



TEXTS ADOPTED

P9_TA(2022)0406

New EU strategy for enlargement

European Parliament recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement (2022/2064(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU),
- having regard to the presidency conclusions of the European Council meeting held in Copenhagen on 21 and 22 June 1993, also known as the Copenhagen Criteria,
- having regard to the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 29 and 30 April 1997 on the application of conditionality with a view to developing a coherent EU strategy for relations with the countries in the Western Balkan region,
- having regard to the declaration adopted at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki on 21 June 2003, concerning the prospect of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU,
- having regard to the Berlin Process launched on 28 August 2014,
- having regard to its previous resolutions on the matter, in particular that of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania¹, its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit², its resolutions on the 2021 Commission reports on the enlargement countries, and its resolution of 23 June 2022 on the candidate status of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia³,

¹ OJ C 202, 28.5.2021, p. 86.

² OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

³ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0249.

- having regard to the EU Global Strategy of 2016, which specifies that a credible enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in Europe’s security and prosperity, and has already contributed greatly to peace in formerly war-torn areas,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 February 2018 entitled ‘A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’ (COM(2018)0065),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0057),
- having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summits held in Sofia and Zagreb on 17 May 2018 and 6 May 2020, and to their respective declarations,
- having regard to the Brdo Declaration, adopted at the EU-Western Balkans summit of 6 October 2021,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 24 and 25 March 2022,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 30 May 2022 on Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia,
- having regard to the applications for EU membership submitted by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and the related favourable Commission opinions and European Council conclusions, namely those of 23 and 24 June 2022 on wider Europe, Ukraine, the membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, the Western Balkans, economic issues, the Conference on the Future of Europe and external relations, which granted candidate country status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova and expressed a readiness to do the same for Georgia,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 26 June 2018, 18 June 2019, 25 March 2020 and 14 December 2021 on enlargement and the stabilisation and association process, to the Council conclusions of 15 July 2019 and 14 October 2019 on Türkiye’s illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, to the European Council conclusions of 12 December 2019, 1 and 2 October 2020 and 15 and 16 October 2020, to the statement of the EU foreign ministers of 15 May 2020 and the main results of their videoconference of 14 August 2020 on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to the outcome of the informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Gymnich of 27 and 28 August 2020,
- having regard to the Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part¹, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, which entered into force on 1 September 2017, and to the related Association Agenda,

¹ OJ L 161, 29.5.2014, p. 3.

- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III)¹,
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0641),
 - having regard to the European Court of Auditors special report 01/2022 of 10 January 2022 entitled ‘EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist’,
 - having regard to the European Court of Auditors special report 09/2021 of 3 June 2021 entitled ‘Disinformation affecting the EU: tackled but not tamed’,
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 19 October 2021 entitled ‘2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2021)0644),
 - having regard to the Council conclusions of 13 July 2020 entitled ‘Promoting values and rules-based pan-European cooperation and supporting a reinvigorated Council of Europe’,
 - having regard to the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, as formally approved by the Council on 21 March 2022,
 - having regard to the political agreement of 12 June 2022 on principles for ensuring a functional Bosnia and Herzegovina that advances on the European path,
 - having regard to its resolution of 17 February 2022 on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2021²,
 - having regard to its resolution of 9 June 2022 on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties³,
 - having regard to its recommendation of 8 June 2022 to the Council and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the EU’s Foreign, Security and Defence Policy after the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine⁴,
 - having regard to Rule 118 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0251/2022),
- A. whereas enlargement is the most effective EU foreign policy instrument and one of the Union’s most successful policies, and it remains a strategic, future-oriented geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity on the European continent; whereas in the light of the growing Russian threat to European peace and stability, an

¹ OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1.

² OJ C 342, 6.9.2022, p. 148.

³ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0244.

