectively exercise its competences in the territory of the new Member State.

After accession, the Union's full rule of law toolbox will be deployed to ensure continued compliance, with a monitoring of the rule of law situation in all Member States under the Rule of Law report, including recommendations to guide further reforms if needed.

To respond to rule of law challenges, the available legal instruments also include infringement proceedings, budgetary conditionality, incentives and safeguards notably under the Multiannual Financial Framework and Article 7 TEU. The basis for more timely and efficient procedures is an early identification of rule of law concerns. This is the core purpose of the Rule of Law report, which sets up a cycle for cooperation and support to Member States. The Commission will continue to draw on evidence from monitoring under the Rule of Law Report, the tracking of the implementation of its recommendations, as well as infringement proceedings and assessments of risks to the Union budget to identify persistent breaches earlier. It will

[17] Current and future financial instruments include: REGULATION (EU) 2024/792 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 29 February 2024 establishing the Ukraine Facility; REGULATION (EU) 2024/1449 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans; REGULATION (EU) 2025/535 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 March 2025 establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova; REGULATION (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III); REGULATION (EU) 2021/947 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009.

continue to assess the appropriate response under the relevant instruments, in accordance with their respective legal requirements, and ensure that their application is coherent and complementary.

Article 7 addresses a clear risk of a serious breach of the values in Article 2 TEU and, where a serious and persistent breach is established, allows the Union to suspend rights deriving from membership, including Council voting rights. Article 7 must retain its central role in addressing the most serious breaches. Its high procedural thresholds – notably the four-fifths majority and unanimity requirements – and the absence of set timeframes can, however, hamper timely action and the effectiveness of this instrument to intervene in real time against serious breaches of the Article 2 values. A more effective handling of Article 7 procedures, including possible timeframes, could be explored with the Parliament and the Council. Such issues could be laid down in interinstitutional arrangements within the existing Treaties. In its discussions with the Council on Article 7 procedures, the Commission will seek more regular consideration of outstanding concerns and clearer follow-up to hearings. The accession safeguards proposed in Part IV would provide additional, temporary instruments.

Protecting fundamental rights

Enlargement extends the protection of the Charter of Fundamental Rights to new Member States. Enlargement countries must therefore prepare for its effective application before accession. This requires courts and other relevant independent authorities to be afforded the protection of their prerogatives, as well as the power and resources needed to enforce these rules. Along these lines, enlargement countries must be in a position to effectively uphold fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, including non-discrimination, gender equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Upon accession, they must also comply with the general obligation that all Member States have to ensure compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and to respect Article 2 TEU values when implementing the EU budget.

The Commission will strengthen cooperation between enlargement country authorities, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and relevant Union networks. Monitoring and technical assistance will focus on practical enforcement of fundamental rights, including equality and non-discrimination, data protection and the rights of persons in vulnerable situations. Article 19(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) requires unanimity in the Council for the adoption of measures to combat discrimination, following the consent of the European Parliament.

The Commission will assess whether recourse to the general passerelle clause in Article 48(7) TEU could facilitate decision-making in this area, strengthen the protection of equality and non-discrimination, and will make recommendations as appropriate. Safeguards in the Multiannual Financial Framework proposals, notably the Charter Horizontal Enabling Condition under the National and Regional Partnership Plans Regulation, are important tools in ensuring that the Charter of Fundamental Rights is upheld.

Strengthening democratic resilience

Reforms must also strengthen resilience to threats facing Member States and enlargement countries alike. Foreign information manipulation and interference, cyberattacks, and pressure on independent media and civil society cross borders. Vulnerabilities in enlargement countries can affect the Union, already before accession.

To address these shared threats, the Commission associates enlargement countries with the implementation of the European Democracy Shield and the work of the European Centre for Democratic Resilience.[18] Such cooperation – together with the High Representative/Vice-President wherever appropriate – covers electoral integrity, foreign information manipulation and interference, transparency of political advertising, media freedom, the protection of journalists and human rights defenders, civic space, media literacy and support for independent fact-checking, and citizen participation. This cooperation helps authorities and independent actors identify threats, exchange information and improve their preparedness and response, while protecting freedom of expression. Reforms that ensure democratic resilience should form part of accession monitoring and guide technical and financial support. Close cooperation before accession will strengthen the Union's collective resilience.

