

# Discussion Paper



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## Setting the Stage for Enlargement

### The Integration of the Staged Accession Model into the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans

#### *1. Introduction: Putting the gradual integration approach into action*

The inception of the [New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) (NGP) represented a pivotal moment in the ongoing discussions of how to breathe life into gradual integration within the EU's approach to enlargement. Gradual integration can be broadly defined as the strategy to incrementally extend membership-like benefits to non-member states, thereby smoothing their transition toward full EU membership. Since 2021, the [Model for Staged Accession](#) has pioneered a horizontal approach to this concept,<sup>1</sup> linking the access to increased

benefits to the level of accomplished reforms in all clusters.<sup>2</sup> This model seeks to move beyond the traditional binary approach to enlargement while prioritising the Fundamentals. Given that both the Model and the NGP represent attempts of operationalising gradual integration, it is warranted to analyse to what extent they overlap. The paper posits that while the NGP effectively integrates the Model's principle of conditional financial incentives to promote reforms, it overlooks the critical role of institutional participation as a complementary driver for accelerated accession progress. Uncovering the similarities and nuances of the NGP and the Model, the aim of the paper is to provide clarity on the analysed topic to EU policymakers and guide them on how to continue exploring further possibilities of gradual integration in the next institutional cycle.

<sup>1</sup> To be more specific, the Model's horizontal perspective aims to gradually provide benefits in the form of institutional and financial incentives in order to draw out the necessary reforms across all clusters. In contrast, the sectoral approach looks at how candidates can be integrated into specific areas of EU policy and the EU single market upon successful adoption of the *acquis* in selected policy areas. Given the difference between the two perspectives, the Model explores the sectoral approach only as a complementary activity that can indeed allow for closer integration prior to official membership (although without the potential to draw out reforms in the area of Fundamentals).

<sup>2</sup> For the details on the latest Template 2.0 on the Staged Accession, see here: Milena Mihajlović, Steven Blockmans, Strahinja Subotić, and Michael Emerson, [Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU](#), European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) & Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2023.



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## II. Assessing the Overlap between the NGP and SAM

### II.1 Funding the Future

With its provision of increased and conditional funding, the NGP represents the first practical application of the financial logic underpinning the *Staged Accession Model*. The latter insisted on the necessity of *gradually* and *conditionally* providing *additional* short- and mid-term *financial incentives* to candidate countries — in order to serve as a “carrot” to encourage reforms while making the process more predictable and based on merit. Accordingly, as the Model proposed,<sup>3</sup> a timely revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) was executed in Spring 2024,<sup>4</sup> successfully designating €1.6 billion in operationalisable grants (of the total €6 billion of the NGP's *Reform and Growth Facility*) to the Western Balkans (WB).<sup>5</sup> When combined with the €12.2 billion from the WB's estimated share of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance

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3 Milena Mihajlović, *Reforming the EU's pre-accession funding instrument: Effective membership preparation through the Staged Accession Model*, European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade), 2023.

4 Had this opportunity been missed, no new and additional funds, besides the existing IPA III, would be subject for allocation until the next financial cycle beginning in 2028.

5 European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans*, 2023, p.47.

(IPA III),<sup>6</sup> the total grant provision reached €13.8 billion.<sup>7</sup> Further echoing the Model, the NGP also introduced the *conditionality* at the core of the Facility, by requiring the fulfilment of semestral targets set out by *Reform Agendas* across all clusters, and with particular emphasis on the Fundamentals, as a precondition for the funds to be unlocked.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with the Model's proposal, which sets specific reform thresholds across all clusters to unlock the funds while imposing stricter criteria in the Fundamentals area. Specifically, as membership preparedness improves — with Stage 1 being associated with a *moderate* level of preparedness across all clusters and Stage 2 with a *good* level — additional funds are supposed to be released progressively, from one stage to the next.<sup>9</sup> The indicated overlap in the overall logic between the two proposals, even led Gert Jan Koopman, head of Directorate-General Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), to publicly describe the NGP as “a form of *Staged Accession*”. With the NGP slated to continue until 2027, this period presents the EU with a critical opportunity to guide candidate countries in leveraging IPA/NGP funds to enhance their readiness for membership, aiming to elevate their status from “moderate” to “good” across all clusters.

