

DRAFT

IPA III Programming Framework

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Table of contents

Introduction	page 3
Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy	page 11
Windows 2: Good governance, EU <i>acquis</i> alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication	page 24
Window 3: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	page 34
Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth	page 43
Window 5: Territorial and cross-border cooperation	page 53
IPA III Indicative Allocations	page 62

INTRODUCTION

Disclaimer: To allow for the timely adoption of programming documents, the programming process needs to advance without prejudice to the legal basis finally adopted by co-legislators. Commission services and Delegations will be informed of any relevant change and all necessary adaptations will be made. The formal decision-making process will only take place after the adoption of the IPA III regulation, being the legal basis for the programming documents.

[Following paragraph to be updated once the Interinstitutional Agreement between European Parliament and Council of 11 November 2020 will be formally adopted] The European Commission's Communication 'A modern Budget for a Union that Protects, Empowers and Defends – The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027'¹ set the main priorities and overall budgetary framework for EU external action programmes under the heading 'Neighbourhood and the World'. In order to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, kick-start the recovery and prepare for a better future for the next generation, in May 2020 the Commission proposed a powerful, modern and revamped long-term EU budget together with a new European Recovery Instrument ('Next Generation EU')².

This proposal includes a strengthened Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) to support the seven beneficiaries identified in Annex 1 of the IPA III Regulation: Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Serbia and Republic of Turkey during the next programming period 2021-2027, starting from 1 January 2021.

As recalled in the Communication from the Commission 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans'³, the core objective of the European Union's engagement with the Western Balkans is to prepare them to meet all the requirements of membership. This includes supporting fundamental democratic, rule of law and economic reforms and alignment with core European values. This will in turn foster solid, sustainable and accelerated economic growth and social convergence.

The revised enlargement methodology, endorsed by the Council in March 2020, builds on the four key principles of making the enlargement process more credible, subject to stronger political steer, more dynamic and predictable. The changes introduced in the programming process for IPA III are part and parcel of this revised enlargement methodology, which aim to increase the performance-based approach of the instrument and increase its efficiency in terms of delivery.

Throughout the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have an **important disruptive effect on the economies** of the Western Balkans, which were already **lagging behind in terms of economic convergence** with the EU. The

¹ COM(2018) 321 final

² COM(2020) 442 final

* 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.

³ COM(2020) 57 final

region faced continued challenges from weak competitiveness, high unemployment and significant brain drain. The need to step up their efforts in implementing structural reforms, to overcome the main structural weaknesses and accelerate convergence is more pressing than ever.

The IPA III Programming Framework represents the overarching European Commission's strategic document for the use of EU funds assisting the seven IPA III beneficiaries. It has been designed to also support the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans⁴. The Economic and Investment Plan aims to spur the long-term recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, boost economic growth and support reforms required to move forward on the EU path, including bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market and the latest EU policy developments, such as the European Green Deal. It aims to unleash the untapped economic potential of the region, the significant scope for increased intra-regional economic cooperation and trade and to allow for a sustainable transition towards modern, resource-efficient and competitive economies.

IPA III – A policy-based instrument – Policy framework

IPA III presents a solid policy-driven approach, with strategic and dynamic deployment of assistance, putting the fundamental requirements for membership at the core of the instrument. By further focusing EU financial assistance on key priorities, IPA III will provide even bigger leverage for supporting reforms fostering sustainable socio-economic development and bringing the partners closer to the Union's values and standards.

The EU accession process is built on strict but fair conditionality and aims at ensuring that candidate countries and potential candidates meet the Copenhagen and Madrid membership criteria. The "fundamentals first" principle is at the heart of this process. Core pillars of the rule of law, fundamental rights and strengthening democratic institutions; public administration reform at all levels of government; as well as sustainable economic development and competitiveness remain key. These issues reflect the importance the EU attaches to its core values and general policy priorities. All three pillars are closely linked, and properly addressing the fundamentals is thus key to meeting the Copenhagen and Madrid membership criteria in line with the revised enlargement methodology, as well as reinforcing sustainable economic development and investments, ever more needed for a swift recovery from the economic downturn created by the COVID-19 crisis.

In order to meet the well-established membership criteria and their own policy priorities, the beneficiaries need to deliver on their commitment to implement the fundamental reforms essential for success on the EU path. The rule of law, fundamental rights and functioning of democratic institutions together with good governance must be strengthened significantly. Socio-economic reforms must be pursued with vigour to address structural weaknesses, low competitiveness and high unemployment and accelerate sustainable economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

The specific instruments of the enlargement process, namely: the negotiating frameworks, the recommendations of the Enlargement Package, the Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) and the policy guidance agreed annually in the joint conclusions, the conclusions of the meetings organised in the context of the (Stabilisation and) Association Agreements as well as, the EU-Western Balkans Strategy⁵, and the national plan for the adoption of the *acquis*, all

⁴ COM(2020) 641 final.

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (6 February 2018)

form the basis for identifying and guiding the fundamental reforms. The IPA III beneficiaries must also commit to overcoming the legacy of the past, by achieving reconciliation and solving open bilateral issues well before their accession to the EU, in particular border disputes.

The overall objective of the EU's assistance to candidate countries and potential candidates is to support the IPA III beneficiaries in adopting and implementing the political, institutional, legal, administrative, social and economic reforms required by those beneficiaries to comply with Union values and to progressively align to Union rules, standards, policies and practices with a view to Union membership, thereby contributing to their stability, security and prosperity. The ultimate indicator of the state of preparedness is progress on the path to the European Union as measured in the Commission's annual Enlargement Package and relevant third party assessments.

The External Action Guarantee (EAG), created under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and financed by NDICI and IPA III funds, will also form the backbone of the **Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans**. In the Western Balkans, the EAG will be named the "Western Balkans Guarantee Facility" and will be instrumental to tackle the hard socio-economic impact of the crisis, to modernise the economies in the region, support the necessary socio-economic reforms, start closing the development gap and support the twin green and digital transition. The Economic and Investment Plan will also facilitate increased investment in the region. At the heart of this plan is a **substantial investment package** articulated around ten indicative **investment flagships** that can support the development of connected, green, competitive and thriving economies in the Western Balkans, with an increasingly dynamic private sector and a stronger human capital development. The accompanying Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans⁶ will support the alignment of the Western Balkans with the goals of the European Green Deal.