Next steps

The Commission will:

- Extend the Rule of Law Report to other enlargement countries as and when they become ready.
- Use the enlargement package to identify outstanding reforms, target technical assistance and assess implementation in the following reporting cycle.
- Strengthen cooperation with enlargement countries on the practical enforcement of fundamental rights. Focus assistance on the independence and capacity of enforcement bodies and access to effective remedies.
- Continue to foster practical cooperation with enlargement countries under the European Democracy Shield, including in the framework of the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, covering threat assessment, information exchange, support for independent media and other areas of mutual interest.
- Assess and support countries' progress – in close cooperation with the European Public Prosecutor's Office – on the legislation and operational capacity required for effective participation in the Office as of accession.
- Engage with the European Parliament and the Council on Article 7 TEU procedures.

[18] European Commission, *Joint Communication on a European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*, 2025, JOIN(2025) 791 final.

3. Policies

With reliable and effective authorities and respect for common rules, enlargement can strengthen the impact of Union policies through greater scale. A larger Single Market, better access to critical raw materials such as rare earths, and enhanced industrial capacities create opportunities for trade, investment and growth. Stronger energy, transport and digital networks reduce dependencies and increase security. Wider judicial, police and civil protection cooperation improves the response to cross-border crime and crises. Future members' capabilities can strengthen the Union's external action and defence preparedness.

These gains require effective implementation of common rules and cross-border cooperation, adequate administrative capacity and targeted investment. The accompanying Staff Working Document provides the detailed analysis of opportunities and challenges arising from enlargement, resulting policy gaps and options for policy adaptation. The principal sectoral conclusions are as follows.

- **Freedom, security and justice**. Enlargement would extend the Union's external borders and widen judicial and law enforcement cooperation. This requires operational cooperation on security and migration management, effective preparations regarding border management, asylum and migration systems and trusted participation in common information systems. Readiness must be tested in practice and accompanied by effective judicial oversight and data-protection and fundamental rights safeguards.
- **Single Market**. A larger market would widen opportunities for trade and investment. These benefits depend on uniform application of the acquis, comparable levels of protection and effective enforcement, including market surveillance, customs, competition and state aid, public health, consumer protection and product safety. Demonstration of full and effective enforcement capacity by candidate countries' administrations and regulators will be required before full participation. If appropriate, transitional measures applicable to the free movement of workers and allowing for gradual opening of EU labour markets after accession could be envisaged, as in previous enlargement rounds.
- **Competitiveness and inclusive growth.** Enlargement would strengthen the Union's industrial and innovation base and broaden its pool of skills. Closer integration, when paired with the necessary investment and prioritisation, can strengthen strategic industrial sectors, European value chains, cooperation in research and innovation and EU policies on education and skills, cybersecurity and the digital sphere. This requires full alignment with the Union's economic security approach and strengthening the investment and administrative capacity needed to participate effectively in these policies. Integration in the Customs Union poses particular implementation and investment challenges and requires a proactive approach ahead of accession accordingly.
- **A decarbonised economy and sustainable connectivity**. A stronger, larger EU brings an extended commitment to decarbonise our economy, as well as to clean energy transition that ensures energy security, while protecting natural resources and boosting the circular economy. It would boost the EU's leadership in decarbonisation, clean industries and clean tech. Integrating energy and transport networks would diversify supply, improve cross-

border connections and strengthen resilience. This requires substantial investment in energy diversification, operational systems, interconnections and corridors, compatible market and technical rules and cooperation between regulators, system operators and neighbouring Member States. Planning, monitoring and implementation instruments must also be adapted so that enlargement supports the Union's energy, climate and environmental objectives throughout the accession process. Enlargement countries must gradually work towards attaining the EU objectives and standards in these three policies.