⁴ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0235.

enhanced enlargement policy remains the strongest geopolitical tool at the EU's disposal;

- B. whereas enlargement is a win-win process and has been a very effective and successful instrument for boosting the necessary reforms both within the EU and in applicant countries, helping to encourage democratic transformation; whereas its effectiveness has been considerably diminished over the years due to the EU's failure to live up to its own promises;
- C. whereas enlargement policy should not be seen as a purely political, administrative or technocratic process, but should become more dynamic and outreach-oriented, since accession negotiations entail the progressive transfer and reinforcement of EU values and policies in candidate countries;
- D. whereas the EU is committed to supporting candidate and potential EU candidate countries that share the EU's common values; whereas the EU continues to be their biggest trading partner and largest provider of investment and financial assistance through the IPA III, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe, and macro-financial assistance;
- E. whereas the EU should undertake a comprehensive reflection on the credibility and effectiveness of its enlargement policy, while reforming and strengthening itself, notably the functioning of its institutions, policies and voting procedures;
- F. whereas a new, clearly defined and strategically, politically and geopolitically focused impetus, political commitment and vision is urgently needed to overcome the status quo, address the EU's lack of political will over the last decade and re-energise the enlargement process within the EU and in the candidate countries in particular, while ensuring its continuity, consistency, credibility and impact, delivering tangible results in the countries that are part of the enlargement process by implementing concrete reforms and achieving the benchmarks of the new enlargement methodology;
- G. whereas the European Parliament remains a reliable partner for accession countries and an advocate of the enlargement process, enabling institutional and socio-economic reforms for the benefit of citizens;
- H. whereas due to internal blockages in the past few years, the Council has failed the enlargement countries by blocking the accession process and not delivering on the EU's long-outstanding promises, leading to delays in the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as well as visa liberalisation for Kosovo, despite their having fulfilled the required benchmarks, as the Commission itself had confirmed; whereas the EU's lack of engagement and credibility over the past few years has created a vacuum, thereby opening up space for Russia, China and other malign third actors;
- I. whereas limited progress is also due to a lack of genuine political will on the part of some of the political leaders in the enlargement countries to advance fundamental reforms, as the declarations that they have made have not always been commensurate with the level of reforms in the accession process of the respective countries;

- J. whereas enlargement policy must be updated to become more flexible, dynamic and rewarding, by taking into consideration both the political realities and the new geopolitical context created by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, while maintaining the merit-based accession process; whereas in order to become more effective, the EU's enlargement policy needs to combine a strong focus on the fundamental issues – the rule of law, democratic standards, economic reforms, fundamental rights and freedoms – with the gradual phasing-in of the candidate countries into various sectors of EU integration, moving visibly and constantly towards full membership to sustain the momentum for reform in candidate and potential candidate countries;
- K. whereas the new EU enlargement strategy should be strictly based on upholding the principle of each country being able to freely choose its own path, taking into account the lessons learnt in the ongoing process with the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries; whereas third parties should not be allowed to blackmail or threaten the EU by claiming that EU enlargement is targeted against them;
- L. whereas EU accession countries are facing challenges stemming from malign foreign interference and disinformation campaigns; whereas past developments have shown that non-enlargement has a serious strategic cost and can undermine security and stability on our continent;
- M. whereas the transatlantic partnership has been a reliable and constant platform for supporting EU enlargement; whereas the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has once again confirmed the significance of this partnership;
- N. whereas Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has prompted three countries with EU Association Agreements – Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – to submit membership applications, expressing their peoples' wish to live in free and democratic countries firmly anchored in the European family; whereas on 17 June 2022, the Commission published its opinions on the membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, recommending to the Council that all three countries should be given the perspective to become a member of the European Union, as well as recommending, in particular, that candidate status be granted to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and to Georgia once the country has fulfilled certain criteria;
- O. whereas on 23 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while recognising the European perspective of Georgia;
- P. whereas the Western Balkans are an area of strategic and geopolitical competition and some of its countries are prone to destabilisation, threatening the security and stability of our continent; whereas third countries are exploiting these vulnerabilities, including through strategic investments and disinformation campaigns; whereas the stability, security and democratic resilience of the accession countries are inextricably linked to the EU's own security, stability and democratic resilience;
- Q. whereas in its conclusions of 23 and 24 June 2022, the European Council expressed its full and unequivocal commitment to the Western Balkans' EU perspective and called for the acceleration of the accession process;