Boosting investment and sustainable economic growth will only be possible if the IPA III beneficiaries **firmly commit to and implement fundamental reforms based on EU values**. Whether strengthening the **rule of law**, improving **public administration** (also digitally) or structural **economic reforms**, these are essential for an environment favourable to entrepreneurship, job creation, sustainable investment and wellbeing of the population. Citizens have a key interest in a functioning system of checks and balances and an independent judiciary. People and businesses need legal certainty, absence of corruption and efficiently functioning administrations to get good services, be able to set up their operations and rely on efficient and independent institutions to enforce their rights. Foreign investors need reassurances on a level playing field that will protect their investments. Alignment with the EU public procurement rules and enhanced transparency and oversight is key. A strategic approach towards effective dismantling of criminal organisations and their economic basis needs to be established, including improved results in financial investigations and asset confiscation.

In the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey alike, the post-COVID-19 economic recovery and the **transition to a sustainable, socially just, resilient and climate neutral economy** should go hand in hand. The regulation sets out that actions funded through IPA III are expected to contribute to the Union's efforts to mainstream climate actions with [18%, with the objective of reaching 20% by 2027] of the overall financial envelope. This is in line with the principle

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁶ SWD(2020) 223 final.

that all EU expenditure should be consistent with Paris Agreement objectives under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the years 2021 to 2027. This will notably be reflected in the definition of thematic windows (with Window 3 being dedicated to sustainable connectivity and the green agenda) but also through an enhanced mainstreaming of climate, environment and climate-related energy considerations in all windows. The European Green Deal⁷ - being the first political priority of the European Commission – is expected to be the strategic reference for the Green Agenda, in order to support the just transition in IPA beneficiaries towards a circular, climate resilient and low carbon economy. An economy where growth is decoupled from emissions of greenhouse gases, resource use and waste generation, where climate resilience is pursued, and where green transition is done in a way that is just and leaves no one and no place behind. In the Western Balkans, the guidelines for the implementation of the five pillars of the Green Agenda will serve as guiding reference for the deployment of IPA III support.

In the same vein, the IPA III beneficiaries should use the EU's digital strategy⁸ as the guiding principle for a human-centric digital transformation of their economies and societies. This will make them better positioned to integrate into the EU's higher added-value supply chains and, in the future, join a rapidly evolving EU digital single market

In line with the approach outlined in the EU Gender Action Plan, (GAP III) 2021-2025, IPA III will mainstream gender equality and also continue ensuring girls' and women's physical and psychological integrity, promoting the economic and social rights and strengthening girls' and women's voice and participation with targeted actions.

At the global level, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents the umbrella strategy to achieve a more sustainable future for the planet and to eradicate poverty and is fully embedded in the EU's policy framework. As such, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent for the beneficiaries both a direct commitment taken at multilateral level and an additional requirement to converge on the EU policy framework in the accession process. In this context, IPA-funded activities will be consistent with and supportive of the beneficiaries' undertakings for their achievements.

IPA III objectives and thematic windows

Article 3 of the IPA III regulation outlines the general and specific objectives of the instrument. Annex II of the IPA III regulation identifies the key thematic priorities for assistance. These are reflected in the IPA III Programming Framework, which represents the overarching European Commission's strategic document for the use of EU funds assisting the seven IPA III beneficiaries. This document has been prepared in partnership with the IPA III beneficiaries, Member States and the European Parliament. It identifies five thematic windows and provides an indicative allocation per area of support:

- Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy;
- Window 2: Good governance, EU *acquis* alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication;
- Window 3: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity;
- Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth;
- Window 5: Territorial and cross border cooperation.

⁷ COM/2019/640 final

⁸ COMMUNICATION on Shaping Europe's digital future COM/2020/67 final

These five windows, which broadly correspond to the specific objectives of the Regulation, are all facets of the EU policy for enlargement and are linked with one another in a complementary manner. In addition, a number of cross cutting themes, such as climate change, environmental protection, civil society, gender equality, rights based approach, will be mainstreamed and therefore can be implemented under the five windows.

Likewise, some policies and actions, such as public administration reform and fight against corruption, are closely interlinked and therefore relevant for more than one window. Even if an action is placed under a particular Window, it may contribute to other Windows and/or to IPA III specific objectives. For example, financial assistance provided for the implementation of agriculture and rural development programmes, is also contributing to enhancing competitiveness of the sector, alignment with EU standards and public administration reform in the sector. The core of actions proposed will thus be looked at in order to determine their window. For instance, while most actions under all windows will have communications activities, a corporate communication campaign should be funded from Window 2.

IPA III Programming process

Article 7 of the IPA III Regulation specifies that the IPA III programming framework shall take relevant national strategies and sector policies into due account. Assistance shall be targeted and adjusted to the specific situation of the beneficiaries, taking into account further efforts needed to meet the EU membership criteria as well as their capacities. Assistance shall be differentiated in scope and intensity according to needs, commitment to reforms and progress in implementing those reforms.

With a view to strengthening the policy-driven approach and efficiency of EU support, **relevance** of requested IPA interventions, **maturity** of the proposals as well as **progress of the beneficiaries on their enlargement agenda**, will be the three key criteria for IPA III programming.

IPA III Beneficiaries are expected to prepare **Strategic Responses** outlining how their overall policies and sectoral strategies are in line with the recommendations and requirements of the specific policy instruments of the enlargement process and how they will contribute to the objectives of IPA III Programming Framework. These documents will also include a first list of draft projects concretely presenting how IPA funding opportunities are planned to be used and how the thematic priorities contained in the IPA III programming framework will be addressed.

The European Commission, following a consultation with the relevant services, will then make a first selection of actions on the basis of their **policy relevance**. Only those envisaged actions that will receive approval at this stage will be developed further and transformed in fully-fledged action documents.

In line with the policy-first approach, actions will be considered as relevant when they contribute to achieving the objectives identified in the IPA III Programming Framework and are in line with the recommendations derived from the specific instruments of the enlargement process, in particular: the negotiating frameworks, the recommendations of the Enlargement Package, the Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) and the policy guidance agreed annually in the joint conclusions, the conclusions of the meetings organised in the context of the (Stabilisation and) Association Agreement as well as, where applicable, the Western Balkans Strategy, the Macro-Regional Strategies and the national plans for the adoption of the EU *acquis*. In particular, the European Commission's Reports, prepared in the framework of the annual Enlargement Package, provide a detailed assessment of both the level of preparedness and the degree of progress achieved over the preceding reporting period.

They also provide for concrete recommendations on the most pressing reforms to be undertaken per negotiating chapter. In addition, the policy guidance stemming from the ERP process should serve as roadmaps for governments to prioritise and implement needed socio-economic reforms.

IPA III support will be granted in full complementarity with the previous financial assistance under IPA and IPA II as well as with the EU policies in the respective sectors. In particular, IPA III ensures continuity with the Sector Approach introduced under the previous instrument to help the beneficiaries with the design and implementation of sector reforms and to increase coherence between national strategies, sector policies, resource allocation and spending practices. IPA III builds upon the previous achievements, as all the actions designed in support of a specific sector will be financed under the same window.