- **Cohesion, agriculture and rural development, food and fisheries**. Enlargement would increase both development opportunities and disparities within the Union. Investment should support convergence, connectivity and structural reform, with allocations reflecting the framework agreed for the Union budget. National, regional and local authorities must have the capacity to manage, control and implement EU resources effectively. Future members would also add substantial agricultural production and strengthen the Union's food security potential, while also increasing pressures on markets, and needing income support to be catered for. Preparations must ensure full compliance with food safety, animal and plant health, animal welfare, as well as marketing and environmental standards. They must also strengthen the capacity to administer agricultural support and manage crises. Fisheries and maritime policies will likewise require effective implementation of common rules and adequate administrative and control capacity. For Ukraine, the scale, structure and very high levels of productivity of the agricultural sector warrant the examination of targeted arrangements that would significantly limit financial support and market access for sensitive agricultural products, while supporting Ukraine in regaining access to its historic third-country export markets.
- **External relations, security and defence**. Future members would add geopolitical weight and, in some cases, significant operational experience and industrial capacity to the Union's external action, defence and security. This means that they must be in full and sustained alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions. Alignment in this area remains insufficient among certain enlargement countries. Preparations will connect candidates' capabilities with defence industrial cooperation, military mobility and joint work on cyber and hybrid threats.
- **Administrative policies**. Strong administrative cooperation and capacity, including a solid anti-fraud framework, are essential for effective implementation of EU rules. Sustained simplification efforts, interoperable IT systems and pre-accession support and coordination tools should help enlargement countries prepare for accession.

Next steps

The Commission will:

- Continue to identify, as accession negotiations advance, the legislative adaptations, administrative preparations and investments required in each policy area, drawing on the reviews and the accompanying Staff Working Document.
- Work with national administrations, regulators and Union agencies to assess enforcement capacity and test participation in common information systems before accession.

- Prepare country-specific support and transitional arrangements where the negotiations establish a need, including in agriculture, the movement of workers and services, and participation in common systems (and specify the purpose, duration and review conditions for those arrangements).
- Reflect the targeted arrangements for Ukraine in the area of agriculture in the Draft Common Positions related to Cluster 5: Resources, agriculture and cohesion, at an appropriate moment.

4. Budget

The budget must provide for the policy adaptations and investments identified in the reviews. The Union budget must support reforms and convergence before accession, accommodate new Member States without disrupting EU priorities, and protect the Union's financial interests throughout. The Commission has made a proposal for a modern Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034[19] to help the Union to deliver on its priorities, in particular our preparations for future enlargement of the Union. The next Multiannual Financial Framework constitutes the main response to the budgetary questions raised in the March 2024 Communication.[20] The Global Europe instrument will cover EU external action financing under the next Multiannual Financial Framework,[21] providing support to help candidate countries and potential candidates progress along this path. The next Multiannual Financial Framework also provides support under National and Regional Partnership Plans[22] and other programmes, such as the European Competitiveness Fund,[23] from which new Member States will be able to benefit.

The EU budget also includes a mechanism for the revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework in the event of accession of new Member States to the Union.[24] The main effects are likely to concern expenditure on agriculture, home affairs and cohesion policy, as well as new Member States' contributions to the Union budget, taking account of any transitional or other arrangements agreed in the accession negotiations.

Financing preparation for membership

Preparation for these funding arrangements begins before accession. Union support helps candidate countries implement reforms, strengthen administrative capacity and narrow

[19] European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Regulation laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2028 to 2034*, 2025, COM(2025) 571.
[20] European Commission, *Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, 2024, COM(2024) 146 final.*
[21] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Global Europe, COM(2025) 551 final.*
[22] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security for the period 2028-2034 and amending Regulation (EU) 2023/955 and Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509*, COM(2025) 565 final.
[23] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation on establishing the Europea Competitiveness Fund*, COM(2025) 555 final.
[24] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2028 to 2034*, COM(2025) 571 final, Article 11.

economic, social and territorial disparities. It also prepares them to apply Union policies and manage Union funds after accession. The Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova and the Ukraine Facility already link financial support to agreed reforms and investments. Disbursements depend on the fulfilment of defined conditions. This rewards progress and directs resources towards reforms that advance convergence and accession preparation.

Building on this experience, the proposed Global Europe instrument will place support for candidate countries within a more coherent and flexible framework. It will combine grants, loans, budgetary guarantees and technical assistance. Support will be tailored to each country's needs, accession progress and the Union's strategic interests. Loans and guarantees can leverage the impact of the Union budget and help mobilise further public and private investment.

Objective-based plans should link this support to reforms and investments. They should also prepare enlargement countries for the planning, management and control systems that apply to Member States. In parallel, enlargement countries will progressively participate in Union spending policies, avoiding a sudden shift at the point of accession.

Preparing accession financial packages

As negotiations approach completion, the Commission will set out the funding transition in a financial package specific to each country's accession timeline. Such financial packages would follow the same approach.

