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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

2024 Communication on EU enlargement policy

{SWD(2024) 690 final} - {SWD(2024) 691 final} - {SWD(2024) 692 final} -
{SWD(2024) 693 final} - {SWD(2024) 694 final} - {SWD(2024) 695 final} -
{SWD(2024) 696 final} - {SWD(2024) 697 final} - {SWD(2024) 698 final} -
{SWD(2024) 699 final}

I. KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Twenty years after the biggest enlargement in EU history by 10 new Member States, EU accession remains a key driver of long-term **security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe**. It continues to promote **common values**, including democracy, the rule of law and respect of fundamental rights, while fostering **economic growth**. A credible prospect of EU membership drives reforms and is essential for fostering **reconciliation**. The importance of European integration was further demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which put in the spotlight Europe's interconnectedness and the need to face global challenges together. The three membership applications from the EU's eastern neighbours in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, and the ensuing decisions by the European Council, are further testimony of the geopolitical weight of EU enlargement.

The historic opportunity of binding their **future with the EU is open to 10 partners**: six in the Western Balkans, as well as Türkiye, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova¹ and Georgia. The enlargement process is **merit-based** and depends on the individual objective progress made by each of the partners. This requires determination to implement irreversible reforms in all areas of EU law, with a special emphasis on the **fundamentals of the enlargement process** – related to democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights as well as a functioning market economy, able to resist the competitive pressures in the EU, and a public administration capable of implementing the body of EU legislation. Countries choosing to join the EU must fully and unequivocally embrace and promote EU values, including aligning with the EU's common foreign and security policy.

The **enlargement process entered a new phase with fresh momentum** in 2024. Following the December 2023 European Council decision to open negotiations with **Ukraine and Moldova**, the first intergovernmental conferences opening the negotiations with both countries were held on 25 June 2024. Subsequently, the Commission started the bilateral screening meetings that are now in full swing. Upon the Council decision recognising that **Montenegro** had met the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, the intergovernmental conference on 26 June communicated the closing benchmarks for these chapters. This also paved the way to start provisionally closing the negotiating chapters. The screening sessions were completed with both **Albania and North Macedonia** at the end of 2023. The fundamentals cluster was opened with Albania on 15 October 2024.

In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. The Commission was invited to prepare the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment the country takes all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of October 2022. In December 2023, the European Council granted candidate status to **Georgia**. However, the course of action taken by the Georgian government since spring 2024 jeopardises Georgia's EU path, *de facto* halting the accession process. The Council remains seized of **Kosovo's*** membership application submitted in December 2022.

The enlargement momentum has been coupled with a **reinvigorated engagement** with the relevant partners, particularly through their **progressive integration** into the EU single market. This integration is a facilitator (and not an alternative) to accession, by bringing even before accession the tangible socio-economic benefits of EU membership to the enlargement countries that are ready in specific areas. To show its commitment to above-

¹ Hereinafter 'Moldova'.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

mentioned engagement, the EU has significantly boosted its financial support to partner countries.

On 1 March 2024, the **Ukraine Facility**² entered into force. Against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, this financing instrument supports Ukraine's efforts to sustain macro-financial stability, promote its recovery and support reforms with a view to future Union membership. It will provide Ukraine with coherent, predictable and flexible support from 2024 to 2027 - conditional upon the country meeting pre-agreed reform requirements. The Facility is endowed **with EUR 50 billion** in grants and loans, and its implementation is based on the **Ukraine Plan** - a reform and investment strategy - developed by the country and greenlighted by the Council on 14 May 2024. To date³, EUR 12.4 billion in financing have been disbursed from the Ukraine Facility, and EUR 1.4 billion of investments have been approved for financing under the Investment Framework, which is an integral part of the Facility.

The Commission adopted the **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**⁴ in November 2023. The **EUR 6 billion Reform and Growth Facility**⁵, an integral element of the Growth Plan, entered into force on 25 May 2024. The new Growth Plan aims to complement the Economic and Investment Plan⁶ for the region to help increase its economic convergence with the EU and accelerate reforms related to the fundamentals of the accession process. It provides for gradually integrating the region into specific areas of the EU single market, subject to progress in regional economic integration and alignment with the relevant EU *acquis*, as well as setting up sufficient administrative capacities and procedures. Based on the logic of the NextGeneration EU initiative and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Reform and Growth Facility will further incentivise key socio-economic and enlargement-related reforms agreed in each beneficiary's tailor-made, ambitious Reform Agenda. Upon fulfilment of reform steps and essential conditions, financial rewards will be released to the national budgets, complemented by targeted investments in the green and digital transitions, the private sector and human capital development through the Western Balkans Investment Framework.

The implementation of the Growth Plan and the Facility is underway and has led to a significant political mobilisation in the region, recognising the substantive benefits the Growth Plan will bring. Five of the six beneficiaries have submitted their reform agendas to date, and they were approved by the Commission in October 2024. The corresponding prefinancing transfers are foreseen upon entry into force of the Facility and the loan agreements with each of the beneficiaries and fulfilment of the prefinancing conditions.

The European Commission adopted in October 2024 a dedicated **Growth Plan for Moldova**⁷ to support its socio-economic reforms, investments and alignment with the Union *acquis* and values.

Following President von der Leyen's announcement in her 2023 State of the Union speech, as of 2024 the Commission extended the participation in the Rule of Law Report to some enlargement countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).

Türkiye is a candidate country and a key partner of the EU, and highlights EU accession as its strategic goal. Nonetheless, accession negotiations with the country have been at a standstill since 2018, in line with the decision of the Council. Türkiye did not reverse the

² Regulation 2024/792

³ October 2024

⁴ COM(2023) 691

⁵ Regulation 2024/1449

⁶ COM(2020)641

⁷ COM(2024)470

negative trend of continued deterioration of democratic standards noted in the past years. The EU's serious concerns in the areas of fundamental rights and the rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary, remain. At the same time, following up on the recommendations of the Joint Communication on the state of play of EU-Türkiye political, economic and trade relations⁸, the implementation of the recommendations included therein is advancing, in line with the April 2024 European Council Conclusions, in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner. The EU has a strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye. In this regard, the European Union attaches particular importance to resumption of and progress in the Cyprus settlement talks in further enhancing EU-Türkiye cooperation.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has further underlined the need for unity and solidarity among the EU and its closest partners and the importance of alignment with the **common foreign and security policy** (CFSP). Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina reached or maintained full CFSP alignment. The implementation of sanctions in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a challenge. Kosovo continued to align unilaterally. The overall alignment rate of Ukraine and Moldova has significantly increased. Serbia's alignment pattern has remained largely unchanged, but the country continued cooperating with the EU on sanctions circumvention. Serbia is expected, as a matter of priority, to fulfil its commitment and improve its alignment with the EU CFSP, including restrictive measures, in line with its negotiating framework, and to avoid actions and statements that go against EU positions on foreign policy. Georgia's alignment rate with the CFSP remains low, but the country also cooperated with the EU on combating sanctions circumvention. Türkiye made no progress on CFSP alignment during the reporting period, maintaining a very low rate. Türkiye has implemented some specific measures to stop the circumvention of EU sanctions against Russia through its territory and should continue to cooperate actively with the EU on this matter.

Summits and high-level meetings with the enlargement partners continued, with the **EU-Western Balkans Summit** in December 2023, and the third meeting of the **European Political Community** on 18 July 2024. The latter brought together some 50 European leaders, including from candidate countries and potential candidates, to discuss joint efforts for peace and security, as well as energy resilience and migration in Europe.

II. PREPARING FOR A LARGER UNION

Enlargement is a historic opportunity both for the acceding countries and for the current Member States and the EU as a whole. There are significant socio-economic, political and security advantages of a bigger and stronger Union.

An enlarged EU is a better guarantor of **political stability, security and peace on the continent**. With its focus on the fundamentals of the accession process, the EU encourages political reforms and the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the candidate countries and potential candidates. It allows better cooperation on migration and border management, security, organised crime, terrorism and hybrid threats, which is essential to guarantee the integrity and security of the Schengen area. In addition, enlargement fosters mutual understanding among peoples in Europe as a whole, which promotes reconciliation and peace.

A bigger Union will be a stronger global player, carrying more geopolitical clout, which will enable it to play an **even more significant role on the international stage**. In addition, as a

⁸ JOIN(2023)50

more important regional player, an enlarged EU will be able to exert more influence in its neighbourhood too, projecting stability and prosperity, as well as economic cooperation around its external borders.

EU enlargement will bring far reaching **socio-economic benefits** to its current and future members. The increase in the number of consumers in the single market will provide major opportunities for businesses to expand and trade more freely. Furthermore, new markets will open up new investment opportunities for businesses, creating a virtuous circle of promoting growth in the current and future members' economies.