- R. whereas in the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Council emphasised that the Western Balkan countries need to continue to make tangible progress on the rule of law and reforms based on European values, rules and standards in order to advance on their European path;
- S. whereas the Council's decision should be backed up with a concrete action plan that not only includes expected deliverables from the candidate countries, but also ensures that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have all the necessary support to become EU Member States; whereas the plan should also provide Georgia with a clear roadmap with the tangible requirements it needs to fulfil in order to be granted candidate status and the perspective for joining the EU;
- T. whereas Russia's energy war and destruction of Ukraine's critical infrastructure has exacerbated candidate countries' dependency and vulnerabilities, highlighting the opportunity and urgent need for substantial and immediate EU financial support, as well as for investments in long-term sustainable energy interconnectivity with the EU, energy diversification and strategic autonomy;
- U. whereas Türkiye is a candidate country for EU accession; whereas Türkiye remains vastly distant from the EU's values and normative framework, a gap that is widening in fundamental areas, such as the respect for international law, the rule of law, human rights, individual liberties, civil rights and freedom of expression, as well as good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation;
- V. whereas each enlargement country should be judged on its own merits and advancement on the EU path should depend on sustained and irreversible progress made through necessary EU-related reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law;
- W. whereas accession to the EU must take place in accordance with Article 49 TEU, based on respect for the relevant procedures and subject to the fulfilment of the established criteria;
- X. whereas the EU must defend its principles and values by showing solidarity with those who stand up for shared ideals;
- Y. whereas there is no place in the EU or in countries aspiring to become its Member States for inflammatory rhetoric, genocide denial or the glorification of war criminals from any side; whereas coming to terms with the past is the only way to achieve genuine reconciliation, which is crucial for prosperous societies and successful integration;
- 1. Recommends that the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

The geopolitical context and the future and cohesion of the European Union

- (a) recognise that the EU's prosperity and security rests on its ability to defend and advance peace, democracy, the rule of law, human rights including minority rights, fundamental freedoms and values, and the rules-based multilateral order, including in its immediate neighbourhood;

- (b) advance the EU's enlargement policy as the single most effective EU instrument for securing peace, prosperity and fundamental values on the European continent;
- (c) retain the geostrategic and geopolitical relevance and credibility of the EU by enhancing the integration of the Member States and cooperation with like-minded partners, especially candidate and potential candidate countries, in the areas of common foreign, security and defence policies, and by streamlining its decision-making processes with a view to becoming a more credible and efficient global player, while enhancing the functioning and transparency of its internal policies, making them easy for candidate countries to adopt;
- (d) enhance the EU's capacity to act by reforming decision-making, including through the introduction of qualified majority voting in areas relevant to the accession process, and ensuring the effective functioning of an enlarged union as a whole; abolish, in particular, the requirement for unanimity when deciding on the start of the negotiation process as well as the opening and closing of individual negotiating clusters and chapters;
- (e) recognise the EU's transformative power throughout the integration process and previous successful rounds of EU enlargement; deliver positive results both for the Western Balkan applicant countries under the stabilisation and association process and the Eastern Partnership applicant countries under the association process;
- (f) acknowledge the need for the EU to enhance the effectiveness of its enlargement policy, upgrade its enlargement strategy and undertake a thorough critical assessment and revision of the EU's enlargement capacity and perspectives, and enhance it through the new EU strategy for enlargement, including by defining clear and transparent policy objectives and implementing the necessary and timely institutional reforms, while confirming that full accession to the EU is irreplaceable and that the enlargement process will encourage much-awaited EU reforms;
- (g) reconfirm the validity of the Copenhagen criteria and the relevance of the EU's integration capacity; involve the candidate countries in discussions on EU reforms; continue regular summits with the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries in order to strengthen political ownership and better direct the enlargement process; deliver on the Commission's intention to begin the necessary preparations for the launch of a European convention and recognise the importance of its success for effectively achieving EU enlargement;
- (h) ensure that the EU remains an evolving community of European states open to the accession of like-minded democracies, which shares and fully protects common values, principles and interests and respects the EU Treaties;
- (i) strengthen the Member States' commitment to enlargement by delivering on the EU's commitment towards the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries; carry out EU enlargement as a merit-based political process; reaffirm their untrammelled political will to proceed further with the accession process for the Eastern Partnership countries and maintain their long-standing commitment to the Western Balkan countries, which dates back to the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit and