The Commission presented Montenegro's financial package on 30 June 2026, providing the first application of this approach.[25] Before accession, each candidate country will prepare a Global Europe Plan keeping in mind the requirements of the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans. Upon accession, new Member States will be fully integrated under a National and Regional Partnership Plan. At the moment of accession, the Global Europe plan would become part of the National and Regional Partnership Plan as the unallocated component, and additional envelopes for the Cohesion Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, Home affairs, and Interreg will be added. This would ensure continuity of implementation of key reforms and investments, avoid implementation gaps at a critical juncture of Montenegro's membership and allow Montenegro to fully participate in the Union budget. Additional commitment appropriations would avoid reducing funding foreseen for existing Member States and the transfer of resources already available for Montenegro under Global Europe would partially offset the costs.

This first package illustrates the method for identifying and accommodating financial implications as negotiations advance. It neither prejudges the timing of accession nor the outcome of the Multiannual Financial Framework and accession negotiations, nor the potential financial packages for other candidates at a later time. It estimates the new Member State's allocations and specifies a transition from pre-accession funding to inclusion under the internal Union programmes. It also identifies the financial impact on the Multiannual Financial Framework, and addresses own resources, administrative expenditure and any temporary

[25] European Commission, *Communication on financial package for the accession negotiations with Montenegro, 2026,* COM(2026) 334 final.

compensation or other financial arrangements, such as the phasing-in of Common Agricultural Policy support and home funds. The agreed accession terms will provide the basis for the Commission's proposal to revise the Multiannual Financial Framework when accession occurs, if necessary.

Protecting Union funds

The transition from external to internal Union funding requires enlargement countries to be able to manage Union funds effectively and accountably. They need sound public financial management, transparent procurement, effective internal control and independent audit. They must also be able to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute fraud, corruption and other irregularities, recover irregular expenditure and cooperate effectively with the Commission, the European Public Prosecutor's Office, the European Anti-Fraud Office and other anti-fraud actors. All this should be tested and demonstrated before accession.

Support under the objective-based plans must remain conditional on reform progress and improvement of national financial control processes. Payments should be suspended or reduced where conditions are not met, for instance where serious deficiencies affect financial management. Technical assistance should address weaknesses identified through accession monitoring and improve the country's administrative capacity.

After accession, these controls will be backed by the Union's budget-protection instruments, within their respective scopes. The Financial Regulation and programme-specific rules cover audits, payment suspensions, financial corrections and recoveries. Infringement proceedings address failures to comply with Union law. The general regime of conditionality addresses rule of law breaches that affect or seriously risk affecting the Union budget.

Next steps

The Commission will:

- Prepare, under the proposed Global Europe instrument, objective-based country plans that link accession reforms and investment with the disbursement of funds, with particular emphasis on progress on the fundamentals.
- Take forward negotiations on Montenegro's financial package and present other country-specific packages as other accession negotiations approach completion. Specify commitment appropriations, funding transitions and the resulting changes to the Multiannual Financial Framework.
- Support enlargement countries in strengthening their capacity to manage Union funds, collect own resources, detect, prevent, investigate and prosecute fraud, corruption and other irregularities, and recover amounts unduly spent through technical assistance, audits and accession monitoring.

III. Reinforcing gradual integration

Union policies have been examined to anticipate a larger membership, and candidates that meet the relevant conditions should participate earlier in areas of shared interest, in a mutually beneficial way. Gradual integration supports implementation of the EU acquis and economic and social convergence during the accession preparations, while allowing citizens and businesses to benefit progressively from closer integration with the Union. It does not replace but complements and reinforces the accession process, and should be designed to contribute to progress in the accession agenda as a whole. It also builds administrative capacity and mutual trust, helps prepare for membership, while remaining conditional and reversible.

1. A coherent, strategic and predictable approach

The 2020 revised enlargement methodology provides the basis for this approach.[26] It opened the way to closer integration into selected Union policies, the Single Market and Union programmes, frontloading tangible benefits and obligations of membership before accession.

To make fuller use of these possibilities, earlier participation should be organised through a coherent, merit-based and reversible framework. Access must be conditional on progress in accession preparations, readiness in the policies concerned and strategic alignment with the Union. Candidate countries demonstrating comparable level of preparation in a given policy area should have access to comparable opportunities. Transparent access conditions should guide candidates' reform priorities.