In the specific case of the Western Balkans, the region is surrounded by EU Member States; therefore, their accession to the EU means a significant **simplification of trade and transport arrangements**, as well as enhanced control of the supply chain of goods with common product standards, no personal checks in the enlarged Schengen Area, no customs procedures for goods and integration of infrastructure networks. This simplification would significantly lower the cost of logistics and could help the acceding countries become major transport hubs. Freedom of movement of goods, as well as agri-food and aquatic produce and other consumer products that meet the required quality and safety standards, will give consumers access to a wider choice of safe products.

Enlargement will contribute to the **competitiveness of the EU's economy** and make it more fit to tackle global challenges, including the green and digital transitions. The average age of the population in the acceding countries is lower than that in the EU, and enlargement will contribute to creating a broader and younger workforce. At the same time, an even closer cooperation and exchanges between scientists, students and businesses will lead to better pooling of talent and brain power and harnessing these assets for research and innovation and the development of new technologies.

Integration of the new markets into the **EU value chains** will further facilitate nearshoring. In addition, **access to and responsible exploitation of natural resources**, including raw materials, in the potential future members, will facilitate applying new technologies and implementing the green transition on the continent. Moreover, partnerships on raw materials⁹ aim to support the development of new local industries and high-quality jobs in partner countries, in full respect of high environmental and social standards, while addressing with full transparency the concerns of local communities. Natural energy-related resources, including wind and solar power generation, will help the EU's efforts in the shift towards renewables and securing its energy demand.

Reaping these benefits requires thorough **preparation by the candidate countries and potential candidates** for EU membership, based on their full and sustained political commitment and engagement. It also means putting in place appropriate safeguards against backsliding in reforms and transition mechanisms to offset the potential impact of significant gaps in economic convergence.

At the same time, enlargement requires an internal reflection in the EU and the preparation of its bodies. On 20 March, the European Commission adopted a **Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews**¹⁰, which contributes to the ongoing discussion on the internal reforms the EU will need to make. It looks at the implications of a larger EU in four key areas – values, policies, budget and governance – and lays the ground for the pre-enlargement policy reviews. Last but not least, enlargement should be accompanied by

⁹ Following the Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials and the Critical Raw Materials Act, the Commission has started to build a series of Partnerships on raw materials, including the Memorandums of Understanding signed with Ukraine in 2021 and Serbia in 2024.

¹⁰ COM(2024) 146 final

targeted communication actions aimed at informing the public opinion about the process, both in the EU and in the candidate countries.

III. ENLARGEMENT COUNTRIES ON THE WAY TO THE EU

In line with the revised methodology¹¹, in this Communication's conclusions and recommendations, the Commission assesses the **overall progress in the accession preparations and negotiations** and proposes the way ahead for each country.

All negotiating chapters with **Montenegro** have been opened, with three provisionally closed. In June, Montenegro achieved a major milestone with the positive assessment on meeting the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters. The intergovernmental conference with Montenegro of 26 June 2024 paved the way for the provisional closure of negotiation chapters.

Serbia has 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters open, two of which are provisionally closed. Frequent electoral cycles in Serbia have had an adverse impact on the continuity and the speed of reform progress related to EU accession. The authorities continued to declare EU membership as their strategic goal. The path towards opening further clusters with Serbia will depend in particular on the progress and pace of rule of law reforms and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Albania and **North Macedonia** have consistently stated their political commitment to the strategic goal of EU integration and their ambition to move forward in the accession negotiations based on continuous reform progress. After the first intergovernmental conferences held with the two countries in July 2022, the screening meetings on all six clusters were successfully completed by December 2023. Based on the Commission screening reports, in autumn 2023, the Council communicated to each country the benchmarks for opening negotiations on cluster 1 (fundamentals).

At the end of 2023, **Albania** submitted its roadmaps on public administration reform and the rule of law, which allowed the fundamentals cluster to be opened in October 2024 during the second Intergovernmental Conference. Albania also submitted its roadmap on the functioning of democratic institutions in September 2024.

In December 2023, **North Macedonia** adopted the roadmaps on the rule of law and on public administration reform. The adoption of the action plan on the protection of minorities is still pending.

Meanwhile, the Commission presented to the Council further screening reports on both countries: in May 2024 for cluster 2 – internal market, and in October 2024 for cluster 6 – external relations and cluster 3 – competitiveness and inclusive growth.

In line with the Commission's recommendation, in December 2023 the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved. As reflected in the March 2024 Commission report, Bosnia and Herzegovina had advanced in adopting EU-related reforms and achieved full alignment with EU foreign policy. However, developments in the *Republika Srpska* entity hampered this positive momentum, notably with the adoption in April of separate entity laws on election, referenda and immunity, the continued non-recognition of the Constitutional Court's authority and decisions, as well as continued secessionist rhetoric.

¹¹ COM(2020) 57 final

In light of the results achieved since 2022, on 12 March 2024, the Commission considered that Bosnia and Herzegovina had reached the necessary level of compliance with the membership criteria. Building on the Commission's recommendation, the European Council decided on 22 March 2024 to open EU accession negotiations with the country. Following this decision, on 24 April 2024, the Commission held a first introductory meeting to explain the process ahead, in particular the screening. The reform dynamic stalled between April and October 2024. The Commission is preparing the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment all relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of October 2022 are taken.

Since 1 January 2024, holders of **Kosovo** biometric passports enjoy visa-free travel to the EU, and as of October 2024, so do the holders of Serbian passports issued by the Serbian Coordination Directorate. Kosovo remained committed to EU-related reforms.

Tensions in the north of Kosovo continued in the aftermath of the violent attack against the Kosovo Police by an armed gang on 24 September 2023, which was the gravest escalation in recent years. Other crises were triggered by issues over land expropriations by the government in the north; the adoption of a central bank regulation on cash transactions negatively affecting Kosovo Serbs and other non-majority communities; police operations to close down offices of Belgrade-run institutions providing assistance to non-majority communities; and by the continued ban on the import of goods of Serbian origin, in effect since June 2023, which disproportionately affects businesses in the Kosovo Serb community. These issues further damaged relations between the government and the Kosovo Serb community. EU measures concerning Kosovo, imposed in 2023, remained in place during the reporting period. The High Representative has recommended the lifting of those measures.

In December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with **Ukraine**. Following the completion of the four remaining steps identified by the Commission in its recommendation of 8 November 2023, the first intergovernmental conference was held on 25 June 2024. In spite of Russia's ongoing war of aggression, Ukraine maintained its strong commitment to reform across many sectors. The Ukraine Plan, endorsed in April 2024 and serving as a comprehensive reform strategy, contributed to strengthening broader policy commitments within the enlargement process. With the Ukraine Facility, the EU continues to tie its financial support for the recovery with the reforms needed to lift Ukraine's economy and to help it on the path towards accession. The EU-Ukraine joint security commitments signed in June 2024 stated that security, resilience and defense support, as well as Ukraine's EU accession process, support to reforms, macro-financial, humanitarian and reconstruction assistance reinforce each other. For its part, Ukraine committed to continue undertaking reforms in line with its EU path, including in the security, defense and intelligence sectors.

There have been significant challenges arising from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and hybrid actions against **Moldova**. However, Moldova has continued to steadily progress on its EU accession path. In December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova. Following the completion of the three remaining steps identified by the Commission in its recommendation of 8 November 2023, the first intergovernmental conference was held on 25 June. The Commission and Moldova have together developed a Growth Plan that will boost support to relevant reform and investment priorities and extend certain benefits of participation in the single market. The Moldovan people voted on 20 October 2024 in a referendum on EU accession and in the presidential election. The proposal to enshrine EU accession in the Constitution was supported by 50,38% of voters. A second round of the presidential election will be held on 3 November, between the two candidates who scored the highest in the first round.

Explanatory meetings on the EU *acquis* with Ukraine and Moldova took place between February and May 2024, and the bilateral **screening** meetings started in July, after the negotiating frameworks were presented to both countries at the intergovernmental conferences in June.

The European Council granted candidate status to **Georgia** in December 2023, on the understanding that the nine steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken. The government prepared a dedicated action plan to carry out the nine steps and expressed its commitment to advance on EU-related reforms. However, as of March 2024, there have been concerning developments that do not reflect the government's stated commitment to the EU path. These include the decision to resuscitate the Law on transparency of foreign influence and its adoption on 28 May, and the adoption on 17 September of the legislative package on family values and protection of minors. Building on its Conclusions of 27 June, on 17 October 2024 the European Council reiterated its serious concern regarding the course of action taken by the Georgian government, which runs counter to the values and principles upon which the EU is founded. The European Council recalled that such a course of action jeopardises Georgia's European path, and *de facto* halts the accession process.

On 26 October, Georgian citizens voted in the parliamentary elections. The preliminary findings of the joint International Election Observation Mission led by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) identified several shortcomings that occurred in a tense and highly polarised environment. The reported weaknesses include *i.a.* the recent legislative amendments to the election process, frequent compromises on vote secrecy, procedural inconsistencies, intimidation and pressure on voters that negatively impacted public trust in the process. These preliminary findings confirm the need for a comprehensive electoral reform that was already highlighted in past key recommendations.