Each beneficiary will be asked to demonstrate that the proposed actions have been widely **consulted** at different levels with sector working groups, stakeholders and other donors in order to ensure broad societal ownership and added-value.

The second selection will then focus on **technical maturity**. Only actions that are sufficiently technically mature will be considered ready for adoption. An action will be considered as sufficiently technically mature, when most preparatory activities (e.g. environmental impact assessment, social impact assessment, climate proofing, identification and approval of site location, cost-benefit analysis, drafting of tender specifications / Terms of Reference etc.) have been finalised. Where applicable, technical maturity will be assessed also in the broader sense of ensuring that the proposed action provides the appropriate mix of investments, reforms, including EU *acquis* alignment, and assistance to build-up administrative capacities, where needed. Actions that are not mature enough but have policy relevance shall remain in the pipeline for adoption at a later stage (e.g. the following year).

In line with the commitment to a merit-based enlargement process, the overall exercise of assessment of the strategic response will take into account the **progress of each beneficiary on the enlargement agenda**. Assistance will be targeted and adjusted to the specific situation of the beneficiaries, ensuring an appropriate level of support to all of them (principle of ‘**fair share**’). This performance-based and reform-oriented approach means that if candidate countries and potential candidates move on reform priorities agreed in the negotiations, they will also have access to increased funding investments.

The IPA III programming process aims at ensuring an on-going pipeline of mature actions that reflect priorities identified in the specific instruments of the enlargement process as well as in the national strategic documents and relevant action plans and contributes to accelerating their implementation by reducing the time gap between their selection and effective contracting. The programming process is described by means of a diagram at the end of this chapter.

Preferred methods of budget implementation and types of financing

IPA III will rely on a variety of **partners** (such as central and local authorities, Member States’ agencies and organisations, international and regional organisations, civil society organisations, international and development financial institutions) in situations where they have a clear added value, building on the experience achieved and the lessons learned from the implementation of IPA and IPA II.

Assistance under IPA III (Windows 1 to 5) will continue to be implemented using the **full range of management modes** in accordance with the Financial Regulation and with the State aid principles and regulations.

In terms of **instruments and delivery modes**, all types of financing foreseen in the Regulation are possible: from grants, procurement, budget support, contributions to EU Trust funds if relevant, to financial instruments and budgetary guarantees.

The **Western Balkans Guarantee Facility - the Western Balkans arm of the External Action Guarantee – and the External Action Guarantee in Turkey** will be used in particular to support the socio-economic recovery of the enlargement region after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through their increased firepower the European Commission aims at leveraging funds from the private and public sector and promote investment also in the enlargement region and thus multiplying the effect of the EU assistance.

Support to institution building may be provided through the two dedicated Institution Building Instruments: TAIEX and Twinning.

IPA III will also promote, when relevant, beneficiaries' participation in the areas of relevance in appropriate **Agencies, Facilities and Union Programmes**, such as, but not limited to, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, InvestEU Fund, Creative Europe.

Thematic support provided under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) might be used as appropriate.

As in the previous pre-accession instruments, assistance will be deployed, to the benefit of the IPA III beneficiaries, through **annual or multi-annual action plans** at national or regional level or through horizontal initiatives targeting specific types of partners (e.g. civil society) or cross-cutting issues (e.g. EU integration facility).

IPA III will ensure synergy and **complementarity between bilateral and regional programmes**. The latter will primarily be mobilised to address issues of regional nature, or when a regional approach will allow for greater efficiency.

Bilateral and multi-country/regional programmes complement each other to meet the IPA III regulation objectives. Therefore, IPA III will ensure synergy and **complementarity between bilateral and multi-country/regional programmes**.

In particular multi-country actions would be programmed *inter alia* a) when they would tackle well-defined regional objectives fostering regional cooperation and when issues are best tackled regionally because of their cross-border dimension; b) when it is opportune to follow a common methodology for instance to carry out benchmarking, diagnostic studies or exchanges of best practice (as in the case of TAIEX); c) in the case of Facilities/mechanisms which enable coherent common approaches and offer greater efficiency including economies of scale; d) when the nature and size of investments warrants them to be implemented under the Western Balkans Investment Framework.

IPA III beneficiaries will be closely consulted on actions programmed on a multi-country or regional level. This will ensure close articulation between the regional and bilateral assistance in the drafting of the strategic response and that the needed reforms needed the sustainability of infrastructure investments are carried out.

In view of the technical specificities of the assistance provided under Window 5, a detailed section on the preferred methods of implementation for that Window is included in the relevant chapter.

IPA III Programming Process



WINDOW 1 - RULE OF LAW, FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

1. Context Analysis

Pursuing reforms in the area of rule of law, fundamental rights, democracy and security remains one of the most pressing issues for the Western Balkans and Turkey. It is also the key benchmark against which the partners' preparedness for becoming an EU Member State will be measured by the EU. These are fundamental values on which the EU is founded and are at the heart of the accession process, as reflected in the importance of chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security). The beneficiaries must embrace the fundamental EU values strongly and credibly. Any erosion of these values would be detrimental for the EU accession process, negatively affect citizens' rights, and deter investment and trade thus seriously hamper their overall sustainable economic development. This might also have negative repercussions on the visa-free status enjoyed by some of the IPA III beneficiaries. Strengthening the rule of law is not only an institutional issue. It requires profound and sustainable societal transformation. All seven IPA III beneficiaries – like all EU Member States – are members of the Council of Europe, which has a standard-setting role in the fields of human rights, rule of law and democracy, as emphasised in the Council Conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe 2020-2022 of 13 July 2020.

An independent, impartial and efficient **judicial system** is a key feature of a modern democracy abiding by the rule of law. The independence of the judiciary and of individual judges is essential to ensure fairness and to hold the executive and legislative branches to account. This is a precondition for any democratic society based on the rule of law and for its sustainable economic development.

Corruption remains a serious problem in the candidate countries and potential candidates and must be rooted out without compromise. Strong and independent institutions are crucial to prevent and effectively tackle corruption and conduct more effective investigations and prosecutions, leading to final court rulings that are enforced, and include dissuasive sanctions and robust track-records. Beneficiaries must also put in place an effective and functional framework which is holistic in its approach, taking into account both repressive measures as well as prevention measures of corruption including through specialised anti-corruption institutions. It is also key that in the context of public administration reform, efforts are carried out in order to increase transparency and predictability in strategic planning, to improve inclusive and evidence-based policy and legislative development, to depoliticise civil service, to increase accountability of administration and to enhance sound public financial management. Special attention should be given to development of measurements and indicators of corruption so that a thorough follow-up of the outcomes is carried out. More transparency and accountability are needed in the management of public funds, in particular taking into account the current COVID-19 pandemic, at all stages in public procurement and concessions, an area particularly prone to corruption.