A common framework must be flexible enough to accommodate different routes to participation. The appropriate pathway depends on each candidate country's level of preparation, and the sectors in which earlier participation would bring the greatest mutual benefits. The applicable legal framework also matters. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Ukraine and Moldova provide possibilities that differ from those available under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the Western Balkans.

Whatever the pathway, deeper integration requires sustained alignment with the Union's values, acquis and strategic interests of both the EU and its Member States. Respect for EU values and principles, full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the implementation of sanctions, should inform both access to integration opportunities and their continuation. It remains a key requirement for membership. Participation must be supported by the capacity to enforce the relevant obligations and flanked by mechanisms that protect the autonomy and uniform interpretation of EU law.

Building on the findings of the policy reviews, the Commission will map existing gradual integration instruments across policies and enlargement countries and identify opportunities for gradual integration in specific sectors. These may require legislative adaptations or administrative measures, and will ultimately depend on the enlargement countries' decisions to align and implement Union law ahead of accession.

[26] European Commission, *Communication on Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, 2020, COM(2020) 57 final.

2. Priorities for deeper integration prior to accession

Single Market, competitiveness and economic security

The Single Market is the first priority for economic convergence. Earlier integration would open opportunities for Union businesses, strengthen European value chains and reduce strategic dependencies. The Commission will identify where regulatory alignment, including with the social acquis, and enforcement capacity allow deeper participation in research, innovation and industrial cooperation, and wider market access accordingly. Priority should go to opportunities that advance accession preparations and meet shared economic and strategic needs, including on the basis of existing agreements for closer economic integration into the Single Market.

Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products, for instance, should advance where the required alignment has been achieved.

The framework should also accommodate emerging strategic sectors such as semiconductors, quantum technologies, biotechnology, artificial intelligence and space. Participation will depend on the rules of each programme and, where relevant, security requirements.

As industrial and market integration deepens, participation in sensitive sectors must be accompanied by alignment with acquis on investment screening, export controls, sanctions implementation and the protection of sensitive technologies. Assessments of access should consider strategic alignment, critical dependencies and the capacity to manage risks to infrastructure and supply chains. Where those conditions are not met, the scope of participation should be adjusted under the applicable instrument.

Energy, transport and digital connections

Deeper economic integration also depends on the energy, transport and digital connections that allow European networks to operate efficiently across a wider Union. Progressive participation in the TEN-T and TEN-E networks should be supported by investment in cross-border links and cooperation between regulators, system operators and neighbouring Member States. Priorities are to secure more diverse energy supplies, resilient transport routes and secure, interoperable digital infrastructure.[27]

Transport links require the same combination of investment and operational cooperation, supported by common technical standards and more efficient cross-border procedures. Enlargement countries and neighbouring Member States should identify bottlenecks and prepare the infrastructure and administrative improvements together. This will help ensure that investment in one part of a corridor improves the reliability of the route as a whole.

The reliability of these networks also depends on secure digital infrastructure and cybersecurity.

Security, defence and resilience

Protecting critical networks and responding to common threats also require closer security and defence cooperation before accession. Priorities include defence industrial cooperation,

[27] European Commission, *Communication on the REPowerEU Plan*, 2022, COM(2022) 230.

military mobility, cybersecurity and the response to hybrid threats, as well as contributions to Common Security and Defence Policy missions where appropriate. Participation should reflect sustained strategic alignment and the capacity to meet the relevant obligations.

For defence industrial cooperation, Security Action for Europe[28] and the European Defence Industry Programme[29] provide opportunities for common procurement and closer industrial cooperation, including with Ukraine, under their respective participation and eligibility rules. Further opportunities with Ukraine could include building on the association of Ukraine to European Defence Fund to support defence industry innovations, as well as joint European Defence Projects of Common Interest (EDPCIs) to reinforce the EU's defence technological and industrial base.

Benefits for citizens and businesses

Closer integration must also bring tangible benefits in the daily lives of European citizens and businesses.

The experience of existing EU programmes demonstrates the added value of bringing people closer together and fostering gradual integration, notably through Creative Europe, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+.

Payments and roaming also show how meeting common requirements can deliver such benefits through the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) and Roam Like at Home.

Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have started participating in SEPA schemes, enabling more efficient cross-border euro payments through participating providers.

Ukraine and Moldova joined Roam Like at Home on 1 January 2026, extending domestic roaming conditions to their citizens and Union travellers.