Not only does the NGP incorporate the *logic* of the Model, but it also follows its example in terms of the *size* of the total funds. This analysis reveals that the combined size of IPA III and NGP grants *fully aligns* with the Model's Stage 1 funding levels. Namely, the Model proposed that Stage 1 funding for candidate countries (with a *moderate* level of preparedness across all clusters) should equate to 40% of the financial trans-

6 The total operationalisable appropriations of IPA III (2021-27) amount to €13.8 billion when including both the Western Balkans and Türkiye. However, since the NGP excludes Türkiye from its scope, it was essential to estimate the specific portion of IPA III funds allocated to this region. Unlike its predecessor IPA II (2014-20), which had country-specific envelopes, IPA III does not, necessitating an estimation exercise. By analysing the signed Financial Agreements between Türkiye and the European Commission for 2021-24 (see: Directorate for EU Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, *TR-EU Financial Co-operation*, 2024) and projecting a similar allocation rate for the remaining four years, the estimation concludes that Turkey will likely receive €1.6 billion for a period covering 2021-27. After deducting this figure from the total, approximately €12.2 billion remains for the WB. This remainder supports the WB through the IPA national programming, multi-country programs, IP-ARD, EIDHR/CFS/Media, Migration & RHP, Horizon & Erasmus & UP entry tickets, CBC, and WBIF. While the final amount may vary by 2027, this estimate serves as a solid illustrative example. Indeed, when inquired, the European Commission confirmed that they anticipate the total IPA III for the WB to exceed €11 billion, thus validating this assessment. This response was acquired during *Online Consultation: European Commission DG NEAR exchange of views with Civil Society on the reform priorities under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans*. The event was organised by TACSO (EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey) on 22 April 2024.

7 For illustrative purposes, the table assumes commitment appropriations (CA) equal payment appropriations (PA). This is in line with the European Commission's approach during the development of the Regulation.

8 This way, cherry-picking was supposed to be avoided and key reforms supported while working towards shrinking the socioeconomic gap between the region and the EU.

9 To clarify, the term “Stage 1” designates a candidate country that has achieved a *moderate level of preparedness*, with an *average rating* of 3 out of 5 in *each cluster*. Additionally, this stage requires that each chapter and subarea within the Fundamentals maintain a *minimum rating* of 3. Progressing to “Stage 2” demands a higher, generally *good level of preparedness*, with *each cluster* achieving an *average rating* of 4 out of 5. This stage also requires that each chapter and subarea in the Fundamentals meets a *minimum rating* of 4.

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fers they would receive as EU member states.<sup>10</sup> Assuming all Western Balkan countries advance to this stage, the financial support is projected to total approximately €14.21 billion over one MFF cycle, equating to €2.03 billion annually.<sup>11</sup> Coincidentally or not, the combined funds from the €12.2 billion IPA III and the €1.6 billion NGP grant amount to €13.8 billion, translating to an annual €1.97 billion over a 7-year time period. Although encouraging, the Model insists on looking at a long-term perspective as well by encompassing a long-term horizon of funds up to 60% in Stage 2. This would apply to countries with *good* level of preparation across all clusters, which would translate to €3.04 billion annually or €21.28 billion over seven years. Thus, introduced mid-MFF cycle as *an interim solution* that builds upon the Model's proposals, the NGP's successful application could, in principle, lay the groundwork for a more robust funding instrument for 2028-34, desirably mirroring Stage 2 funding size.<sup>12</sup> This way, gradual integration would indeed turn into an essential framework for facilitating future enlargement rounds.

*The NGP should be viewed as a step in the right direction, as long as it sets the path for the reforms to take place – that could, in turn, generate the region's stabilisation and foster its self-growth.*

10 Strahinja Subotić, *On financial and economic implications of the Staged accession model on the EU budget, and on acceding countries' budgets*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) & Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2023.