Organised crime's foothold in the region remains strong, whether in terms of trafficking in human beings, particularly women and children primarily for the purpose of sexual exploitation, smuggling of migrants, drugs, firearms and weapons, organised property crime, or the risk of criminal infiltration of the political and economic systems. Important smuggling routes run through Turkey and the Western Balkans. Powerful criminal networks with an international reach operate from and via this region. Criminal re-distribution of stolen property (fencing) is also an issue of concern. Police and judicial cooperation in criminal justice, law enforcement investigations and witness protection need to be further stepped up both among the beneficiaries and with the EU. Proactiveness of authorities in identifying and addressing corruption and organised crime, in developing internal investigation bodies, in properly handling the exchanged information, and in using the instruments and tools provided by the EU Agencies is needed. The authorities must dismantle criminal networks and their economic bases more effectively, making systematic use of financial investigations and systematically confiscating the proceeds of crime. A concrete and sustained track-record in tackling organised crime and money laundering should be established or strengthened as a matter of urgency. Cybercrime continues to be a threat to the EU and the IPA III beneficiaries and needs to be effectively addressed.

There is a need for a robust and well-coordinated response in preventing and countering all forms of **radicalisation and violent extremism** spreading in society. Likewise fight against **terrorism** and addressing the challenges posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families, including their reintegration in the local communities, are key for reinforcing social cohesion. The region was at the origin of a large number of foreign terrorist fighters going to Syria and Iraq. This demonstrates the importance of having proper legal and strategic frameworks – aligned with EU policy – to prevent terrorism and radicalisation in the region. Returning and repatriated Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their family members pose significant long-term challenges, as regards both investigation, prosecution and bringing to justice as well as de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration. The local level plays a key role to prevent radicalisation. A multi-agency approach is crucial. Effective measures to address radicalisation in prison should also be in place. Moreover, pro-active information exchange between law enforcement authorities is a key security requirement for the region and the EU. More needs also to be done on the financing aspects of terrorism. Evolving threat pictures require more work on the protection of critical infrastructure, the protection of public spaces, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) related threats and new and emerging threats such as unmanned aircraft systems (“drones”).

The management of mixed **migration** flows remains one of the key challenges for both the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey. The interlinkage and interdependence of the European Union and the enlargement region has been evident during the European migration and refugee crisis in 2015-2016. Cooperation continued through the joint work along the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans migration routes. In this context, the 2016 EU-Turkey statement is producing clear results, including significantly reduced numbers of irregular arrivals on this route. However, more needs to be done to better equip the IPA III beneficiaries to manage migration, fight migrant smuggling, including efforts to align with the institutional and legal setup of border management in the EU as well as to better manage borders/boundaries and irregular migration, while respecting the fundamental rights of the individuals. This includes responding effectively to the specific needs, priorities of and protection risks facing refugees and migrants, including women and children, as well as to the risk of their radicalisation. Further efforts are needed to ensure that asylum procedures are fair and effective in the whole enlargement region. In light of the unpredictable nature of migratory flows, it is also important to have in place effective contingency plans. To this end,

the timely exchange of relevant data and information is necessary for a clear and complete situational overview and adequate measures to prevent the exploitation by terrorist organisations.

Respect of fundamental rights is one of the core EU values enshrined in the EU Treaties and an essential element in the accession process. The adoption and ratification of all core international human rights framework and necessary legislative amendments is crucial. Fundamental rights are largely enshrined in the legislation of the beneficiaries but more needs to be done also to ensure they are fully implemented in practice. Strong and independent institutions are needed to ensure the effective application of these rights and freedoms. Particular focus is needed to safeguard the freedom of expression and independence of media as pillars of democracy, also data protection and privacy.

Discrimination against women and girls, minorities, children, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups remains an important challenge in the region. Further measures are necessary to protect and promote the rights of the child and to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Decisive efforts are needed to fight discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation. To build strong rule of law-based societies, gender equality should also be more effectively promoted and implemented in all areas.

Strengthening the functioning of **democratic institutions** is essential. This includes principles such as the separation of powers, adequate checks and balances as well as ensuring constructive dialogue across the political spectrum, notably within the parliaments. Democratic institutions must be inclusive of the plurality of groups in society and must promote an equal distribution of power. The government needs to ensure that the opposition has the possibility to fully perform its role. An active, constructive and engaged opposition is an important element in the democratic process. Efforts are needed to further increase the active participation, representation and leadership of women in politics and in the political decision making process. Elections should be transparent, inclusive and credible, the bodies charged with overseeing the implementation of election processes should be able to operate independently and the recommendations of election observation missions should be properly implemented. The rules for the public and private financing of political parties also require substantive reform.

Citizens have a right to be actively involved in policy-making. More needs to be done to strengthen transparency, participatory democracy, democratic citizenship and develop dialogue between decision makers and stakeholders also by using modern technologies. An empowered **civil society** is a crucial component of any democratic system and prevents the polarisation of a society. It enhances political accountability and social cohesion, deepening understanding and inclusiveness of accession-related reforms, as well as supporting reconciliation in societies divided by conflict. In some cases, a more supportive and enabling environment needs to be developed that improves the conditions for policy dialogue and non-partisan input to the decision making process. IPA III will build upon the results achieved in the previous period, while continuing to consolidate reforms and to build resilience to emerging challenges.

2. Key priorities for IPA III support

The overall objective of IPA III under this window is to strengthen the rule of law, democracy, the respect of human rights and international law, civil society and security as well as to improve migration management including border management. Addressing reforms in the area of rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy and ensuring proper management of migration are thus key priorities in the enlargement process, as reflected in chapters 23 and 24. Providing a robust level of security, including fostering law enforcement as well as judicial cooperation in civil and criminal matters, strengthening police cooperation and fight against organised crime, cybercrime, terrorism, violent extremism and gender based violence remain crucial while upholding fundamental rights. With this in mind, EU's assistance will focus on further developing the legislative framework, strengthening relevant institutions and capacities, and continue encouraging IPA III beneficiaries to step up operational cooperation with the aim of establishing a convincing track-record and concrete results. Civil society remains a crucial partner in strengthening democratic societies. Therefore, IPA III will support both the creation of an enabling environment for a strong and vibrant civil society and the capacities of civil society itself. The proposed actions will also be designed in a way to assess, address and mainstream gender, with special consideration to combatting all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, promoting gender equality and empowering girls and women. For negotiating countries, the action plans for chapters 23 and 24 provide a key guidance for their efforts in this area and the basis for IPA III support. For others the Commission's annual report should be the basis so support shall address the weaknesses identified.