The Council's June 2026 authorisation of negotiations to extend Roam Like at Home to the Western Balkans provides a basis for further progress. The Commission will pursue the necessary agreements and preparations, with participation conditional on regulatory and operational readiness.

Beyond payments and communications, recognition of qualifications and education and mobility programmes will widen opportunities for work, study and research, while cooperation in health and civil protection will improve crisis preparedness. The Commission will support preparations for further integration and clear information for citizens and businesses.

3. Progressive association with the Union's institutions and working structures

Delivering these benefits requires closer administrative cooperation. Participation should therefore extend progressively from Union policies and programmes to Union bodies. This will

[28] Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument.
[29] Regulation (EU) 2025/2643 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2025 establishing the European Defence Industry Programme and a framework of measures to ensure the timely availability and supply of defence products.

help candidate country administrations build capacity and allow Union institutions and agencies to test cooperation with future members.

The revised enlargement methodology already envisages observer participation for candidate countries in key Union meetings. Building on this approach, participation should extend, where conditions are met, to Union agencies, networks and operational structures in fields where the candidate has achieved the necessary alignment and implementation capacity. Before accession, observers would contribute to policy preparation and operational cooperation without taking part in Union decision-making. Greater observer participation in expert groups and agency activities should familiarise candidate administrations with Union working methods and strengthen their capacity to apply Union policies.[30]

The Commission proposes that appropriate information, consultation and observer arrangements be put in place following the final Intergovernmental Conference concluding the accession negotiations, ahead of signature of the accession treaty. It will work with the European Council and the Council on corresponding arrangements for their meetings and preparatory bodies. This stage should enable the acceding country to follow developments in Union policies, prepare its positions and assume its institutional responsibilities at accession, while respecting institutional autonomy and confidentiality.

Following signature, involvement should deepen further. Under its Rules of Procedure, the European Parliament may invite the parliament of an acceding country to appoint observers. The Commission will examine structured political participation in relevant Commission activities, in full respect of the Treaties, the Commission's institutional autonomy and the principle of collegiality. If at this stage candidate countries are also compliant with the Single Market legislation, preparations would have been completed. Thought should therefore be given to how candidate countries in this situation could already participate in relevant parts of the Single Market.

Earlier enlargements offer experience for these preparations. In 2004, after accession, Commissioners from the new Member States were paired with incumbent Commissioners without holding separate portfolios until the new Commission took office. Pre-accession participation cannot, however, confer membership of the College or decision-making rights.

4. Making gradual integration operational

The Commission will launch annual gradual integration dialogues with enlargement partners progressing with accession-related reforms. Each dialogue will review participation in gradual integration mechanisms, and identify further opportunities. The follow-up will specify the outstanding requirements, responsible authorities and technical or financial support needed for the next stage. Subsequent dialogues will review delivery against these steps.

A dedicated share of support under the proposed Global Europe instrument should finance the gradual integration needs identified through the dialogues. It would support the investments, administrative capacity, regulatory implementation and information systems required for

[30] For instance, EUIPO, with the EU budget support, started recently to collaborate with intellectual property offices of some enlargement partners and to offer them support on acquis alignment, capacity building and enforcement of the EU acquis related to intellectual property.

effective participation in Union policies and programmes. Country plans should identify these needs and sequence financing with the reforms and operational preparations on which participation depends.

Financing and earlier participation must be matched by continued compliance. Every gradual integration measure should specify the relevant acquis, the conditions for participation and the monitoring arrangements. Participation must include continued alignment with an evolving acquis, effective controls and cooperation with Union bodies.

Where these obligations are not fulfilled, participation must remain reversible. Access should be suspended or withdrawn where warranted. Corrective measures should be proportionate and confined to the policy area concerned where the shortcoming is sector-specific. Broader backsliding on fundamentals or strategic alignment may justify a wider response under the applicable instruments. Conditions for suspension and restoration should be stated in advance. Decisions should identify the breach, explain the scope of any restriction and specify the corrective action required to restore participation.

Next steps

The Commission will:

- Present the mapping and put forward a coherent, strategic and predictable approach to gradual integration for consultation with Member States.
- Launch annual gradual integration dialogues with enlargement partners progressing with accession-related reforms. Agree follow-up on outstanding requirements, further opportunities, responsible authorities and the support needed for delivery.
- Expand participation in Union programmes, agencies, expert groups and operational structures in line with accession progress. Identify the tasks and administrative preparations needed for effective participation, subject to the applicable rules.
- Work with the European Parliament, European Council and Council to establish appropriate information, consultation and observer arrangements after the final Intergovernmental Conference, and examine further institutional participation following signature of the accession treaty.
- Identify in country plans under the proposed Global Europe instrument the investments, capacity and systems required for gradual integration.
- Include enlargement countries in the design of new measures to protect the EU market.