Türkiye is a key partner for the EU and a candidate country, and EU-Türkiye relations have gained momentum over the past year. In line with the European Council conclusions of April 2024, the EU has re-engaged with Türkiye in a number of areas of joint interest. This engagement aims to advance work on the recommendations of the 2023 Joint Communication of the Commission and High Representative on EU-Türkiye political, economic and trade relations¹² in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner. Over the last year, high-level dialogues were held on migration and security, agriculture, health, research and innovation, coupled with a high-level of engagement between the Commission and Türkiye. In addition, the first meeting of the high level dialogue on trade took place in line with the recommendations of the Joint Communication. Based on the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, positive cooperation with Turkish authorities continued on migration management yielding results, despite implementation challenges. One of the next steps should be holding the next meeting of the High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security. The EU will continue efforts to bridge key differences and to seek cooperation with Türkiye in every mutually beneficial area, including the Customs Union, migration management, peace and security, the green and digital transitions, agriculture and rural development, investment and connectivity. Türkiye's own constructive engagement will be instrumental in advancing the various areas of cooperation identified in the Joint Communication.

IV. THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

The **rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform and the economic criteria** constitute the 'fundamentals' of the EU

¹² JOIN(2023) 50 final

accession process. Credible reforms and irreversible achievements on the fundamentals are essential for people to enjoy equality before the law and adequate protection of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Consolidating results in these areas is crucial for enlargement countries to secure progress on their respective paths to accession. Legal certainty and good governance are also the basis for boosting competitiveness and creating the conditions for foreign direct investments, socio-economic progress and prosperity. Stable institutions are also essential for compliance with the EU *acquis* across all policy areas, including the management of considerable financial assistance the EU provides. Over the past year, progress on the reforms linked to the fundamentals was noted particularly in Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine.

The inclusion of some enlargement countries in the Rule of Law Report as of 2024 (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) supports the implementation of the recommendations under the enlargement package, in particular as regards efforts to reform the justice systems, anti-corruption frameworks, media pluralism and freedom, and checks and balances, as well as helping authorities to make further meaningful progress in the accession process, for which the annual enlargement reports will continue to provide guidance and recommendations. The Commission will include other enlargement countries in the Rule of Law Report as and when they are ready, as set out by President von der Leyen in her Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029.

Judiciary and fundamental rights

Some countries' sustained efforts to efficiently implement **justice reforms** and conduct vetting have led to strengthening the **judiciary's** independence and accountability, particularly in Albania, Moldova and Ukraine. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also launched preparations for integrity checks across the judiciary. However, in most countries, threats to judicial independence remained. Attempts at undue political interference continue, affecting the credibility of the judiciary in the eyes of the population. Improving the judiciary's quality and efficiency remains a priority. Many enlargement countries are also confronted with significant challenges affecting the quality and efficiency of their justice system: court backlogs, difficulties in filling open vacancies and insufficient funding. Several enlargement countries have reformed their judicial training system, but some are not in compliance with the European standards. Efforts to digitalise the justice system, including to establish or strengthen case management and information systems, improve specialisation, and introduce safeguards against manipulation must continue in order to strengthen independence and impartiality.

Corruption remains an issue across the public and private sectors in the enlargement countries. The fight against corruption remains a priority for governments in the enlargement countries. Risks related to state capture are the most difficult challenge to tackle, requiring urgent and determined responses from governments. Democratic stability and economic development are affected by high-level corruption and undue influence from oligarchs, alongside organised criminal networks, attempting to infiltrate various sectors. Despite some progress in strengthening legal and institutional arrangements, corruption continues to affect many areas from the judiciary, public administration and public procurement to the economy more generally, including vulnerable sectors, such as energy, health, construction and the media. These issues require systemic and comprehensive approaches based on genuine political commitment and a long-term vision to improve transparency and integrity. They also need anti-corruption strategies and risk assessments across key sectors to be implemented systematically. Unfortunately, effective assets declaration systems, prevention of conflicts of interest, transparency of beneficial ownership, and integrity measures across public services are lacking. Anti-corruption agencies require improved resources, stronger and independent mandates and freedom

form undue political interference and influence. More action is needed to investigate and prosecute corruption cases effectively, especially at high levels, and to ensure the seizure and confiscation of criminal assets. In addition, a systemic approach to de-oligarchisation to limit the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political and public life needs to be pursued. The enabling environment for investigative journalism and civil society should be improved and continuously protected.

Fundamental rights are largely enshrined and protected by law throughout the enlargement region. Countries have ratified the key international and European instruments on human rights and fundamental freedoms and taken steps to align their legislation with the EU *acquis*. **Alignment gaps** remain, particularly on freedom of expression, gender equality, non-discrimination, hate crime and hate speech, data protection, procedural rights for suspects and accused persons in criminal proceedings, and rights of victims of crime. Foreign agent/influence laws infringe upon human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights to freedom of association and expression. Challenges persist also in ensuring the **effective implementation** of legislation and policy tools on fundamental rights and the effectiveness of redress mechanisms. All countries need to step up efforts in following up international and European monitoring bodies' recommendations, including on detention conditions. They also need to ensure judgments of the **European Court of Human Rights** are enforced. In much of the region, **ombudsperson institutions** and other independent bodies strive to fulfil their role in monitoring the states' actions to respect, protect and promote human rights. However, there is still a need to increase their functional independence and resources and improve the follow-up of their recommendations.

Freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism are key pillars of a democratic society. Despite some legislative changes, the media sector in several countries remains marked by media concentration and political influence. This undermines pluralism, independence and the quality of journalism and leads to polarisation. Efforts have been made to address intimidation and violence against journalists. A track record of systematic follow-up needs to be established. There is an increase in the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists and civil society in several countries of the region.

Non-discrimination laws are in place, but greater efforts are still needed to combat discrimination, in particular against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons, Roma and other minorities. Efforts are also needed to prevent weakening of non-discrimination legislation and fundamental rights. In most countries, policies on gender equality and frameworks to prevent and combat **gender-based violence** and domestic violence are being upgraded, in line with the requirements of the Istanbul Convention. However, gender-based violence is still a serious concern in many countries, and support services for victims of violence remain insufficient and under-financed. Urgent efforts are also needed to strengthen the integration of **child protection systems** and to accelerate the **de-institutionalisation** of children and adults with disabilities.

Justice, freedom and security

Progress on **justice, freedom and security**, law enforcement and judicial cooperation between the EU and enlargement countries continued to evolve positively, but challenges remain. The enlargement countries' efforts to develop a credible **track record on proactive investigations, prosecution and final convictions of organised crime and corruption, particularly at high level**, generally need to be improved. The Western Balkans and Türkiye continue to be a source and hubs of criminal activities and groups that are also active in the EU. These countries are major transit points for victims of trafficking in human beings, migrant smuggling and smuggling of goods, in particular illicit drugs and tobacco. Organised

crime groups from the Western Balkans are major players in the international drug trafficking connecting Western Europe with Latin America.

Despite the efforts of Western Balkans partners in the prevention and fight against the misuse and trafficking of firearms, EU member states still identify this region as an important source of weapons illegally entering the EU. In this regard, the implementation of the second phase of the regional roadmap to better control small arms and light weapons is crucial.

Organised crime groups from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are active in migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings, smuggling of goods, drugs and arms trafficking, cyber-dependent crime and other crime, such as document fraud, despite efforts in these countries to fight organised crime.

Operational capacities and tools of customs and border guards are still insufficient in many enlargement countries to cope with these challenges. The level of effectiveness in the fight against organised crime varies across the enlargement countries but the cooperation between law enforcement authorities in the EU and in the enlargement countries has increased.

Candidates and potential candidates should have fully functioning national Schengen governance systems by the time they are admitted to the EU. This entails preparing a Schengen Action Plan, supported by functional monitoring and follow-up. The decision to abolish checks on persons at future common internal EU borders will be subject to the fulfilment of additional objective requirements to be verified under the Schengen evaluation mechanism.

The **fight against economic crime and money laundering** is insufficient as is asset-recovery capacity, including the seizing of crypto-assets. Financial investigations and Financial Investigation Units' capacity are insufficient in many enlargement countries. Alignment with and effective implementation of legislation on anti-money laundering, countering terrorist financing and asset recovery, including the set-up of Asset Recovery Offices and the strengthening of tracing and confiscation powers remains uneven. More action is needed to tackle criminal networks' illicit profits, improve the transparency of beneficial ownership, and strengthen interinstitutional access to relevant databases and the international exchange of information, including strengthening digital infrastructure. Türkiye completed its action plan to resolve the identified strategic anti-money laundering and countering terrorist financing deficiencies and is therefore no longer subject to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) 'grey list'.

Terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation continue to pose a challenge. At the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum held in October 2023, a commitment was made to renew the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans in view of emerging threats and work on a new plan is advancing. Enlargement countries should ensure that terrorist offences are criminalised and penalised in their national criminal law frameworks. More efforts are required to prevent radicalisation, including local structures, radicalisation in prisons and following up on the release of terrorist offenders and effectively tackling terrorist and extremist content online.

Hybrid threats remain a political and security challenge for the enlargement countries, in particular for those in electoral cycles. These threats include foreign information manipulation and interference and physical and cyber-attacks, in particular against critical infrastructure. After a sharp increase following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, these threats continue to pose a considerable risk, and EU support and cooperation has been strengthened.

Functioning of democratic institutions

Consolidated democratic institutions are essential in ensuring stability and a central pillar of the accession process. Many enlargement countries continued to be affected by distrust and marked polarisation. Their parliaments oversight role over the executive remained weak, which has a negative impact on the legislative process and hinders appointments to public bodies. In many countries, the electoral process continues to require reforms, in line with outstanding recommendation from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) / Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Nevertheless, positive developments were observed in Montenegro and Moldova.

As concerns civil society, while legal frameworks for freedom of association usually align with international standards. However, in practice, civil society organisations are not always able to register and operate freely, with some countries having a constrained or difficult environment.

Public administration reform

Recommendations made in 2023 on **public administration reform (PAR)** continue to apply, with overall progress rather limited. The biggest challenge relates to the functioning of the civil service and the management of human resources, including politicisation, with the lack of reforms continuing to drive a high turnover of staff. This has been generally affecting the design and implementation of reform policies, including under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility, and remains a key obstacle to taking on EU membership obligations. In Ukraine, the challenges are amplified by the consequences of Russia's ongoing war of aggression. More action is needed on the institutional coordination of PAR and the strengthening of the oversight institutions to ensure proper accountability.

In the area of **public finance management (PFM)**, all countries have established a credible and relevant strategic framework for PFM reforms, including a regular monitoring and coordination mechanism. Bosnia and Herzegovina saw a PFM policy dialogue carried out for the first time. The main challenges are related to: (i) public investment management; (ii) monitoring fiscal risks; (iii) improving fiscal discipline; (iv) linking strategic planning to the medium-term budgetary frameworks and improving their credibility; (v) further strengthening public internal financial controls; and (vi) improving budget transparency.

The provision of reliable and timely official statistics by national statistical authorities is essential. Therefore, further strengthening of the capacity of **national statistical systems** remains a key element of the reform process.

Migration

The EU remains firmly committed to cooperate and support the Western Balkans and Türkiye by taking a comprehensive approach to address irregular migration, including fighting against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, improving border management, cooperation on asylum and protection, intensifying work on returns. While the irregular migratory flows have decreased on the Western Balkan routes, the phenomenon requires constant vigilance, in particular the illegal activity of networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.

The number of 2023 illegal border crossings to the EU from the Western Balkans decreased by 31% compared with 2022, and the downward trend more than doubled in the first half of

2024¹³. In line with the **EU action plan for the Western Balkans** presented by the Commission in December 2022, the European Commission's support to the region focuses on border management, the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, increasing returns, and cooperating on asylum and protection and reception systems as well as achieving alignment with the EU visa policy, one of the commitments from Western Balkan partners in the Reform Agendas under the Growth Plan. New status agreements allowing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) to deploy additional European Border and Coast Guard teams in the Western Balkans have been negotiated, signed, or operationalised over the reporting period. The EU support to the Western Balkans in combatting migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings is bringing operational results.

Although the number of irregular arrivals from Türkiye to the Greek islands has increased significantly compared with 2022, arrivals from Türkiye to Cyprus and Italy substantially decreased in 2023. The Commission is implementing the EU Action Plan for the Eastern Mediterranean adopted in October 2023. The EU continues to support **Türkiye's significant efforts** in hosting 3.6 million refugees, mainly from Syria, and cooperate with the Turkish authorities to prevent irregular migration. Implementation of the March 2016 EU-Turkey statement and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement remains crucial to the EU-Türkiye cooperation.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues to cause a massive displacement of the population **within Ukraine and the wider region**. Countries in the wider region have continued to host Ukrainian refugees, contributing to protection and integration efforts.

Economy

In 2023, most of the 10 enlargement **economies rebounded from the major economic and social challenges** they faced on the back of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, demonstrating significant resilience. Despite the continued destruction and high numbers of civilian casualties, Ukraine's GDP grew by a higher-than-anticipated 5.3% in 2023. Under the new Ukraine Plan, the country committed to implement a comprehensive set of reforms to maintain macroeconomic stability, foster recovery and advance on the EU path. In most Western Balkan countries, real GDP growth slowed but was still robust – at 6% in Montenegro, 3.4% in Albania, 3.3% in Kosovo and 2.5% in Serbia – and more modest at 1.6% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 1% in North Macedonia. Türkiye and Georgia also experienced strong GDP growth rates of 5.1% and 7.5%, respectively, while Moldova began to recover from its deep recession in 2022, with a modest growth of 0.7%.

After peaking in 2022, **inflation eased** across all enlargement countries, primarily driven by lower international commodity prices and tightening monetary policies. In Türkiye, there has been a welcome shift towards more conventional and tighter economic policies since mid-2023. Structural issues in the **labour market**, such as the wide gender gap, a skills mismatch and a high share of undeclared work continue to represent common challenges affecting the business environment, the workforce, and the overall growth of the 10 economies. Strengthening social dialogue, including the capacities of social partners, continues to be relevant in order to address these challenges.

It is increasingly important that all 10 enlargement countries **accelerate structural reforms** to enable a sustainable growth in the medium term and make progress in meeting the economic criteria for EU membership. This involves ensuring the functioning of market economies and demonstrating the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market

¹³ Source: European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

forces in the EU. Economic policies should also support ambitious goals under the green and digital transition. Pursuing decarbonisation and resilience policies remains an essential part of the alignment with EU standards.

V. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONVERGENCE AND ACCELERATED INTEGRATION

GDP per capita of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia remains around or below 50% of that of the EU, and the pace of achieving convergence is slow. At the same time, the experience of EU enlargement in 2004 demonstrates the positive impact that membership of the EU single market and structural funds has on **economic convergence**. This underpins the current spirit of the relations between the EU and the enlargement countries, which focuses on investments in infrastructure and improving the business environment and on **bringing forward integration into specific parts of the EU single market**. This is being pursued through dedicated instruments, such as the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, and the association agreements, including deep and comprehensive free trade areas with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Such accelerated integration must be accompanied by relevant *acquis* alignment and strengthening administrative capacities.

To further speed up reforms and **socio-economic convergence** of the **Western Balkans** with the EU and to help them meet EU membership requirements, the Commission adopted a **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**. The plan aims to bring forward some of the advantages and further reform incentives of EU membership before accession. It focuses on a gradual integration of the region's partners into the EU single market even before accession, on strengthening regional economic cooperation and on leveraging structural reforms in the areas of the rule of law, the business environment, the green and digital transitions, and human capital development. These reforms will be rewarded through the Reform and Growth Facility.

Implementation of the Growth Plan is in full swing, bringing a new dynamic to the region. The prospect of tapping into some areas of the EU single market before accession - contingent on concrete progress in adopting the relevant *acquis*, structural reforms and regional economic cooperation - has brought the region closer together in **regular ministerial and leaders' meetings**¹⁴. These meetings are devoted to implementation and hosted on a rotating basis by the Western Balkan partners, with the participation of the EU. The measures for accelerated integration being launched so far include applications to join the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), Green Lanes to speed up goods clearance on EU-Western Balkans borders, dedicated Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products, developing national identity wallets and a Balkan Digital identity wallet interoperable with the European Digital Identity Wallets, replicating the WiFi4EU initiative in the Western Balkans, inclusion of the region in the European Digital Innovation Hubs, as well as cooperation under the Critical Medicines Alliance. The possibility for Albania and Montenegro to become SEPA members by the end of 2024, followed by other Western Balkans partners as early as in 2025, could bring substantive benefits to these countries.

Access to the EU's single market is conditional on the region stepping up its efforts in regional economic cooperation by implementing the **Common Regional Market**. The Western Balkans have developed and adopted an ambitious revised action plan for this

¹⁴ Such Leaders of the Western Balkans Six (WB6) meetings took place in Skopje on 21-22 January 2024, Tirana on 28-29 February, and Kotor on 15-16 May, where it was agreed that the next one would be hosted by Bosnia and Herzegovina in autumn 2024. On 19 September 2024, leaders of the Western Balkans Six met with President von der Leyen to discuss the implementation of the Growth Plan.

initiative, which has significant potential to bring the region additional growth through regional mobility and attracting investment at regional level.