Thematic Priority 1: Judiciary

The specific objective of IPA III in this area will be to further improve the independence, accountability, quality and efficiency of the judicial systems of each beneficiary. IPA III will also contribute to improve the professionalization of judges and of the justice system as a whole, including the skills and capacities of officers concerned in the administration of justice. For countries that have opened negotiations with the EU, the focus of assistance will primarily be on specific benchmarks for chapter 23.

In particular, support under IPA III will focus on ensuring that there is a strategic approach towards judicial reforms, with more attention for thoroughly assessing the situation and introducing robust tools to monitor and evaluate reform processes. This support will be crucial to tackle the slow pace of judicial reforms and promote a change in judicial culture.

Support to independent bodies such as judicial and prosecutorial Councils will continue, as appropriate, in order to help them fully assume their institutional and managerial role. This support is key to strengthen the independence of the judiciary from the executive, and to ensure that judges and prosecutors can perform their work free from undue political pressure.

IPA III will also support organisational aspects, introducing management techniques in courts, beefing up the capacity to monitor and evaluate the performance of courts and prosecution offices using data in a pro-active manner and for planning purposes. It will also ensure a modern approach to human resources policy and introduce data and information and communications technology tools such as digitalisation of management systems. This support is crucial to ensure fair and timely proceedings, improve the efficiency of service delivery and the legal predictability for professionals and court users.

Ethics and integrity will remain high on the agenda and support will be provided to improve transparency of the judiciary and to better communicate to the public on the functioning of the judiciary and on specific cases. Judges, prosecutors and other legal professions will need to

continue to step up professionalism and competence. These aspects are fundamental to ensure the application of objective, merit-based criteria for the recruitment, promotion and career development of judges and prosecutors; and to restore the public trust of citizens and court users in the judiciary.

Courts and prosecution offices need to have decent working conditions. Support to improve infrastructure may be offered, but only in support of an overall strategy on reforming the judicial system backed by strong political will, upon demonstration of needs to reach the goals of the reform process. To alleviate the burden on courts, support will be provided to promote and implement alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to the extent that these mechanisms will help reducing the backlog in courts, increase efficiency and provide litigants with faster and cheaper instruments to solve their civil and commercial disputes.

IPA III will also contribute to further improving access to justice, including for vulnerable persons and children, ensuring consistency of jurisprudence and developing e-justice systems. These are key to improve access to information in the area of justice, provide legal aid for victims, offer easier and faster resolution of courts cases as well as facilitate cooperation between the beneficiaries and with the EU Member States in this area.

Judicial training will address challenges on the basis of a sound training needs assessment and a problem-oriented approach, ensuring coherence and sustainability. It will be provided primarily through the support to build capacity of local actors: staff of training providers, trainers, and all others involved. A specific focus on the implementation of relevant European standards and the future implementation of the EU *acquis* as well as ethics and integrity. Justice professionals from the IPA III beneficiaries will be encouraged to participate in cross border judicial training with EU professionals.

Thematic Priority 2: Fight against corruption

The candidate countries and potential candidates must increase the awareness in the fight against corruption and increase their efficiency in their efforts to eradicate corruption. Corruption remains widespread in the region, with continued impunity in many cases, especially for high-level corruption. The specific objective of IPA III in this area will be to establish, and strengthen when already existing, track-records of investigation, prosecution and conviction for high-level corruption cases, as well as robust anti-corruption institutional framework.

In particular, IPA III will support the consolidation of strong and independent institutions, from undue political influence, which are crucial to prevent and tackle corruption and conduct more effective investigations (including internal ones) and prosecutions, leading to a solid track-record of final court rulings that are enforced, and include dissuasive sanctions. Tangible results in the fight against corruption are crucial not only to mitigate the threat to democratic structures, but also to create a stable and transparent business environment, restore trust in state institutions and provide quality services to citizens. Therefore, IPA III will contribute to strengthen specialised prosecutorial structures to fight corruption (and organised crime) and judicial bodies. The credibility, autonomy and pro-activeness of these structures will also be addressed.

IPA III will also support measures and structures addressing the stripping of illegally acquired assets, the loss of the ability to hold public office, stricter compliance rules for public officials and accessible information and complaints mechanisms for citizens.

IPA III will be pivotal to support beneficiaries in further strengthening their legal and institutional framework for the prevention of corruption and improving the track-record of implementation. In complementarity with the support provided under other windows,

Window 1 will contribute to awareness raising and civic education on the negative effects of corruption. Civil society will continue to be supported to play a central role here.

Thematic Priority 3: Fight against organised crime / security

Organised crime remains a very serious issue in the region. Important smuggling routes run through Turkey and the Western Balkans, and powerful criminal networks with international reach continue to operate from and via this region. Nevertheless, final convictions for organised crime or money laundering in recent years have been very limited in certain cases. Therefore, criminal procedures and operational capacities (the practical implementation of a risk based approach and intelligence led policing) should be improved notably in the context of the EU Policy Cycle / European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) for organised and serious international crime.

The specific objective of IPA III in this area will be to set up effective systems to establish and strengthen existing track-records of proactive investigation, prosecution and conviction for organised crime as well as to counter radicalisation and combating all forms of violent extremism.

IPA III support in the fight against **organised crime** will focus on assisting authorities to develop a more strategic approach towards tackling various forms of organised crime, including a better priority setting and allocation of adequate means accordingly. This should result in better identifying and effectively dismantling criminal networks and their economic bases more effectively, making systematic and proactive use of financial investigations and applying asset confiscation. Beneficiaries also have to step up their capacity to effectively address organised crime and money laundering on-line and to develop a strategic approach towards tackling cyber criminality.

Support will also focus on operational cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation. This is key to help establishing a concrete and sustained track-record in tackling organised crime and money laundering. To effectively tackle serious and organised crime, including cybercrime, IPA III will continue to support operational cooperation with relevant EU agencies, Member States' agencies and international law enforcement organisations operating in criminal justice, law enforcement investigations and witness protection. Operational cooperation, including with EU agencies, has intensified, but overall the track-record in organised crime cases often remains weak. EU assistance will therefore be crucial to enable proactive, timely, secure and trustful exchange of information and evidence during investigations and prosecutions. In addition, IPA III beneficiaries that are parties to international agreements on mutual legal assistance should accept the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) as a competent authority of the Member States participating in the EPPO for the implementation of those agreements. Cooperation between the EPPO and the IPA III beneficiaries should be facilitated by the conclusion of working arrangement.⁹

Special attention will be given to enhancing specialised law enforcement. Modern investigation techniques should be further rolled out, including intelligence-led policing, the use of special investigation methods, DNA analysis, financial and digital forensics, etc.