11 In fact, if mandatory contributions are accounted for upon membership, the annual proposal of €2.03bn funds would amount to 54% of funds. This is so, as the total amount for the WB upon acquiring membership is €5.07, whereas €3.76 billion if contributions are accounted for.

12 As the negotiations for IPA IV, or whatever it might be called in the next financial cycle, are soon to start, the proposed sum of €21.3bn solely for the WB6 would be appropriate to meet their needs during 2028-34 in a gradual manner.

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### II.2 Swimming Against the Tide

The preceding lines go in contrast with the general sentiment in the civil society that is engaged in enhancing the enlargement policy. In fact, civil society organisations have, to a large degree, expressed notable “disappointment” with the size of funds proposed by the NGP. It was argued that the yearly amount of NGP grants offers only 0.3–0.4% of the region's annual GDP, adding that this amount is substantially lower than the amount most WB countries have recently received annually through foreign direct investments or workers' remittances.<sup>13</sup> This criticism is not necessarily without foundation. In fact, CEP's supplementary work to this paper shows that the combined funds are too limited to address the socio-economic gap, while adding the limited potency of the NGP to improve the region's growth rate in the next decade.<sup>14</sup> However, the same paper counters arguments of those suggesting that a lot of time is lost “discussing some things which will have no implications at all on the situation on the ground.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, it is argued that the NGP should be viewed as a step in the right direction, as long as it sets the path for the reforms to take place – that could, in turn, generate the region's stabilisation

13 Ioannis Armakolas & Ana Krstinovska (eds.), *The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, ELIAMEP, 2024.

14 As the paper indicates, annual funding disparities per capita between Croatia (€740) and the Western Balkans (€122) remain significant. The former incorporates all MFF funds member states are eligible for together with the grants from the NextGeneration EU funds, whereas the latter takes into consideration IPA III and NGP grants. The discrepancy becomes particularly striking when the region's population of 17.6 million is juxtaposed against Croatia's 3.9 million.

See: Marko Todorović and Ana Milinković, *The Great Gap: Socioeconomic Disparity and the Imperative for EU Support for the Western Balkans*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), 2024, available at:

15 Dušan Reljić at the conference of the European Policy Centre (EPC), *The road to accession: Will the Growth Plan re-energise the Western Balkans' EU bid?*, 39<sup>th</sup> minute.



and foster its self-growth.<sup>16</sup> In essence, the NGP should not be seen as an instant solution to the socio-economic challenges but as a valuable precursor to a more comprehensive instrument that will not only be larger but will also fully integrate funds with the principle of performance-based conditionality.

Moreover, this view of the NGP fits well with the Model's focus on *gradual integration*, calling for incremental increases in funding over time. In fact, the Model's proposal to gradually increase funding from 40% to 60% was designed to make the progression from one stage to the next continuously appealing, thereby addressing concerns from some member states that excessive early support might disincentivise the governments from pursuing full membership.<sup>17</sup> As an anonymous EU official remarked, "one ought to prevent candidates from being *too comfortable* in the pre-accession stages".<sup>18</sup> Originally, the 2021 Template for Staged Accession suggested disbursing 50% of funds in Stage 1 and 75% in Stage 2. However, after incorporating mandatory contributions into the financial assessments, it became apparent that the funds available at Stage 3—full membership—would be on par with, or sometimes less than, those in Stage 2 under the initial plan. Consequently, the proposed percentages per stage were reduced in Template 2.0 of the Model. Although this adjustment went against the traditional logic of civil society organisations to ask for more notable increases in funding, the idea was to make the proposal operationalisable and realistic, reliable and credible, in order to be implemented sooner rather than later, while carefully the interests of both candidate countries and current EU member states.