The Growth Plan includes a dedicated **Reform and Growth Facility** of EUR 6 billion, which is being used both to reward the countries for real progress in implementing agreed ambitious reform agendas and to support key investments in the priority areas through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). The Commission has adopted a decision approving five reform agendas. Implementation will start following the signature of the Facility and the loan agreements and the disbursement of the prefinancing.

The Facility complements the pre-accession assistance already provided to the Western Balkans through the **Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)**, focusing on administrative and institutional capacity building, as well as implementation of the 2020 **Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans**¹⁵, including the roll out of initiatives under the Global Gateway Strategy, supporting economic growth and the dual green and digital transitions in the region. The Economic and Investment Plan is expected to mobilise investments worth up to EUR 30 billion in the region, of which EUR 9 billion in the form of EU grants. Implementation of the plan is progressing smoothly, with the programmes approved so far set to mobilise up to EUR 17.5 billion, including EUR 5.4 billion in EU grants for the financing of 68 key infrastructure and social investments in the region. Furthermore, 21 guarantees, benefiting from up to EUR 937 million in EU coverage, aim to crowd-in private investments to increase the region's investment capacity. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance also includes support for rural development programmes (IPARD) in Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Türkiye.

The reconstruction of Ukraine and its economy to bring it up to speed with the EU for its prospective accession requires not only a major financial effort but also structural reforms. To this end, the EU has adopted the **Ukraine Facility** of EUR 50 billion, which aims to support the country in preparing for accession, rebuilding and modernising its infrastructure, implementing structural reforms and strengthening its administrative capacity to take on its membership obligations. The Facility entered into force on 1 March 2024.

The **Ukraine Plan**, the first pillar of the Facility, is an essential tool to ensure Ukraine's convergence and gradual integration into the EU. The Ukrainian government designed this comprehensive plan, which was endorsed by the Commission in April and by the Council in May. The plan identifies 69 reforms and 10 investments, covering 15 areas (including energy, agriculture, transport, the green and digital transitions, human capital, state-owned enterprises, the business environment, public finances and decentralisation). These measures aim to boost Ukraine's macroeconomic and financial resilience, improve governance, increase the administration's capacity and efficiency, improve the judiciary's accountability and integrity, support the development of the private sector and create an environment conducive to sustainable economic growth. Several reforms are expected to help Ukraine's efforts on the accession path by advancing alignment with the EU *acquis*, notably in public administration, public finance management, anti-money laundering, public procurement and the transport and agri-food sectors.

The second pillar of the Facility, the **Ukraine Investment Framework**, is equipped with EUR 9.3 billion in EU financial instruments and aims to attract public and private investment, mobilising up to EUR 40 billion to support the country's recovery and reconstruction. EUR 1.4 billion has already been allocated to top up existing investment agreements with several international financial institutions in order to leverage concrete investments in the Ukrainian economy. The third pillar of the Facility provides technical assistance to the Ukrainian

¹⁵ COM(2020) 690

government to build its capacity, implement the reforms set out in the plan and relevant for accession, and to support civil society.

The EU **Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine** has proven to be an effective instrument to create the conditions for improved economic and trade relations to further stimulate convergence. With the DCFTA, the EU has fully liberalised imports from Ukraine for the vast majority of products and maintained tariff rate quotas and a minimum price system for only a few selected agricultural products. Since 2022, in order to support Ukraine's economy, the EU has fully lifted its tariffs on all imported products by adopting temporary autonomous trade measures. However, to reflect EU stakeholders' concerns, a reinforced safeguard mechanism and an emergency brake were introduced for some sensitive agricultural sectors. Other provisions allow for a gradual integration, bringing forward the benefits of membership in the period before accession. Examples are the possibility to conclude an Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAA) or to join the 'Roam like at home' initiative.

The **EU-Moldova DCFTA** is helping Moldova enhance its economic and trade integration with the EU in advance of accession. The EU has fully liberalised all imports from Moldova, except seven agricultural products, for which autonomous trade measures granting temporary liberalisation have been in place since 2022. The country is also working towards an ACAA and possible access to the EU "roam like at home" area.

On 10 October 2024, the European Commission adopted the **Moldova Growth Plan**, worth EUR 1.8 billion, and underpinned by a Reform and Growth Facility for the period 2025-2027. This plan aims to accelerate socio-economic and fundamental reforms, enhance Moldova's access to the European Union's single market and increase financial assistance over the next three years. Together, the plan and facility will enable and incentivise reforms and the investments needed to accelerate the accession process.

The implementation of the **EU-Georgia DCFTA** continues to facilitate an approximation of the Georgian legal framework to the EU, and offers an open environment for trade and investment between the two parties.

The Eastern Partnership countries and region are also benefiting from assistance under the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and the **Economic and Investment Plan**¹⁶, supporting the green and digital transitions and economic growth across the region, including the roll out of the Global Gateway Strategy. Its implementation has accelerated over the reporting period. As of October 2024, a total of EUR 11.6 billion in public and private investment had been mobilised under this plan. These investments are geared towards the private sector and provide access to concessional finance for micro, small and medium-sized companies. In addition, there are investments in transport and digital and energy connectivity. Leveraged investments contribute substantially to the partner countries' economic growth and lay the groundwork for more integrated and future-ready economies.

The **Turkey Investment Platform** (TIP), launched in 2022 under the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+), is expected to mobilise close to EUR 2.4 billion in investments in Türkiye on the back of more than EUR 400 million in EU budget guarantees. TIP facilitates investments in areas of mutual interest, such as green investments and a sustainable transition, renewable energy, connectivity and digitalisation. It provides a powerful set of de-risking instruments to increase the financial capacity of EU and international financial institutions and support and promote public and private investments

¹⁶ SWD(2021) 186 final

in Türkiye. TIP can also pave the way for potential joined-up Team Europe initiatives with international financial institutions.

Moreover, the EU provided strong financial support and showed solidarity with Türkiye in response to the devastating **earthquakes** of February 2023. Both sides are successfully cooperating to implement the EUR 1 billion of assistance pledged by the EU.

In addition, 1 billion EUR was pledged for **Syrian refugees and host communities in Türkiye** in 2024.

Economic convergence needs to go hand in hand with **social convergence** – based on the principles of the EU Pillar on Social Rights and the EU social *acquis*. In order to achieve this, it is crucial that all enlargement countries develop well-functioning labour market structures and institutions, effective social protection systems and strong social dialogue.

VI. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

In the **Western Balkans**, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are essential elements of the stabilisation and association process, as well as the enlargement process. **Overcoming the legacy of the past** and addressing disputes arising from the conflicts of the 1990s remain key. Important outstanding bilateral issues still have to be solved, including border issues and delivering justice to war crime victims, identifying remaining missing persons, and establishing an accurate record of past atrocities at regional level.

The region is fulfilling its ambition to create a **Common Regional Market (CRM)** that aims to ensure freedom of movement for people, services, goods and capital. This will facilitate employment and trade and ease customs procedures between the partners. This work is coordinated by the **Regional Cooperation Council** and the **Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)** in partnership with the **Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum**.

There has been **progress in implementing the CRM Action Plan**, with the adoption of five mobility agreements over the past three years. These agreements are related to ID for travel, the recognition of professional and academic qualifications, and access to higher education. Overcoming longstanding difficulties, a number of substantial decisions were taken at the **CEFTA Joint-Committee in October 2024**, greatly extending the potential benefits arising from the CRM.

At the **Berlin Summit on 14 October 2024**, the region adopted the **second CRM Action Plan for 2025-28**. The plan focuses on deepening existing cooperation and launching new initiatives, in particular on trade, freedom of movement, the business environment, human capital and the digital transition. Implementation of this action plan and overall regional cooperation will be a crucial condition for progress in opening up access to specific areas of the EU single market, as set out in the Growth Plan. The implementation of both the CEFTA decisions and the Action Plan open a new phase in the establishment of the Common Regional Market, with tangible benefits for citizens and businesses of the region.

Regional connectivity remained high on the agenda through cooperation in the areas of transport, energy and digital. The **Transport Community** continued to support the progressive integration of transport sectors in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, while promoting transport facilitation through the Green Lanes initiative with the preparation of a roadmap. It includes plans for modernising 11 border crossings within the region and between the region and the EU to considerably reduce waiting times, while at the same time ensuring necessary controls. The EU-Ukraine **Solidarity Lanes** continue to play a significant role in providing logistics routes for critical trade flows between Ukraine, Moldova, the EU and the rest of the world.

Cooperation with the **Energy Community Secretariat** continued on national energy and climate plans (despite delays in their adoption), underpinning the implementation of the 2030 Energy and Climate framework, as well as improving energy security and efficiency, and advancing **energy market integration** with the EU. It is crucial that the Energy Community contracting parties transpose and implement the Electricity Integration Package, and work towards a carbon price equivalent to the price on the EU Emission Trading System for electricity by 2030.