Emerging security issues at global level also need to be addressed, in particular in the area of cybersecurity and building State and societal resilience against hybrid threats. Particular

⁹ Pursuant to Articles 99(3) and 104(1) of the Council Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 of 12 October 2017 implementing enhanced cooperation on the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office

attention will be paid to providing increased support to capacity-building in the area of **cyber-security and fight against cyber-crime**.

Continuous support will be offered to reach the above strategic objectives on **counter-terrorism as well as on the prevention and countering of violent extremism and radicalisation**. Strategic, legislative and institutional capacities need to be strengthened. For the Western Balkans region, the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans¹⁰ and the bilateral arrangements implementing it provide a comprehensive and structured framework including for future work.

IPA III will therefore also focus on countering-terrorism as well as preventing and countering all forms of violent extremism and radicalisation. In this context, IPA III will build on existing frameworks and actions at all levels including the regional level but also address evolving threat pictures and new threats. A long-term response to the issue of returning foreign fighters and their families is essential.

Cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation and information exchange will also be key to address the challenges of cyber-security, cybercrime, counter-terrorism and radicalisation (off-line and online). This includes the promotion and increased connections to the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) platform for information exchange with Member States and with Europol. Most beneficiaries need to continue the current efforts to address the issue of returning foreign fighters and to prevent extremism and radicalisation, including inside and outside of prisons. For these purposes, tracing of financial flows, money laundering and terrorism fighting shall be tackled proactively and strategically.

The regulatory framework for the protection of critical infrastructure should evolve and be implemented in line with the EU *acquis* and take into account the evolving challenges linked to interdependencies and cascading effects. Evolving threat pictures also call for work to be done on the protection of public spaces, Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) related threats and new and emerging threats, such as unmanned aircraft systems.

IPA III will also support actions addressing the threats of anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war, including improvised explosive devices. Mines continue to cause dreadful harm, instil fear and stop refugees and internally displaced people from returning to their homes. Mines also continue to strip entire regions of a fair chance of economic recovery and development.

Thematic Priority 4: Migration and border management

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to further step up strategic and operational cooperation on migration, along different pillars: irregular migration, border management, international protection and legal migration. IPA III will continue to support the beneficiaries in developing the necessary institutional framework and capacities that are necessary to manage migration in all its aspects, while aligning with EU and international standards on the external and internal dimensions of migration.

Dealing with mixed migration flows remains a challenge across the region; and smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, particularly women and children, remain major issues of concern. Support under IPA III will continue to prioritise reducing irregular migration, cooperation in the region and with EU Member States to fight trafficking in human beings and migrants smuggling and an effective implementation of readmission and return

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/news/docs/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf

policies. It will continue to strengthen capacity building of protection and gender sensitive migration policies as well as the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks, in line with the evolving EU migration *acquis* and policy as well as with international standards. Capacities will continue to be developed to facilitate assisted voluntary and non-voluntary return both to and from the region, including on incentives to help integrate returning citizens.

Through IPA III, support would aim to align with the European integrated border management strategic objectives and capacities, including by improving border surveillance and checks at border crossing points as well as further developing and implementing mechanisms for cooperation in the region and with EU agencies, such as the European Border and Coast Guards agency. These efforts will also contribute to managing irregular migration and to fighting organised crime. In complementarity with the Integrated Border Management Fund, IPA III assistance will therefore focus on the continuous alignment with the relevant EU *acquis* and European standards. It will also focus on increasing operational capacities, fostering further compliance of law enforcement institutions with rule of law and good governance principles, and stepping up international police cooperation. The ultimate objective will be establishing concrete results and a sustained track-record in these areas. IPA III also aims at strengthening international and regional cooperation (including with EU agencies, Member States and the respective liaison officers in the region) and sharing of relevant information and data (such as current figures on migration and risk analyses).

With regard to the right to asylum, IPA III beneficiaries will receive support to further develop capacities to grant protection to people fleeing persecution or serious harm in their own country. The right to asylum is a fundamental right; guarantying it is an international obligation, with due respect to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees and the 1967 Protocol. Ensuring access to international protection and access to basic services for the most vulnerable people remains a priority in this area, together with supporting asylum authorities and efficient asylum procedures with special focus on unaccompanied children and on vulnerable categories of asylum seekers. It is also important to develop integration strategies for recognised refugees and asylum seekers, information campaigns and addressing negative public attitudes towards migrants and refugees. IPA III will continue to support the establishment of protection-sensitive and EU compatible asylum systems, and EU compatible registration and referral mechanisms for asylum seekers.

In the area of legal migration, the beneficiaries will be eligible to receive support to ensure alignment with the EU *acquis*, but also to implement temporary and circular migration for specific professions and designed to address labour market and demographic age disparities in the region and in the EU. Furthermore, progress towards EU integration should result in political stability and economic growth, which may lead to increased flows of migration for labour purposes within and to the region. This might place labour migration management issues higher on the agenda of migration priorities in the region.

Full alignment with the EU visa policy also needs further efforts. In addition, increased support may be directed to enhance the contributions of third country nationals and of citizens living in diaspora to the development of the beneficiaries.

Thematic Priority 5: Fundamental rights

Fundamental rights are largely enshrined in the legislation of the IPA III beneficiaries, while in some cases the legal framework still needs to be brought into line with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) case law. However, more needs to be done to ensure these rights are fully implemented in practice. The specific objective of IPA III will thus be to ensure the alignment of the legal framework

with EU and international standards as well as to establish a solid track-record in respecting fundamental rights.

IPA III support will prioritise the correct implementation of all the rights and freedoms set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, its protocols, its jurisprudence and enforcing the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. Support will also be given to establishment and effective and independent functioning of all the relevant structures for the promotion and protection of human rights, including the Ministries for Human Rights, National Human Rights Institutions and equality bodies¹¹ and the Ombudsperson. This will allow the concerned beneficiaries to be in a position to implement their human rights obligations and policy in an adequate manner. These actions are key to ensure that fundamental rights are effectively implemented, as this is not fully the case in practice yet.

Ensuring gender equality and preventing discrimination and gender-based violence remain key priorities. IPA III will support the set-up of effective institutions and systems in order to ensure all women and girls in the region to be free from violence and to enjoy equal rights throughout society. IPA III support in the fight against gender-based violence will focus on assisting authorities to bridge the gaps between the legislation and its full and proper implementation in order to meet the standards set forth in the Istanbul Convention. Moreover, assistance will be provided to implement, where relevant, the recommendations of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and to combat gender stereotypes that prevent victims from accessing justice and contribute to the underreporting of offenses.