### II.3 Institutional Divergence

While the NGP and SAM display a significant overlap in financial perspectives, a critical divergence lies in their approach to institutional incentives. In fact, the lack of a gradual integration of candidates into EU institutions has been called out by think tanks as the "main blind spot" of the NGP.<sup>19</sup> This gap

<sup>16</sup> The same paper adds that while the New Growth Plan provides a roadmap for development, its success hinges on adaptive policymaking, flexibility in implementation, and resilience in the face of external shocks. Moreover, the NGP implementation appears to require national governments' renewed focus on enhancing human capacities in financial management. The paper goes on to argue that when faced with tangible benefits from NGP's direct financial and indirect societal impact, citizens will be more inclined to support further accession efforts, as democratic theories emphasise that a stable economy and a strong middle class are conducive to building vibrant democracies.

<sup>17</sup> Although the Template envisaged a robust reversibility policy to sanction prolonged stagnation and backsliding in the fulfilment of membership conditions, it was nevertheless deemed warranted to address the identified gap in order to minimise the risk of undesired outcomes.

See: Strahinja Subotić and Milena Lazarević, *The Model for Staged Accession to the EU: Addressing the Four Key Concerns*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade).

<sup>18</sup> The quote is from an anonymous source in the foreign ministry of one of the EU member states. It was selected because it encompasses the overarching concern across the EU.

<sup>19</sup> Think tanks have been rightly critical of the fact the European Commission has opted for a "predominantly economic approach", reflected in the very name of the very name of the communication ("New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans"). See: Milena Mihajlović and Lukáš Macek, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans: An important step forward, while much is yet to be done*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) and Centre Grande Europe at Jacques Delors Institute, 2024.

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was critically examined in a complementary paper, which indicated that the NGP rather opted for incentives in the form of early integration into the single market by providing access to various EU initiatives such as programmes, agencies, joint alliances, and more.<sup>20</sup> For instance, these include the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization (CENELEC). In addition, in the context of the potential participation in the work of classical EU institutions, the NGP only refers to engagements with the European Commission's expert groups. Like in the case of SEPA and other referred initiatives, the candidate countries have long had the opportunity to join in the work of the expert groups.<sup>21</sup> Hence, although these initiatives add value to the accession journey, they fall short of serving as compelling motivators for the WB6 to enact reforms (particularly in the area of Fundamentals), given their sectoral focus.

From this perspective, the key flaw of the NGP is that it lacks the detailed, merit-based, structured roadmap that is found in the Model, which turns institutional participation into a powerful incentive that is supposed to complement the financial incentive.<sup>22</sup> The Model insists on the importance of opening the doors of the Council of the EU, European Council and European Parliament, as well as comitology, and EU consultative

<sup>20</sup> Đorđe Dimitrov, *The New Growth Plan – Assessing the Value of the Proposed Early Integration Measures*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), 2023.

<sup>21</sup> SEPA was, for example, put on the table already in 2020 with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

<sup>22</sup> The institutional process outlined by the Model explicitly connects EU institutional participation with stages. Namely, focusing on the configurations that correspond to areas where these countries have achieved the highest level of preparedness for membership, according to the Commission's reports. For instance, as access to Stage 1 takes place upon acquiring a moderate level of preparedness across clusters (rating of 3), in practice, a country could acquire access to the Council configurations that cover areas with above-average scores, i.e., a good level of preparedness (rating of 4). Then, access to the Council could be maximally expanded in scope and intensity in Stage 2. Assuming there is a political will to deepen ties with candidates that would be very close to fulfilling all membership conditions in Stage 2, this could involve ensuring the widest possible participation, allowing for discussions to take place on all negotiated areas of mutual importance. See: Strahinja Subotić, *Enabling gradual access to EU institutions with the Staged accession model*, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) & Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2023.