In the digital area, the region continued implementing its '**Roam like at home**' agreement of 2019 and the voluntary agreement by leading telecom operators on lowering roaming charges with the EU, which entered into force on 1 October 2023. Besides alignment with the EU *acquis* and deployment of robust, stable and secure infrastructure, in line with the EU 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox, and comprehensive cyber resilient frameworks, it is also fundamental for the region to develop digital identity frameworks and digital public services. The region is committed to create national Digital Identity Wallets and subsequently a "Balkan Digital Identity Wallet" by the end of 2027.

Action to strengthen human connectivity among young people continued through the **Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)**. This serves as a regional mechanism uniquely positioned to foster regional cooperation, trust and reconciliation among young people in the region and with the EU. In the autumn of 2023, the **College of Europe** inaugurated a branch in the Western Balkans in Tirana, which will further boost the region's educational ties with the EU. People-to-people contacts and good neighbourly relations are also promoted by the active participation of the region in the EU programmes for education, training, youth and sport **Erasmus+** and **European Solidarity Corps**, as well as by the involvement of higher education institutions from the region in the **European University Alliances**, and of the creative sectors in the **Creative Europe Programme**. The successful implementation of the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport continues to facilitate development of research infrastructures, science and technology parks, promote technology transfer and set up of innovation support measures, thus further contributing to region's competitiveness.

Existing **bilateral agreements**, including the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia and the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, need to be implemented in good faith by all parties.

The situation remained tense between Kosovo and Serbia even though there had been progress in the **normalisation of their relations**. Notable achievements included milestone agreements reached in Ohrid in February and March 2023, preparatory steps in establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities in Kosovo, advancements in the energy sector and commitments to addressing missing persons issues. Meaningful progress hinges on both parties engaging in the EU-facilitated dialogue and implementing the legally binding Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its accompanying annex without further delays or preconditions. Normalisation of relations is essential for the EU path of both partners, who risk losing out on major opportunities. The benchmarks of Chapter 35 of Serbia's accession negotiations and the agenda of Kosovo's Special Group on Normalisation were updated in May 2024 to include the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia and its Implementation Annex.

Russia's war of aggression against **Ukraine** has had an impact on relations with its bilateral partners and neighbouring countries. The Ukrainian authorities have sought to maintain and further strengthen cooperation and diplomatic ties with European countries and beyond, including support for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine in line with Ukraine's Peace Formula.

Ukraine's relations with the Western Balkans have improved overall although there are diverging views with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's *Republika Srpska* entity over their ties with Russia. Relations with Georgia have experienced some strain, especially due to Georgia not aligning with the sanctions against Russia. Despite its lack of alignment with the EU restrictive measures against Russia, Türkiye continues to be a partner of strategic importance for Ukraine, with significant bilateral economic and people-to-people ties, demonstrated by a bilateral visa-free regime and a free trade agreement signed in February 2022. Türkiye has also made repeated efforts to revive the Black Sea Grain Initiative, terminated by Russia in July 2023, and has been a prominent participant in Ukraine's International Crimea Platform.

Following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, **Moldova** stepped up cooperation with Ukraine and Romania on humanitarian support for people fleeing Ukraine, energy security, transport and connectivity. Bilateral cooperation with Ukraine continued to grow, with Moldova expressing solidarity with Ukraine, voting in favour of relevant UN General Assembly resolutions, and aligning itself with a number of political statements in international organisations that condemn the military aggression. Moldova has also been aligning more with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia, despite being a target of intensifying Russian pressure itself.

Georgia continues to support Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including through co-sponsorship of UN resolutions in support of Ukraine. However, the country has not aligned with EU restrictive measures against Russia. Georgia and **Türkiye** enjoy a strategic partnership, with high level contacts, including in the framework of a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia also continue to participate actively in the **Eastern Partnership**.

Relations between Türkiye and Greece improved further in the reporting period, culminating in the 5th meeting of the High-Level Cooperation Council in December 2023, during which the Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourliness was signed between the two leaders. Inflammatory rhetoric is now rare. Türkiye did not engage in any unauthorised drilling activity in the Eastern Mediterranean or flights over Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. Violations of Greek territorial waters are still reported and have increased in 2024 compared to 2023. In April 2024, the EU expressed its full commitment to the comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem, within the UN framework and in line with EU values, and welcomed the appointment of the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Cyprus.

Türkiye continued to advocate for a two-state solution, contrary to UN Security Council resolutions. It is now of paramount importance that Türkiye commits and actively contributes to a fair, comprehensive and viable **settlement of the Cyprus issue** within the UN framework, on the basis of a bicomunal, bizonal federation with political equality, and in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, as well as in line with the EU *acquis* and the principles on which the EU is founded. Türkiye urgently needs to fulfil its obligation to fully implement the Additional Protocol to the EU-Turkey Association Agreement and make progress towards normalising relations with the Republic of Cyprus. Türkiye must immediately reverse all actions and steps taken since October 2020 with regard to Varosha that run contrary to relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Pursuing dialogue in good faith and abstaining from unilateral actions which run counter to the EU interests and violate international law and the sovereign rights of EU Member States is an essential requirement to ensure stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between the EU and Türkiye. Türkiye is expected to unequivocally commit to good neighbourly relations, international agreements and to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the

United Nations Charter, having recourse, if necessary, to the International Court of Justice. The EU remains committed to defending its interests and those of its Member States as well as to upholding regional stability.

Territorial cooperation enables the enlargement countries to work together and with neighbouring EU Member States in key social and economic sectors. More specifically, cross-border and Interreg cooperation programmes create opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and development at local government level, with the involvement of communities, the private sector and civil society organisations. The EU Macro-regional Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region have continued promoting cooperation between Member States and candidate countries for the development, cohesion and decreasing of disparities in these two macro-regions. The strategies aim to unlock the macro-regions' economic and social potential, fostering administrative capacity for different EU policies and promoting development projects in key areas, and are crucial contributors to the preparations for enlargement.

Similarly, the Common Maritime Agenda has facilitated dialogue and cooperation between Member States and candidate countries in the Black Sea region, on topics such as environmental protection, marine pollution prevention and management and sustainable blue economy development.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I.

1. Twenty years after the biggest enlargement of the EU by ten Member States, EU accession remains a key driver of long-term security, **peace, stability and prosperity in Europe**. The historic opportunity of binding their **future with the EU is open to ten partners**, including the six in the Western Balkans, as well as Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.
2. The enlargement process continues to be **merit-based** and depends on the objective progress made by each of the partners. This requires determination to implement irreversible reforms in all areas of EU law, with special emphasis on the **fundamentals of the enlargement process**. Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental values will continue to be the cornerstones of the EU's enlargement policy. EU membership is a **strategic choice**. Partners must embrace and promote **EU values** firmly and unequivocally. Alignment with the EU's **common foreign and security policy** is a more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation in the new geopolitical context.
3. The **enlargement process gained new momentum** throughout 2023 and 2024. The fundamentals cluster was opened with Albania on 15 October 2024. Accession negotiations were opened with Ukraine and Moldova at the first intergovernmental conferences in June 2024. Having met the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, Montenegro is on the way to provisionally closing further negotiating chapters. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The screening process was completed with both Albania and North Macedonia at the end of 2023. In December 2023, the European Council granted candidate status to Georgia. However, following the course of action taken by the Georgian government since spring 2024, the EU accession process has been *de facto* halted. The Council remains seized of Kosovo's membership application submitted in December 2022.

4. Enlargement is a historic opportunity both for the acceding countries, and for the current Member States and the EU as a whole. There are **significant socio-economic, political and security advantages of a bigger and stronger Union**. An enlarged EU is a better guarantor of political stability, security and peace on the continent. A bigger Union will be a stronger global player, carrying **more geopolitical clout**, which will enable it to play an even more significant role on the international stage. EU enlargement will bring far reaching **socio-economic benefits** to the Union's current and future members. At the same time, enlargement requires internal reflection within the Union and preparation of its bodies and policies. On 20 March, the European Commission adopted a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, which contributes to the ongoing discussion on the **internal reforms the EU will need to make**. The Commission will present pre-enlargement policy reviews focusing on individual sectors such as the rule of law, the Single Market, food security, defence and security, climate and energy and migration, as well as social, economic and territorial convergence more broadly.
5. Enlargement partners need to be anchored in the EU through **gradual integration**, leading in turn to an acceleration of the enlargement process. Gradual integration will help technical preparations for EU membership, accelerate *acquis* alignment and smoothen the accession process. The implementation of the **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans** will increase the Western Balkans economic convergence with the EU. It aims to bring forward some of the benefits and obligations of access to the Single Market before EU accession, and provides increased financial assistance through the Reform and Growth Facility, in order to incentivise reforms in the Western Balkans. Crucially, access to the EU's single market is conditional upon the region stepping up efforts in regional economic cooperation, by implementing the Common Regional Market, building on recent positive developments. As part of the Growth Plan, the Commission has approved the Reform Agendas of five Western Balkan partners, setting out ambitious reforms they plan to undertake in order to achieve the facility's objectives. The Commission is working with Bosnia Herzegovina to assist it to finalise its Reform Agenda. To uphold Ukraine's convergence and gradual integration into the EU, the **Ukraine Facility** will provide Ukraine with support from 2024 to 2027, based on the implementation of the Ukraine Plan. A dedicated **Growth Plan for Moldova** to support its socio-economic reforms and investments was adopted on 10 October 2024.
6. In the Western Balkans, **good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation** are essential elements of the stabilisation and association, as well as the enlargement processes. Overcoming the legacy of the past and addressing disputes arising from the conflicts of the 1990s remain key. Outstanding bilateral issues still have to be solved, as they notably hold back regional integration and partners' EU paths. Normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is essential for the European path of both partners, who risk losing important opportunities in the absence of progress.
7. **Türkiye** remains a candidate country and a key partner for the European Union, and the government highlights the EU accession as its strategic goal. Nonetheless, accession negotiations with Türkiye have been at a standstill since 2018, in line with the decision of the Council. The underlying facts leading to this assessment still hold. Serious concerns remain in the areas of fundamental rights and rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary. Dialogue on rule of law and fundamental rights remains an integral part of the EU-Türkiye relationship. At the same time, work is advancing on the recommendations of the Joint Communication on the state of play of EU-Türkiye political, economic and trade relations, with avenues for re-engagement being explored and implementation moving forward, in line with the European Council conclusions and in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner. The European Union has a strategic