Discrimination against minorities, including women and girls belonging to minority groups, children, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups remains an important challenge in the region that needs to be tackled.

Promoting and protecting freedom of expression and the independence of media as a pillar of democracy remains a priority. The media business environment is also characterised by political interference and ambiguous media ownership that undermine the sustainability of independent media.

Decisive efforts are needed to protect minorities and, in line with the EU equal treatment *acquis*, fight discrimination, including against persons of the Roma community, persons with disabilities and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex (LGBTI). Further support will be provided to improve the rights of the child and support persons with disabilities, as well as to improve access to justice, the standards of post-penal care, the use of alternative sanctions, the conditions in prisons, the rights of prisoners and the enforcement and probation services. IPA III will contribute to enhance procedural rights of victims and suspects. Persons from Roma communities continue to face social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination. Children rights are still abused and further steps (including adoption of specific strategies) are needed to protect children, including children with disabilities, from violence, neglect and exploitation. Important efforts are also still needed to address in particular hate speech (including hate speech online) and violence.

Support will also be provided to ensure that data protection legislation is fully in line with the EU *acquis* and is applied in a consistent manner both online and offline, including in law enforcement and crime prevention. The correct implementation of legislation on procedural rights in line with the EU *acquis* will also be an area of focus under IPA III.

¹¹ In line with the European Commission Recommendation on Standards for Equality Bodies, 22 June 2018, C(2018) 3850 final.

Thematic Priority 6: Democracy

A functioning democracy is at the heart of the Copenhagen political criteria. However, in the enlargement region, a number of issues remain to be addressed, ranging from parliamentary boycotts to the conduct of elections. A lack of checks and balances and attempts on independent institutions put a further strain on basic democratic principles. Equal participation of women should be strengthened. The specific objectives of IPA III in this area will be to ensure democratic institutions are properly resourced and function in line with constitution, principles of effective government as well as recommendations of the Venice Commission. IPA III support in this area also aims at guaranteeing the effective scrutiny of legislation, the compliance of the electoral legislation with the international and European standards and that effective parliamentary procedures are in place. Democratic institutions must be inclusive of the plurality of groups in society and must promote the equal distribution of power

This includes ensuring constructive dialogue across the political spectrum, notably within the parliaments. Governments need to ensure that the opposition has the possibility to fully perform its role. In addition, the opposition needs to engage constructively in the democratic process.

Support will focus on enhancing parliamentary accountability, oversight of the executive, and democratic scrutiny.

Electoral reform, at central and local level, is required in many of the beneficiaries in line with international standards and to meet the specific recommendations of bodies such as Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission. Elections should be transparent, inclusive and credible, and IPA III will continue to assist in implementing the recommendations of election observation missions, related to long-standing weaknesses identified throughout the electoral observation cycles. Proper functioning of democratic institutions remains a key challenge in most of the beneficiaries. The central role of parliaments, and constructive cross-party dialogue also need to be embedded in the political culture. Parliamentary accountability, oversight of the executive and democratic scrutiny need to be enhanced. For this purpose, IPA III will also support reforms to the rules for the public and private financing of political parties, which need substantial revision.

Thematic Priority 7: Civil Society

As an actor of change, civil society plays a vital role in shaping policies and partnerships, in overseeing their implementation, and in promoting a gender responsive rights-based approach. In the context of preparing for accession, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have two main functions that require support. First, as a democratic watchdog, CSOs and grass root organisations hold governments to account where fundamental rights, democratic principles and the rule of law are brought into question. Second, they contribute to the alignment with and implementation of the EU *acquis* by bringing innovative ideas to the table; by bridging the gap with real needs of citizens in the decision-making process and by monitoring implementation.

Both these functions depend on a vibrant, sustainable, independent civil society with adequate resources to perform its tasks. The role of IPA III is to assist in developing such a sector and in helping ensure its long-term sustainability.

The specific objectives of IPA III in this area will thus be to strengthen the enabling legal and policy environment and support the basic needs of CSOs, to increase CSOs' role in decision

and policy making in partnership with public authorities based on trust and mutual recognition and around common interests, to strengthen CSOs skills and capacities, as well as to increase public awareness on CSOs' needs and role. Building capacity and strengthening the resources of CSOs is key to address the challenges affecting CSOs (such as restrictive laws limiting their operation, intimidation or harassment) and to allow them to perform their roles, including as independent watchdogs and governance actors. The genuine inclusion of CSOs in the policy-making process, which has a meaningful impact, remains to be ensured across the region and therefore attention needs to be paid both to how public authorities ensure a conducive environment for CSOs and to the capacities of CSOs themselves.

IPA III support will aim at fostering an enabling environment in which civil society can actively participate in the reform and policy-making process, for example by establishing inclusive structured dialogues on reform priorities with the involvement of an empowered civil society. Strengthening the legal, institutional and financial environment under which CSOs operate is central for this purpose as a necessary condition for their participation, ownership and sustainability of the reform process.

The partnership principle ensures that regional, local, and urban public authorities, trade unions, employers, NGOs, and other civil society bodies promoting issues such as social inclusion, gender equality, and non-discrimination are involved in all stages of the planning, implementation and monitoring of projects. In order to make this principle more effective across all Member States, the Commission adopted the European Code of Conduct on Partnership¹² in 2014, which should also be followed for the IPA III programming of the 2021-2027 period.

3. Indicators

- Degree of readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates on political criteria (source: European Commission) KPI 1 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

Thematic Priority 1: Judiciary

- Functioning of judiciary (source: European Commission)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

Thematic Priority 2: Fight against corruption

- Fight against corruption (source: European Commission)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

¹² Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

Thematic Priority 3: Fight against organised crime / Security

- Fight against organised crime (source: European Commission)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

- Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (source: World Bank Worldwide Governance indicators)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans 50.72 Turkey (55.29)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 4: Migration and Border Management

- Number of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern to the UNHCR by situation (source: UNHCR)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 5: Fundamental Rights

- Freedom of expression (source: European Commission)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

4. Assumptions & Risks

Window 1, by its nature, touches upon many issues which have a very strong political and societal dimension, often far in excess of the legal or technical dimension. For this reason, the overarching assumptions and risks will be the determining factor for the achievement of the strategic objectives and thematic priorities.

Assumptions

- There is a continuous commitment, steered and coordinated at the highest level of the government, the executive as well as at the legislative and judiciary to address the key priorities under this Window.
- IPA III beneficiaries are committed to upgrading their national strategies and sectoral approaches in line with SIGMA guidelines and relevant assessments, including peer reviews.
- The necessary domestic financial and administrative resources are effectively and efficiently mobilised.

- Systematic efforts are made to raise public awareness of the relevance of the issues supported under this Window.