IV. Safeguards in future accession treaties

The track record of compliance built through the negotiation process must continue after accession. Membership brings wider rights and responsibilities. As the reviews underline, the enlarged Union depends on effective implementation of common rules. The accession process establishes durable compliance with the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights;

accession treaty safeguards provide a means of responding to serious failures to maintain that compliance after accession. These safeguards should complement the Union's general instruments by providing temporary and targeted remedies.

1. Purpose and common principles

As announced in the 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy,[31] future accession treaties should contain stronger safeguards against serious backsliding on commitments undertaken during negotiations, particularly on the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights. The Commission proposes a common framework for these safeguards.

Within this framework, safeguards should have clear grounds for activation and defined periods of application. Decisions should be duly reasoned and based on objective, solid evidence. Measures should be subject to judicial scrutiny and regular review, and should be amended or lifted when the conditions justifying them cease to apply.

Safeguard measures should be proportionate to the nature, gravity and effects of the shortcomings identified and should not go beyond what is necessary to address them. Measures should normally target the sector concerned. Where shortcomings are systemic, a broader response may be warranted within the scope of the relevant safeguard clause. Their scope and application should strike a balance between protecting the functioning of the Union and preserving the rights arising from membership.

2. Sectoral safeguards and monitoring before accession

Future accession treaties should retain the three policy safeguards developed through previous enlargements:

- The economic safeguard clause for serious difficulties affecting a sector of the economy or a geographical area.
- The internal market safeguard clause for serious breaches to the functioning of the internal market, threats to the Union's financial interests, or an imminent risk thereof, caused by failures to fulfil commitments undertaken during accession negotiations.
- The justice and home affairs safeguard clause for serious shortcomings, or an imminent risk of such shortcomings, in transposing or implementing the acquis covered by the clause, including judicial cooperation and mutual recognition.

These safeguards are temporary by design. Previous accession treaties made them available for three years after accession. Future treaties should significantly extend this period to allow sufficient time to establish a reliable implementation record. The treaty should also permit extension of that activation period under defined conditions, on the basis of a Commission assessment.

The period during which a safeguard clause may be invoked should be distinguished from the duration of measures adopted under that clause. Measures adopted before the expiry of the activation period may continue to apply thereafter only for as long as the conditions justifying

[31] European Commission, *Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 2025, COM(2025) 690 final

them persist. They should be reviewed regularly and amended or lifted in accordance with the conditions laid down in the accession treaty.

To support the use of these safeguards, the Commission will assess, from the closure of negotiations all the way to accession, whether commitments are being implemented and maintained. It will report regularly to the European Parliament and the Council.

Future accession treaties should also include a general monitoring clause for the period between signature and accession. This pre-accession monitoring should draw, among others, on the Commission's monitoring tables and reports all the way up to accession. Monitoring should identify shortcomings early and specify the corrective action required. Where serious issues of concern arise, the Council, acting on a Commission proposal, should be able to adopt appropriate measures focused on those commitments. The accession treaty should allow appropriate measures to be decided prior to accession and, where necessary, to take effect from the first day of membership.

Where monitoring identifies backsliding before the first day of membership and targeted measures would be insufficient, a postponement clause could provide a last resort instrument. It would allow accession to be postponed on the basis of a Commission assessment. The clause should use objective criteria and set a proportionate postponement period. The decision-making arrangements remain to be specified. The Commission would reassess the outstanding shortcomings during that period.

3. Institutional safeguard clause

Breaches affecting institutional functioning or membership obligations require protection beyond sectoral safeguards. These could be addressed through a temporary institutional safeguard clause, which would address serious breaches of Article 2 TEU values and of the principle of sincere cooperation. In addition, breaches to the rule of law principles and to the Charter of Fundamental Rights affecting the implementation of EU funds will be addressed through the horizontal conditionalities established as part of the National and Regional Partnership Plans that candidate countries will implement from day one of joining the Union. Furthermore, the Conditionality Regulation will continue to apply to the entire EU budget.