interest in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye.

II.

8. In **Montenegro**, the EU accession process is the key priority for the country and a clear political commitment of the authorities that is generally reflected in policy decisions. This includes a continued 100% alignment rate with the EU's common foreign and security policy, including sanctions. Since its formation in October 2023, the government has been operating in an overall stable political environment, with a lower level of polarisation compared to the recent years. The government greatly accelerated preparations for EU accession, and in June 2024 the Inter-Governmental Conference on accession negotiations with Montenegro confirmed that Montenegro overall met the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters 23 and 24, providing the opportunity to proceed with provisionally closing further chapters if conditions are met.

The Commission assessment is that, in line with the negotiating framework, an overall balance is currently ensured between progress under the rule of law chapters, on the one hand, and progress in the accession negotiations across chapters, on the other. The priority for further progress is maintaining and intensifying efforts to address the outstanding issues. In the rule of law area this would mean maintaining focus on the critical areas of freedom of expression and media freedom, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and accelerating and deepening reforms on the independence, professionalism and accountability of the judiciary. For other chapters of the negotiations, the immediate focus needs to be on delivering key pending EU-related reforms and meeting the closing benchmarks, in particular for those chapters which could be provisionally closed in the short term. The government of Montenegro signalled its objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2026 and the Commission is ready to support this ambitious objective, starting with a proposal for provisional closure of additional chapters by the end of 2024, and a substantial agenda for 2025, if the relevant conditions are met. To this end, it is crucial for Montenegro to implement the structured and well-planned approach that was developed to advance the EU integration agenda in practice. A continued broad political consensus on key reforms is a necessity.

9. In **Serbia**, the early 2023 December elections and the following break in the functioning of the government and parliament slowed down the pace of EU-accession reforms. Still, in the area of rule of law, implementation of the reform of the judiciary continued. Serbia adopted a new anti-corruption strategy and continued to contribute to the management of mixed migration flows towards the EU. The full implementation of the new media legislation, as well as its further alignment with EU *acquis* and European standards remains pending and to be ensured. Serbia committed to fully implement all of their respective obligations stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex reached in 2023 and all past agreements. Serbia's pattern of alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy remained largely unchanged and should be significantly improved as a matter of priority, including by aligning with restrictive measures and statements on Russia. Serbia must refrain from actions and statements that go against EU positions on foreign policy and other strategic matters and seriously demonstrate its strategic direction towards the EU.

Constant attention is needed to preserve the overall balance between progress under the rule of law chapters and normalisation of relations with Kosovo, on the one hand, and progress in the accession negotiations across chapters, on the other. The Commission reiterates its assessment for the third year that Serbia has fulfilled the benchmarks to open cluster 3 (Competitiveness and inclusive growth).

Serbia's progress on the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo will continue to determine the overall pace of the accession negotiations. In the coming year, Serbia is expected to speed up the work on the implementation of EU-accession related reforms across the board, with a particular focus on the rule of law interim benchmarks as well as ensuring a truly enabling environment for civil society and media, making credible efforts to shut down disinformation and foreign information manipulation. Moving forward on the Dialogue, Serbia is expected to implement its obligations stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex, as well as all past Dialogue agreements.

10. In **Albania**, the authorities have consistently stated their firm political commitment to EU integration as the country's key strategic priority and have maintained a high level of ambition to move forward in the accession negotiations. Albania has continued to make progress in reforms under the fundamentals cluster, in particular on the comprehensive justice reform and the vetting process, whose end in first instance is imminent, through good results in anti-corruption cases, and by increasing its capacities in financial investigations against organised crime. Albania's active engagement during its term as a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council until the end of 2023, as well as its record of full alignment with the EU's common and foreign security policy, testify to its strategic choice of EU accession and its role as a reliable international partner.

Following the first intergovernmental conference on accession negotiations in July 2022, the screening sessions for all the six clusters of the EU *acquis* were completed in November 2023. At the end of 2023, the Commission presented to the Council the opening benchmarks assessment report, where it concluded that Albania had met the requirements for opening negotiations on the fundamentals cluster. The Commission welcomes the opening of negotiations on the fundamentals cluster at the second intergovernmental conference held on 15 October, which marked a pivotal moment on the path towards accession. The Commission also supports the opening of negotiations on cluster 6 – External Relations towards the end of the year if the positive trend continues. The Albanian government signalled their objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2027 and the Commission is ready to support this ambitious objective. To this end, it is crucial for the authorities to further intensify the pace of EU oriented reforms, notably on the rule of law, consolidating the track record on law enforcement, on effectively fighting corruption and organised crime, and the promotion of fundamental rights, including media freedom, property rights, and minorities.

11. **North Macedonia** has consistently stated its political commitment to the strategic goal of EU integration and maintained a high level of ambition to move forward in the accession negotiations. North Macedonia needs to continue to deliver on the implementation of EU-related reforms, in particular under the fundamentals cluster, notably the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime. Trust in the justice system needs to be strengthened. Corruption should be addressed unabatedly, including through a solid track record in the investigation, prosecution and final conviction of high-level cases. North Macedonia was actively engaged in 2023 as chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The country continued to fully align with the EU's common foreign and security policy.

North Macedonia has not yet adopted relevant constitutional changes with a view to including in the Constitution citizens who live within the borders of the state and who are

part of other people, such as Bulgarians¹⁷, which the country committed to launch and achieve. North Macedonia provides a good example of a multi-ethnic society. Bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries need to be implemented in good faith by all parties, including the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia and the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Following the first intergovernmental conference on accession negotiations in July 2022, the screening sessions for all the six clusters of the EU *acquis* were completed in December 2023. The Commission is looking forward to swift and decisive follow-up to the screening report on the fundamentals cluster, including as regards the country's roadmaps in line with the negotiating framework, with a view to opening the first cluster as soon as possible and when relevant conditions are met. It is crucial that the authorities further intensify the pace of EU-related reforms. North Macedonia should take the necessary steps to advance in the accession negotiations process and effectively implement EU-related reforms, in particular in the area of the rule of law, justice and the fight against corruption.

12. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** demonstrated tangible results, as reported by the Commission in March 2024. Migration management continued to improve. The country achieved and maintained full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy. Legislation on integrity of the judiciary, anti-money laundering, and conflict of interest was adopted between November 2023 and March 2024. However, more recent developments hampered this positive momentum. The country needs to continue with resolute steps to finalise key reforms in line with EU rules and standards. This includes the adoption of the Law on Courts; the Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council; the Law on personal data protection and the Law on border control. Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to urgently finalise the pending constitutional and electoral reforms. Secessionist actions undermining the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, constitutional order, and international personality of the country undermine progress in EU accession.

As set out by the European Council in its March 2024 decision to open accession negotiations, the Commission is preparing the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of October 2022 are taken.

The Commission stands ready to schedule the explanatory sessions on the EU *acquis* with Bosnia and Herzegovina. To be able to speak with one voice during the upcoming EU accession negotiations, Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to appoint a chief negotiator and their team. As an outstanding obligation under the SAA, Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs to develop a national plan for the adoption of the *acquis*. Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs to appoint the national IPA coordinator.

To advance on its accession path, Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to deliver all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of October 2022. The Commission stands ready to help Bosnia and Herzegovina to address all the issues identified in the Commission's opinion on its membership application in the framework of the upcoming accession negotiations.