bodies and agencies.<sup>23</sup> Although some sporadic participation may have been evidenced prior in some of these bodies, this was not done in a predictable and merit-based manner. Consequently, the EU has yet to unlock the benefits associated with institutional participation, such as candidate countries' socialisation and knowledge transfer, strengthening administrative capacities, greater alignment with EU policies and values, and, ultimately, fostering a sense of belonging even before official membership. To that extent, there is growing consensus among influential thinkers that institutional participation needs to be used as an important incentive during the pre-accession period. For instance, in his report presented to the European Council, Enrico Letta also insists on the importance of facilitating "gradual integration into EU institutions and decision-making processes".<sup>24</sup> As EU membership and preparation for is not – and should not be – viewed solely through a financial and economic lens, the war in Ukraine serves as a constant reminder of the importance of more robust political cooperation and support. Operationalising institutional incentives — under the principle that the more reforms, the greater access to EU institutions and vice versa — will need to be treated independently from the New Growth Plan. As the EU approaches a new institutional cycle, it is presented with a timely opportunity to address these shortcomings effectively, ensuring that future integration measures are as robust institutionally as they are financially.

### III. With greater funds, comes greater responsibility

#### III. 1 Piecing Together Oversight Tools

The augmented funding and intensified focus on reforms under the NGP are unlikely to produce transformative changes on the ground without the enhancement of the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Recognising this, both the European Parliament and the Council have inserted additional safeguards during the amending process. Namely, the recently adopted [Regulation on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility](#) for the WB has underscored that "a firm commitment to 'fundamentals first' approach...remains essential", while adding that upholding "effective democratic mechanisms" will be one of the preconditions for the support under the Facility. Moreover, the establishment of the "Facility Scoreboard",<sup>25</sup> which will display the progress of implementing the beneficiaries' Reform Agendas, was also a positive step forward.

<sup>23</sup> The EU can facilitate greater institutional access for candidate countries without treaty changes, provided there is political will from EU institutions and member states. In doing so, however, the "principle of autonomy in decision-making" must be upheld, as the Council's Legal Service has repeatedly reaffirmed that this principle is fundamental to fulfilling policy-making and decision-making responsibilities. To enable candidate countries' presence in meetings while preserving autonomy, temporary removal of the obligation of professional secrecy would be necessary. In practice, the invitees would be required to leave the room once the specific item on the agenda has been exhausted. Moreover, prior presence on a particular subject does not create a right to be invited on that subject in the future, thus reaffirming the possibility of reversing the acquired institutional benefits in case the necessary accession reforms are missing.

<sup>24</sup> Enrico Letta, *Much More than a Market: Speed, Security, Solidarity* -Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens, p.139, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> See article 26 of the Regulation on the Facility.

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The introduction of payment conditions in the form of both measurable qualitative and *quantitative* steps in the Reform Agendas is also a step in the direction previously advised by civil society organisations.<sup>26</sup> To make sure there is local ownership and scrutiny, the role of civil society was also enhanced, with the adopted Regulation requiring that its input "should be reflected in the Reform Agendas". Finally, the role of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) was further clarified and expanded. Such steps are in line with the Model's requests,<sup>27</sup> reducing the space for doubts on how monitoring and prevention of fraud could be tackled.<sup>28</sup>

#### III. 2 Refining the Mechanisms for Enhanced Reform Tracking

With the increased funding and stronger emphasis on the reforms with the NGP, there is also a need for improved Commission's annual reports assessment. An integral part of that process are the Commission's annual reports, which were supposed to be the primary source for evaluating these countries' progress in the EU integration process – all while serving as a reliable basis for the decisions by the EU Council to make or withhold advancement of individual candidates towards membership. As there is, however, in practice a notable level of mistrust by member states, but also civil society organisations,<sup>29</sup> when it comes to the Commission's approach to reform monitoring and assessment, it becomes evident that this approach needs to adapt. Considering that DG NEAR is in the process of reforming its annual reports,<sup>30</sup> the time is right for

<sup>26</sup> Milena Lazarević and Strahinja Subotić, *Monitoring reforms in the EU accession process: A Western Balkan civil society contribution*, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2023.