The response to such breaches should reflect their nature, gravity and effects, and could extend to suspension of voting rights in the Council in particularly serious cases. Measures should target the affected policy where possible; systemic shortcomings could justify a broader response.

Measures would follow a Commission proposal or a reasoned request of Member States. They would be deemed adopted unless the Council rejected them by qualified majority within a specified period.

The clause would apply for 15 years after accession. Any measures would be subject to judicial scrutiny and regular review by the Council. Measures should be reviewed regularly and amended or lifted when the issues justifying them have been remedied.

The safeguard would complement, not replace, Article 7 TEU. It would provide a temporary, accession-specific mechanism for exceptional situations during the first years after accession.

Article 7 would retain its central role in protecting the Union's values. Use of the safeguard must be coordinated with other procedures so that the response is effective and the combined measures remain proportionate.

4. Complementary arrangements

Full application of the Schengen acquis requires a separate Council decision once the necessary conditions have been verified. The Commission proposes explicit consideration of rule of law conditions relevant to mutual trust, including the functioning of justice, anti-corruption arrangements, policing and border management. These conditions should be assessed in relation to implementation of the Schengen acquis through the applicable evaluation and decision-making procedures.

A further option concerns the exercise of decision-making rights during the first years of membership. A new Member State would undertake, for a limited period, not to oppose Council and European Council decisions concerning future enlargements and relating to bilateral disputes. Bilateral issues unrelated to accession criteria should be addressed through appropriate bilateral or international mechanisms. The commitment would be set out in a declaration accompanying the accession treaty.

The negotiations may also establish a need for transitional arrangements for free movement of workers and services, agriculture, sensitive products, funding and participation in common systems and networks. They should address identified risks and remain proportionate, time-limited and subject to review where appropriate. Where objective circumstances warrant and the candidate country agrees, an accession treaty may also provide for specific arrangements – such as sector-specific safeguard clauses – extending beyond the standard transitional period, including in agriculture, subject to regular review.

To bring these arrangements into the negotiations, the Commission will submit proposals for Union positions under Chapter 34 on Institutions, Chapter 35 on Other issues, Chapter 33 on financial and budgetary provisions and the relevant sectoral chapters where relevant. The proposals will include the necessary Treaty provisions, annexes and commitments, starting with Montenegro's accession arrangements.

Next steps

The Commission will:

- Propose safeguard clauses in accession treaties as appropriate.
- Submit proposals for Union positions under Chapters 34 and 35, including draft treaty provisions on the above-mentioned safeguards.
- Apply this approach first to Montenegro's accession arrangements.

V. Turning preparedness into delivery

This Communication and the pre-enlargement reviews set out ways to achieve the Union's long-term ambitions and address key questions related to its priorities and policies as well as its capacity to act in a wider Union. They identify the types of changes and reforms that the EU

should consider to make its policy and governance framework future-proof and to harvest the mutual benefits of enlargement.

The Commission invites the European Parliament and the Council to take forward the institutional preparations and policy measures within their responsibilities. It will work with Member States and enlargement countries to connect these preparations with progress in negotiations, expand gradual integration in strategic areas of mutual interest, and define the safeguards to be agreed in accession treaties.

To involve citizens and stakeholders in these preparations, the Commission will organise dialogues – including through the Union's delegations network – with citizens, businesses, social partners and civil society in current and future Member States on the mutual benefits of enlargement, the adaptations required and the safeguards accompanying it.

Building on the experience with previous enlargements, the Commission will propose, in the 2026 enlargement Communication, indicative roadmaps providing a pathway for the next steps in the accession processes of the most advanced negotiating countries Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine, provided they maintain the pace of reforms.

These roadmaps will prejudge neither the outcome nor the speed of negotiations but will provide an anchor for the negotiations both for the candidate countries and for the Council. Based on the revised enlargement methodology that provides for greater predictability, such roadmaps will allow for better prioritisation, sequencing and monitoring of the process. In line with the own-merits principle, the pace of accession negotiations will continue to depend on the negotiating countries progressing and completing the required reforms necessary to meet the conditions of EU membership.

The accession process will remain rigorous and merit-based, with participation, benefits and obligations tied to reform delivery, implementation capacity and strategic alignment. But rigorous and merit-based do not mean slow in delivering for europeans. Citizens and businesses – from Member States and enlargement countries alike – must be able to experience the tangible benefits of Europe at every stage of the process.