1993 Copenhagen summit; ensure that there will be no alternatives to substitute enlargement;

- (j) encourage the Member States' active engagement in the enlargement process to ensure that its objectives are met through its new methodology, combining conditionality and instruments of technical and financial support for the candidate countries; step up the involvement of civil society and the local and regional authorities of both EU Member States and candidate countries in the accession process;
- (k) avoid using unresolved bilateral and regional disputes to block candidate countries' accession processes and adopt an official mechanism for the resolution and arbitration of these disputes to support their resolution separately from the accession to the EU, as they can hinder the implementation of European policies and weaken the EU's regional and global influence;
- (l) acknowledge that the Member States' use of bilateral issues for their own benefit is contrary to the spirit of the EU Treaties; work to achieve regional cooperation and the promotion of European values;
- (m) strengthen strategic communication and provide relevant information on the mutual benefits and opportunities of enlargement both in the accession countries and in the Member States in order to further increase support and improve understanding of the accession process, especially beyond the major cities, with a particular focus on democracy, the rule of law and the welfare of citizens; improve the visibility of EU funding and the tangible results of it in the enlargement countries;
- (n) work strategically and proactively to counter hybrid threats and to prevent third-party interference in the political, electoral and other democratic processes of the accession countries, in particular malicious acts aimed at manipulating public opinion and undermining European integration; increase resilience against disinformation and disruptive campaigns designed to undermine democratic processes and create divisions, and encourage candidate and potential candidate countries to take decisive steps to tackle manipulative disinformation, malign propaganda and other hybrid threats;

Accession process

- (o) overcome the enlargement gridlock by revamping the accession process to clearly define political and socio-economic aims, making full use of the new enlargement methodology to increase its credibility, predictability and dynamism; consider appointing EU chief negotiators to carry out negotiations under a broad negotiating mandate, who would also be accountable to the European Parliament;
- (p) accelerate the integration of countries that demonstrate strategic orientation and unwavering commitment to EU-related reforms, democratic consolidation, fundamental values and foreign policy alignment, including sanctions;

- (q) ensure that each country's progress on the path to accession is assessed on its own merits and the extent to which it has adopted and implemented fundamental reforms and the EU *acquis*; refocus the accession process on citizens;
- (r) offer membership-oriented roadmaps for each individual accession country with tangible and concrete steps as well as regular feedback on the results achieved by further enhancing the enlargement methodology; anchor the Commission's new methodology as a long-term policy adjustment;
- (s) apply clear, transparent and consistent performance benchmarks including timelines, improve the measuring of progress and ensure consistent and continued political and technical support throughout the accession process based on individual performance; improve the quality, readability and accessibility of the Commission's reports, especially on the rule of law; provide regular reporting on the lack of progress or backtracking in a systematic and transparent manner, including clear conditions for assessment and indicators to measure any serious or prolonged stagnation or backsliding; establish clear deadlines for concluding negotiations with the accession countries by the end of the current decade at the latest;
- (t) step up political, economic and technical incentives for accession countries, ensuring that intermediate integration steps do not substitute but facilitate the final goal of EU membership;
- (u) reward sustainable progress with a wider phasing-in of candidate countries into respective EU policies, initiatives and the single market, including access to EU funds in the respective areas, enabling citizens to reap the benefits of accession throughout the process and not only upon its completion; work to reduce the development gaps between the Member States and EU candidate countries;
- (v) ensure that integration within the EU single market and other areas is based on strict conditionality and tangible progress on reforms, while sanctioning in real time any backtracking or unjustified delays in the reform process, especially in the fields of democracy, media freedom, the fight against corruption, human rights and the rule of law;
- (w) extend the opportunities for candidate countries to participate in and observe the work of the EU institutions;
- (x) establish enhanced structured political dialogue with associated, candidate and potential candidate countries, including leaders' meetings on the margins of the European Council; open sectoral cooperation with accession countries and ramp up exchanges on best practices in order to advance further economic integration and legislative harmonisation and facilitate gradual integration;
- (y) recognise the role of existing intergovernmental bodies and forums such as the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, the Central European Initiative and the Berlin Process, and promote synergies between them in order to increase the multilateral ties between the Western Balkan and the Member States as a means of advancing integration;