<sup>27</sup> The Model called for a more consistent approach in assessing membership preparedness as well as for adding quantitative ratings to these otherwise qualitative assessments. Such a modification would allow for easier monitoring and benchmarking of the candidates' progress towards membership. Moreover, it was argued that giving a more systematic role to civil society organisations as partners in reform monitoring would help leverage the expertise of CSOs to make the enlargement process more evidence-based and more credible. For more, see: Milena Lazarević and Strahinja Subotić, *Monitoring reforms in the EU accession process: A Western Balkan civil society contribution*, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See also: The European Court of Auditors, Opinion 01/2024 [concerning the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans](#), 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Think for Europe Network (TEN) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), *The Enlargement Impasse and the Necessity for its Transformation*, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> As evidenced by multiple stakeholders at the EU Delegation to Serbia.



*The shortcomings of the Commission's approach to assessing and monitoring are most visibly reflected in the Functioning of democratic institutions (FoDI) sub-area within the Fundamentals cluster. The FoDI is the only part of the report which does not include a membership preparedness assessment, which is based on a scale starting from an 'early stage' up to a 'very advanced' level of preparedness.*

them to tackle this issue seriously and thus set the path for a more responsible approach to tracking reforms in the future.

The push towards more quantifiable, transparent, and predictable evaluations as part of the Facility<sup>31</sup> suggests an evolving approach that could reflect on the annual assessments of the Commission as well. For the time being, the shortcomings of the Commission's approach to assessing and monitoring are most visibly reflected in the Functioning of democratic institutions (FoDI) sub-area within the Fundamentals cluster. The FoDI is the only part of the report which does not include a membership preparedness assessment, which is based on a scale starting from an 'early stage' up to a 'very advanced' level of preparedness.<sup>32</sup> Such a treatment of one of the most fundamental segments of EU membership conditionality runs contrary to the Facility's efforts to prioritise democratic reforms. Hence, addressing this and other issues related to the annual reports, would not only contribute to repairing the inter-institutional trust in the EU and thus reduce the risk of future dissonant views between the Commission and (some) member states, but also increase the likelihood that the subsequent enlargement steps will be done with merit-based principles at their core. With more funds now on the horizon, the urgency to address these issues increases all the more.

### III.3 Avoiding Separate Tracks

With the Facility adopted and boosted, the challenge now remains how to tie the level of implemented NGP-agreed reforms with the political commitments as part of the formal accession process. One could logically assume that the implementation of reforms would not only be followed by more funds, but also by the Council's decision to start opening clusters and closing chapters with the candidates. This becomes all the more pertinent when it is considered that there is no apparent link between the successful implementation of targets agreed

upon as part of the Reform Agendas and the opening of clusters or closing of chapters as part of the ongoing negotiating process. This raises legitimate fears that the NGP might end up being "a separate track to have a life of its own", in parallel with that of the formal enlargement methodology.<sup>33</sup> One way to go would be based on the proposal by Florian Bieber, Nikola Dimitrov, and Michael Emerson, which argued that the detailed conditions set out in the required Reform Agendas could be summarised as commitments to raise the ratings of specified chapters as seen in the Enlargement Package reports.<sup>34</sup> As they go on to argue, this would create objective foundations for achievements under the Growth Plan to impact the formal enlargement process. Whether the EU opts for this or another solution, it remains a fact that resolving this issue in the next institutional cycle would complement both the NGP's and the Model's efforts to accelerate the accession while keeping it merit-based.

Moreover, the aim to accelerate the process and avoid having separate tracks is hindered as long as unanimity continues to be the method for decision-making in the Council for all steps related to enlargement. The Model argues that the dynamics of the enlargement process would be greatly facilitated by a possible extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) to the numerous intermediary steps in the long accession process. Such a change in enlargement policy, although conditional on the political will and agreement of all EU member States, appears to be possible within the current treaty framework. As article 49 of Treaty on EU (TEU) mandates unanimity only at the commencement and conclusion of the accession process, the intermediary steps are based on the "customary use of unanimity".<sup>35</sup> It then follows that if member states agree to adopt QMV for these intermediate steps, it would not set a legal precedent in other areas where unanimity is required by law. Such a transition fits well with the German-Slovenian "non-paper on a more efficient Enlargement Process."<sup>36</sup> In line with the Model's proposal to introduce QMV for intermediary steps of the formal accession process, and considering that the number of candidate countries has grown, it becomes all the more important for member states to engage in critical assessment and cost-benefit analysis of the QMV's value.