¹⁷ As referred to in Council Conclusions 11440/22

13. **Kosovo's** authorities remained committed to its European path. Kosovo submitted an application for EU membership in December 2022. The Commission remains available to prepare an Opinion on Kosovo's membership application as soon as the Council requests it. Progress was recorded in the fight against organised crime, and the business environment improved. Visa liberalisation for Kosovo entered into force on 1 January 2024.

Tensions in the north of Kosovo continued in the aftermath of the violent attack against the Kosovo Police by armed Kosovo Serb assailants in September 2023, the gravest escalation in recent years. Several uncoordinated actions by Kosovo damaged relations between the government and the Kosovo Serb community. EU measures concerning Kosovo remained in place during the reporting period. In line with the 3 June 2023 statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU, the EU has been implementing reversible measures vis-à-vis Kosovo. The High Representative has recommended the lifting of those measures. Kosovo committed to fully implement all of their respective obligations stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex reached in 2023 and all past agreements.

Kosovo needs to intensify its efforts to strengthen the rule of law and public administration and to protect freedom of expression. The government should work to forge cross-party political support to pursue EU-related reforms more effectively. Kosovo should implement the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Annex and all past agreements without further delays or preconditions.

14. **Türkiye** is a candidate country and a key partner for the EU. The European Union has a strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye. De-escalation in the interest of regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and promotion of good neighbourly relations should be sustained. In line with the recommendations of the Joint Communication of November 2023 on the state of play of EU-Türkiye political, economic and trade relations and the guidance of the European Council of April 2024, relations with Türkiye were marked by a gradual re-engagement, and concrete steps were taken towards constructive exchanges on issues of joint interest. High level engagement continued, and a new high level dialogue on trade was launched, confirming progress achieved in this area. Türkiye is a significant regional actor in the area of foreign policy, which is an important element in the context of the EU-Türkiye relationship, even if different views on certain foreign policy issues persist. Türkiye's very low alignment rate with the common foreign and security policy continued to decrease. Türkiye implemented specific measures to stop the circumvention of EU sanctions against Russia through its territory and should cooperate even more actively with the EU on sanctions circumvention. A progressive, proportionate and reversible approach to energise key areas of cooperation should continue to apply. Türkiye's own constructive efforts should be sustained and EU concerns addressed.

Serious concerns remain in the areas of fundamental rights and rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary. Accession negotiations with Türkiye remain at a standstill since June 2018 in line with the decisions of the European Council.

Türkiye is expected to actively support the negotiations on a fair, comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus issue within the UN framework, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and in line with the principles on which the EU is founded and the *acquis*. It is important that Türkiye reaffirms its commitment to the UN-led settlement talks on Cyprus in line with the relevant UNSC resolutions, including their

external aspects. Türkiye needs also to fulfil its obligation to ensure full and non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the EU-Turkey Association Agreement.

15. **Ukraine** has addressed all the outstanding steps identified in the Commission's opinion of 2022. The opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine has been an important recognition of Ukraine's determination to pursue, despite Russia's ongoing war of aggression, reforms on the path of EU accession. Ukraine continued to foster integrity and meritocracy in the judicial system as well as to strengthen the anti-corruption institutional framework and build an enforcement track record in high-level corruption cases. Ukraine has also overhauled its legislation on the protection of rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The martial law related restrictions of fundamental rights remain overall proportionate. The authorities also advanced in implementing important reforms as part of the Ukraine Plan.

Despite progress on fundamental reforms, further efforts are needed. Ukraine should continue focusing on building further a credible enforcement track record in high-level corruption cases to address systemic corruption in most relevant sectors and institutions, and consolidate integrity, professionalism, and efficiency in the judiciary and in the law enforcement sector, while also stepping up the fight against organised crime. Protection of fundamental rights needs to be further strengthened, implementation of the amended legislation on the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities in close cooperation with national minority representatives has to be continued and public administration reform and the decentralisation reform should advance. Measures to support repair and rebuilding of infrastructure will be key for full recovery of the economy, especially in the energy sector which needs to be further decentralised with its governance improved. Following the first intergovernmental conference in June 2024, the analytical examination of the *acquis* (the screening) is progressing smoothly. Following Ukraine's ratification of Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court further steps should be pursued to ensure the full alignment of its domestic legislation. The steady increase of Ukraine's alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy positions and restrictive measures is a clear sign of political commitment and should continue. Subject to Ukraine meeting all the conditions, the Commission is looking forward to the opening of negotiations on clusters, starting with the fundamentals, as soon as possible in 2025.

16. The people of **Moldova** voted on 20 October 2024 in a constitutional referendum on EU accession and in the first round of the presidential election. The proposal to enshrine EU accession in the Constitution was supported by 50.38% of voters. Moldova has addressed all the outstanding steps identified in the Commission's opinion of 2022. The opening of accession negotiations has been an important recognition of Moldova's determination to pursue reforms on the path of EU accession despite facing continuous Russian interference and the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Moldova further improved its alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy. Moldova continues implementing a comprehensive justice reform. The on-going vetting and appointments to top judicial and prosecutorial positions should be finalised in transparent and merit-based procedures. Further consolidating anti-corruption institutions, proactive and efficient anti-corruption investigations and convictions at all levels will underpin the building of a solid track record.

Moldova continued deoligarchisation efforts and launched investigations and prosecution of illegal financial flows and voter bribery. Collaboration with European and

international agencies to fight international criminal networks should continue and be further reinforced. Additional efforts are necessary to implement the deoligarchisation plan including by reinforcing the independence of public media and increasing media ownership transparency. Moldova is taking forward public administration reform, which needs to be rolled out in consultations with civil society to sustain a positive trajectory.

Moving forward will require consolidating reforms focusing on the efficient functioning of institutions within their designated roles and competencies as well as enforcing transparent and standardised appointment and dismissal procedures. In the context of the Moldova Growth Plan, continued reforms on the and economic reforms will be needed to increase convergence with the EU and integration into the Single Market. Following the first intergovernmental conference in June 2024, the analytical examination of the *acquis* (the screening) is progressing smoothly. Subject to Moldova meeting all the conditions, the Commission is looking forward to the opening of negotiations on clusters, starting with the fundamentals, as soon as possible in 2025.

17. The granting of candidate status to **Georgia** in December 2023 has not been followed by sufficient political commitment of the authorities to implement the necessary reforms for the country's progress on the EU path.

On the contrary, significant negative developments, including the adoption of the Law on transparency of foreign influence and the legislative package on "family values and the protection of minors", as well as strong anti-EU narratives from Georgian officials have severely affected Georgia's EU trajectory. As a consequence, Georgia's accession process has *de facto* been halted. Georgia also made insignificant progress on the implementation of the nine steps set by the 2023 Enlargement Communication of the European Commission.

On 26 October, Georgian citizens voted in the parliamentary elections. The preliminary findings of the joint International Election Observation Mission led by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) identified several shortcomings that occurred in a tense and highly polarised environment. The reported weaknesses include *i.a.* the recent legislative amendments to the election process, frequent compromises on vote secrecy, procedural inconsistencies, intimidation and pressure on voters that negatively impacted public trust in the process. These preliminary findings confirm the need for a comprehensive electoral reform that was already highlighted in past key recommendations. The recommendations of the final OSCE/ODIHR report should be implemented as soon as possible.

Constructive and inclusive dialogue across the political spectrum is now paramount. In line with the European Council Conclusions of 17 October, the EU calls on Georgia to adopt democratic, comprehensive and sustainable reforms, in line with the core principles of European integration.

Georgia needs to revert to the implementation of the nine steps as a matter of priority. In addition, Georgia should repeal the Law on transparency of foreign influence, the legislative package on "family values and the protection of minors", and refrain from other activities undermining the rule of law and fundamental rights that remain an integral part of the EU-Georgia relationship. Georgia should also resume efforts to achieve gender equality. Georgia's alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy remains low, and while it made efforts to restrict the circumvention of sanctions via its territory, Georgia has not aligned with EU sanctions packages against Russia and Belarus.

Moreover, the authorities need to stop spreading disinformation against EU values and instead step up actions to combat disinformation and tackle hostile political rhetoric. Authorities must ensure that attacks against media outlets, opposition parties and civil society activists are properly investigated and a conducive environment for their work is guaranteed. Comprehensive and meaningful steps in reforming the rule of law, tackling high-level corruption, and eliminating oligarchic influences need to be undertaken, allowing sufficient public and Parliamentary oversight over the work of law enforcement agencies and guaranteeing the independence of public institutions.

The EU remains committed to further deepen the partnership with Georgia in line with the aspiration of a large majority of the Georgian population. Unless Georgia reverts the current course of action which jeopardises its EU path, and demonstrates tangible efforts to address outstanding concerns and key reforms, the Commission will not be in a position to consider recommending opening negotiations with Georgia.

VIII. ANNEXES

- 1. Third-party indicators related to the status of democracy, good governance and the rule of law in candidate countries and potential candidates**
- 2. Statistical data**