- (z) welcome the start of the long overdue accession talks at the first intergovernmental conferences with the Republics of Albania and North Macedonia held on 19 July 2022; recognise Western Balkan countries' achievements in a timely manner, including by granting visa liberalisation to Kosovo without delay;
- (aa) encourage and support Bosnia and Herzegovina in improving its legislative and institutional framework to ensure meaningful progress in addressing the 14 key priorities, as reiterated in the European Council conclusions of 23 and 24 June 2022; in this context, the European Parliament welcomes the Commission's recommendation with conditions for granting candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a clear message of support and unequivocal commitment to its European perspective as well as a step towards the stabilisation of the country and the region, and calls on the European Council to follow up on the recommendation as soon as possible;
- (ab) underline the need for clear progress in the implementation of key reforms with a view to granting the status of candidate country;
- (ac) continue to encourage and support the acceleration of Montenegro's accession, as the frontrunner in the EU accession process; assist the country in fulfilling all the necessary conditions, including by setting the closing benchmarks for negotiating chapters; call for the country's multi-ethnic identity to be respected; in this context, the European Parliament expresses concern about the persistent political crisis in Montenegro, which has already had and continues to have negative consequences for the country's EU accession path; recalls that all legislative actions must be aligned with the country's constitution, as the rule of law is one of the fundamental European values and principles;
- (ad) welcome the European Council's exceptionally swift decision on the EU membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia and continue to provide them with political and technical support in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; invite the authorities of the three countries to unambiguously demonstrate their political determination to realise the European aspirations of their people by making significant progress on substantial reforms, in particular the priorities outlined in the Commission's opinions of 17 June 2022, in order to effectively fulfil the criteria for EU membership as soon as possible; launch a reflection on how to enhance the effectiveness of accession-related financial and technical assistance in line with the stated reform priorities;
- (ae) encourage continuous and effective implementation of the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia; review the EU's Eastern Partnership strategy and enhance regional cooperation;
- (af) assist Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova to help them meet the conditions set by the Commission for further steps towards EU membership, and assist Georgia to help it complete the necessary steps to obtain candidate status; focus in particular on the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, democratic oversight, human rights and de-oligarchisation; facilitate these

countries' transitions from the Eastern Partnership to the enlargement framework, including the switchover from the NDICI – Global Europe instrument to the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA); sufficiently increase the overall budget of IPA III in order to retain funding for current IPA III beneficiaries;

- (ag) step up the EU's constructive engagement with the authorities of both Serbia and Kosovo to achieve a comprehensive legally binding normalisation agreement based on mutual recognition between the two in the framework of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, which is crucial for both countries to advance on their respective European paths and will contribute to regional stability, prosperity and the normalisation of relations; reiterate the crucial importance of addressing all outstanding issues through the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue swiftly, transparently and in good faith;
- (ah) prioritise the alignment of accession countries with the EU's common foreign and security policy and advance accession negotiations with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia and makes significant progress on the EU-related reforms; call on Serbia to systematically align with the EU's restrictive measures and general policy towards Russia, demonstrate progress in democracy and the rule of law and embrace EU values and priorities; reconsider any bilateral and EU funds for Serbia that would benefit the Serbian authorities, in particular any pertaining to projects financed under the Western Balkan Economic and Investment Plan, in order to ensure that all EU expenditure is fully in line with the EU's strategic goals and interests;
- (ai) keep the process of accession negotiations with Türkiye frozen, in accordance with the negotiating framework, until the country genuinely engages with the EU and demonstrates clear and significant progress in the field of fundamental freedoms, civil and human rights and the rule of law, as well as other EU-related reforms, and fully respects the territorial integrity of the Member States, while continuing a partnership in essential areas of joint interest and maintaining economic and cultural cooperation, especially with civil society;
- (aj) recognise and support the pro-European aspirations of the Belarusian people, who seek to live in a free and democratic society, and formally engage with the democratic opposition of Belarus;

Conditionality

- (ak) confirm that the democratic transformation and the rule of law have a central role in the EU accession process, in line with the new methodology; prioritise judicial independence, regional and judicial cooperation, good governance, the fight against corruption, trafficking, disinformation, money laundering and organised crime, eradicating the improper influence of oligarchs on authorities, the media and the economy, and advancing human rights, including minority rights, gender equality, fundamental freedoms and media freedom, as crucial, non-negotiable preconditions for progress on the EU path;
- (al) strengthen the involvement of civil society, non-governmental organisations and experts in monitoring the accession process; acknowledge and embed within its enlargement strategy the fact that the rule of law, strong independent democratic

institutions, media freedom and a vibrant civil society are inextricably linked to democratic resilience;