33 This issue was raised by: Florian Bieber, Nikola Dimitrov, and Michael Emerson, *The Commission's important but flawed Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, European Western Balkans (EWB), 2024.

34 Ibid.

35 Charles Brasseur, Vera Pacht, and Chiara Grigolo, *Towards an enlarged union: Upholding the rule of law*, Belgian EU presidency and International IDEA, 2024.

36 Germany and Slovenia, *Non-paper on a more efficient Enlargement Process – suggestions for technical amendments to the Enlargement Methodology*, 2024.

31 It should be noted that the WB will be included in the Rule of Law reporting (typically reserved just for member states) from 2024. The European Commission is drafting the reports on the rule of law for both the member and four candidate EU states – Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia. See: European Western Balkans, *European Commission to publish rule of law reports on EU and candidate countries on 3 July?*, 2024.

32 For more on the inconsistencies in the Functioning of the Democratic Institutions sub-area, as well as recommendations how to improve the Commission's reports and start quantifying the reforms, see:

Strahinja Subotić and Miloš Pavković, *Identifying Inconsistencies in the 2022 European Commission's Annual Reports for WB6*, European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade), 2023.

Miloš Pavković, *Quantifying the Functioning of Democratic Institutions: Developing a Reliable Model for the Western Balkans*, European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade), 2023.

Dorđe Dimitrov and Strahinja Subotić, *Deepening and Expanding the Scope of the Commission's Reporting of Developments in the "Functioning of Democratic Institutions" in WB6*, European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade), 2023.



## IV. Make Enlargement Great Again

The concept of EU enlargement has always been driven by the strategic necessity of fostering peace, democracy, and prosperity in Europe. However, ever since the last enlargement in 2013, the process has often been criticised for its lengthy negotiations and perceived inefficiency. To rejuvenate and enhance the effectiveness of enlargement, a new paradigm must be embraced. The title "Make Enlargement Great Again" encapsulates a proposed visionary call to transform the EU's enlargement policy. Positioned within the context of ongoing discussions on gradual integration, the introduction of such a paradigm would seek to reinvigorate and streamline the process by which countries join the EU, ensuring it is not only faster and more efficient but also more transparent and grounded in merit. By incorporating ideas contained in innovative approaches such as the Staged Accession Model — and extending these principles beyond the scope of the New Growth Plan — the EU could render the enlargement process a more dynamic and engaging pathway that not only supports candidate countries in their transition but also enhances the overall strength of the EU. The envisioned paradigm repositions enlargement as a cornerstone of the EU's efforts to make the European continent peaceful, stable, safer, prosperous, developed, and more powerful on the global scene, while also being forward-looking and ready to engage with the most pertinent challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ultimately, the narrative of enlargement needs to be reshaped and communicated as a mutually beneficial endeavour to the public in both candidate and member states, ensuring it is perceived as a win-win scenario.

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As the EU moves toward a new institutional cycle, there are strong indications that the next European Commission may be dubbed the "Enlargement Commission." In the context of such a shift, it is important that the momentum created with the NGP is preserved. In fact, the NGP should be viewed as a springboard for further and more detailed exploration of how to restore enlargement to its status as one of the EU's most successful policies. However, as the analysis has shown, there is significant potential for further exploring gradual integration. This includes incorporating institutional incentives into the framework and linking them to the level of reforms achieved, as well as enhancing the European Commission's tools for monitoring these reforms. This renewed approach promises to rejuvenate faith in the EU's enlargement strategy, making it a more effective and appealing mechanism that meets the needs of both current and prospective member states. By adopting such an approach, the EU would be able to reaffirm its commitment to a united and resilient Europe, positioning enlargement as a celebrated milestone of European integration.

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- 1) Good Governance
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy
- 4) Our Europe

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