- (am) implement the EU human rights sanctions regime (the European Magnitsky Act), and extend it to include sanctions for corruption crimes, covering accession countries;
- (an) ensure that democratic and legal standards are not undermined or downplayed from within the EU institutions or by the Member States; remind European Commissioners of their obligation to act with integrity, discretion and independence in accordance with their code of conduct;
- (ao) improve the consistency, efficiency, visibility and transparency of pre-accession assistance, clearly reflecting the priorities in the fundamental areas in the allocation of IPA III funding; take the necessary corrective measures and develop guidelines on the application of IPA III provisions on conditionality in line with the findings of the European Court of Auditors in its special report of 10 January 2022 on EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans;
- (ap) provide the European Parliament with a full and in-depth evaluation of the use of all pre-accession funds, including funds and projects in individual countries in the region from 2015 onwards;
- (aq) strategically apply targeted conditionality based on clear progress benchmarks, rewarding reforms and sanctioning regression or a persistent lack of progress;
- (ar) strengthen rule of law reporting for all accession countries by fully implementing and enhancing the enlargement methodology and the annual reporting process, and by establishing monitoring, dialogue and warning mechanisms for rectifying major rule of law deficiencies, offering positive conditionality in the form of access to EU policies or triggering negative conditionality in the form of the suspension of accession negotiations and pre-accession funding, in particular by making the relevant provisions of Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 on IPA III swiftly and fully operational, and enabling the reopening of the negotiation chapters under reversibility clauses, as well as by closely involving civil society in the process;
- (as) establish a framework for effective cooperation between the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and the accession countries; encourage candidates and potential candidates for EU accession to swiftly conclude bilateral working arrangements with the EPPO in order to facilitate close cooperation and the prosecution of the misuse of EU funds, including through the secondment of national liaison officers to the EPPO;
- (at) formally assess accession countries under the EU's rule of law mechanism and report, and the EU Justice Scoreboard, using the same indicators that apply to the Member States with the aim of providing an objective and clear picture of the state of play in order to prevent a persistent lack of progress, serious deficiencies and regression;

- (au) set up a dedicated rule of law task force, to be entrusted with developing more substantial and effective support to candidate and potential candidate countries, with the active involvement of judges and prosecutors from the Member States; ensure that compliance with the EU's common values is enforced by applying and strengthening internal procedures to decisively tackle problems with the rule of law;

Democratic and socio-economic transformation in candidate countries

- (av) actively engage in fostering a culture of political pluralism and inclusion, as well as constructive political dialogue and parliamentary functions with regard to legislation, scrutiny and oversight;
- (aw) foster electoral reforms with the aim of ensuring undisputed free, fair and democratic election processes in all candidate and aspiring countries and strengthening the electoral process with respect to OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Venice Commission and other international commitments, obligations and standards, democratic pluralism, intra-party democracy, and the adoption of internal frameworks for integrity and fighting corruption within political parties, the transparency of party and media funding, and judicial and media independence and freedom, by setting these benchmarks as preconditions for financial support and any further progress in the accession process;
- (ax) conduct regular enhanced rule of law expert and electoral observation missions to accession countries;
- (ay) take action against hate speech, smear campaigns, threats and intimidation against journalists and media outlets and insist on the investigation and prosecution of such offences, enabling a safe environment for journalists, while tackling the issues of media concentration, political and economic pressure and the lack of transparency of media ownership; continue its cooperation with the Council of Europe to support accession countries in carrying out essential reforms and training;
- (az) uphold democratic accountability, increase transparency and inclusiveness and enhance the parliamentary dimension, especially parliamentary oversight, of the accession process; support parliamentary work in candidate and potential candidate countries and facilitate the accession-related scrutiny and democracy support activities of the European Parliament and democracy support tools, such as the Jean Monnet dialogue and inter-party dialogue; support a new generation of political leaders in the accession countries;
- (ba) ensure that oversight institutions and other independent democratic bodies are able to effectively carry out their role in the political processes of candidate countries, as provided for by their constitutions;
- (bb) encourage bilateral parliamentary meetings between the parliaments of both the Member States and the accession countries and consider ways to bring forward the period when observers from candidate countries can take up their seats in the European Parliament, as well as closing negotiations on specific clusters;

- (bc) ensure that the enlargement process delivers on the goals of democratic consolidation, institutional integrity, long-term growth and socio-economic cohesion, while underlining the direct link between the rule of law and fighting corruption and sustainable and equitable economic development; focus on mitigating the negative social repercussions of the necessary transformation processes in candidate countries, adding information on approximation to the EU's social *acquis* in the annual reports; work to prevent and reverse the brain drain from candidate countries;
- (bd) considerably reinforce efforts towards settling conflicts, promoting confidence, achieving sustainable reconciliation covering the effective and impartial prosecution of war crimes, and ensuring access to truth, justice and effective and non-selective reparations, including for the victims of sexual violence; facilitate the full implementation of domestic and international court rulings and compliance with international obligations on war crimes and missing persons, addressing the glorification of war criminals and historical revisionism;
- (be) step up efforts towards good neighbourly relations, inclusive and effective socio-economic cooperation at a regional level and solidarity in EU accession countries as well as regional cross-border cooperation between EU Member States and partner countries along the EU's external borders; enhance economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the Western Balkans through structural reforms and by establishing regional economic cooperation that is acceptable to all six countries, pursuing further alignment with EU standards and *acquis* and contributing to the EU integration process; in this context, the European Parliament welcomes the recent agreements at the Berlin Process Summit, in particular the conclusion of regional mobility agreements on the freedom of travel with ID cards and the recognition of academic diplomas and vocational certificates; express strong reservations about any regional economic cooperation initiative that does not encompass all six Western Balkan countries and is not based on EU rules, such as the Open Balkan initiative;
- (bf) insist on the need to build an inclusive society free from discrimination, racism, violent nationalism and extremism; focus on the protection of minorities, including Roma, LGBTIQ+ persons, ethnic and religious communities, and persons with disabilities as well as on the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity; mainstream gender equality and the rights of women and girls, empower and invest in women and young people, and step up the fight against gender-based violence;
- (bg) deplore human rights violations and the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and migrants; work to ensure that the conditions for detainees and prisoners are dignified and in line with international standards; condemn torture and impunity for serious abuses by law enforcement agencies;
- (bh) step up citizen participation and the involvement of civil society in the enlargement process by increasing cooperation with, support for and the funding allocated to civil society; ensure that civil society organisations continue to receive adequate financial support following EU accession;

- (bi) invest in youth and intraregional mobility and connectivity, including by offering broad access to Erasmus+, and increasing its budget, as well as to other mobility programmes for young academics, specialists and researchers from candidate countries; foster, in addition, the further integration of partner countries into EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and Creative Europe, and improve cooperation in the framework of current and future programmes; work to tackle youth unemployment;
 - (bj) promote people-to-people contacts between EU Member States and candidate countries and bolster youth exchange programmes; acknowledge the importance of cross-border mobility in strengthening these contacts, and encourage the development of border infrastructure to this end; reinforce and, where possible, increase the EU's and Western Balkan countries' common efforts on people-to-people contacts and exchanges in order to build mutually positive images among the population;
 - (bk) increase support for economic development, the market economy, transport connectivity, competitiveness and green transition;
 - (bl) strengthen partnerships between candidate countries and the EU through principal infrastructure projects within the framework of the Trans-European Energy (TEN-E) and Transport (TEN-T) Networks, while increasing financial assistance to candidate countries in order to alleviate cross-border bottlenecks and develop transport links for passengers and freight transport;
 - (bm) advance energy efficiency, connectivity and the clean energy transition, increasing the diversification and security of energy supply, as well as sustainable development; ensure that the energy transition is conducted fairly and in a socially sustainable manner, with vulnerable groups adequately supported by the EU and its Member States; take immediate steps to achieve long-term and sustainable connection of candidate countries to the European energy transmission network; mobilise significant investments to support the development of local renewable solutions; include the candidate countries in the EU's energy policy strategies, with a special focus on those which are heavily dependent on Russian gas and are severely impacted due to their European choice;
 - (bn) implement a roadmap for phasing out roaming fees between the EU and accession countries;
2. Instructs its President to forward this recommendation to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and, for information, to the governments and parliaments of the accession countries.