Risks

Primary risk is the lack of political will to implement necessary reforms effectively and establish the necessary track-records from an early stage.

There could also be external factors influencing public support for accession process as a whole as well as reforms in Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in particular. Unresolved bilateral issues can be a major driver of this risk with bilateral political disputes used instrumentally. Lack of willingness of third countries of origin to cooperate on migration management is another risk factor. There is a risk of obstacles to working with civil society, due to restrictive legal environment and tense political situations. The consequence is that CSOs might face more difficulties in fulfilling their obligations under EU funded grants or that it will be more difficult to provide funding to these organisations. There is also a risk of non-genuine civil society and non-governmental organisations bidding for EU funded projects.

WINDOW 2 - GOOD GOVERNANCE, EU ACQUIS ALIGNMENT, GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

1. Context Analysis

Public administration reform (PAR), together with rule of law and economic development, is a fundamental pillar of the enlargement process and a basis for effective implementation of EU policies and legislation. A well-functioning and de-politicised public administration is necessary for democratic governance. The governments' ability to ensure coherent application of rules, procedures, standards and human resources management across public administration at central, regional and local level directly impacts quality of sector policies, public services, and ultimately competitiveness and growth.

Beneficiaries will need to find, in line with their constitutions and decentralisation policies, an appropriate balance between central, regional and local government that best supports implementation of reforms and the delivery of services to citizens. The sub-national levels of government will have as a reference the same governance standards as are expected at the central government level.

Reliable, objective and timely statistics are crucial for decision-makers for evidence-based policy development and monitoring and evaluation of implementation of policies. They are equally important for citizens to scrutinise governments' performances and the use of public finance.

Economic governance is the system by which government institutions, including independent actors like the central bank, regulate and steer the economy. It has emerged as one of the key processes within the EU since the financial crisis and the creation of the European Semester. The economies of the IPA III beneficiaries face many structural weaknesses, with inefficient and rigid markets, low productivity, limited access to finance, unclear property rights and a cumbersome regulatory environment, leading to low competitiveness and high unemployment.

As key part of the Copenhagen criteria, IPA III beneficiaries need to bring their legislation in line with the EU policies and the EU *acquis* and to ensure the required administrative capacity. This is crucial for the EU accession and successful participation in the internal market.

For the accession process to be a success and gain the support of the citizens, its opportunities, results and challenges must be communicated clearly, in the region and in the EU. Effective communication, covering different layers of information, is conducted through raising awareness and support for the EU values, for the accession process and for the benefits, obligations and impact of EU membership on the daily lives of citizens, and where relevant, through dispelling myths and misconceptions and addressing disinformation. Focus should be on sector-specific communication, which should be based on the concerns of the

population and on the thematic priorities set at IPA III beneficiaries' or regional level, addressing the results and impact of the EU and its support on the life of citizens.

Regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations and reconciliation are essential parts of the Stabilisation and Association Process and key for progress on the respective European paths. They contribute to foster stability and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and the legacy of the past. Formats for political and policy cooperation driven by the region, and recent summits, have provided a new momentum to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. This is also building on existing regional initiatives and cooperation frameworks such as the Regional Cooperation Council, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Transport Community Treaty, the Energy Community Treaty and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). This needs to be further exploited in order to continue contributing to political stabilisation, to create economic opportunities and to support the European integration. Together with improved regional cooperation, further efforts towards reconciliation are crucial to firmly anchor peace and ensure lasting stability in the region.

2. Key priorities for IPA III support

The overall objective of the EU's assistance under Window 2 is to promote good governance, increase the compliance with Union's values and their alignment with the Union's rules, standards and practices in the relevant areas. EU assistance will also foster peace and stability across the region.

Window 2 aims to address overall public governance, in particular public administration reform, including digital transformation and public financial management at all levels of government, as well as legislative and institutional alignment with the EU *acquis* (unless specifically covered in other windows). It will also support people-to-people contacts as well as efforts on regional cooperation, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. Strategic communication will also be supported. The proposed actions will be designed in a way to assess, address and mainstream gender, with special consideration to combatting all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, promoting gender equality and empowering girls and women.

Thematic Priority 1: Good governance

The specific objective of IPA III support in this area is to modernise public administrations at all levels of government, strengthen statistical systems and economic governance, and hence contribute to sustainable growth and to improve competitiveness.

Public administration reform is one of the fundamentals of the enlargement policy and it will continue to be a priority. An accountable, transparent and well-functioning public administration is not only a democratic right of citizens but also guarantor of delivery of quality services and the key driver of economic growth and competitiveness. Public administration reform is integrally linked to the rule of law, especially the prevention of corruption, as it enhances the transparency, predictability and accountability of government work. It is also key in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, e.g. in the civil service workforce. Public administration reform will require the digital transformation of the government in support of cross-sector, cross-administration and cross-border cooperation, in order to ensure interoperability, trust and openness.

IPA III will continue to support public administration reform at central government level in line with the normative framework of the Principles of Public Administration¹³. The Principles cover the following core areas: strategic framework; policy development and coordination; public service and human resources management; accountability; service delivery and public financial management. Digital transformation will be a strategic enabler. Most IPA III beneficiaries have adopted comprehensive reform strategies and are addressing identified institutional, legislative and administrative weaknesses in the different core areas, following the assessments against the Principles in the following years. EU assistance will continue to support the implementation of the reform strategies, including their upgrading or renewal, as necessary, following the regular monitoring against the Principles of Public Administration. The focus of assistance will gradually shift towards supporting implementation of new rules and standards in line institutions, while maintaining necessary support to coordinating institutions. There will be also an increased focus to supporting managerial accountability, evidence-informed policy-making and improved internal control culture across administration. Civil society participation in the context of public administration reform will also be supported.

Under **public financial management**, as an integral part of public administration reform, the key priority will be to support IPA III beneficiaries to implement and upgrade their reform strategies to ensure fiscal sustainability and sound management of public finances as applicable in the EU. There will notably be a focus on improving the capacity for domestic revenue mobilisation and effective management of public funds, including through upgrading the revenue administration, budget reliability, transparency of public finances, public investment planning, selection and management, management of assets and liabilities, policy-based fiscal strategy and budgeting, public procurement and concessions, internal control, accounting and reporting, and external audit. Gender -sensitive budgeting should be promoted and systematic inequalities reduced.

Increasing transparency will remain a priority when allocating support under IPA III, in particular regarding the management of public funds and at all stages in **public procurement**, an area particularly prone to corruption. Support will be provided to improve the transparency, competitiveness and fairness of public procurement tenders, reduce the use of restricted tendering, and ensure the effective implementation of the exclusion criteria applied to tenderers, as stipulated by EU procurement legislation. Support will also be granted to effectively roll out e-procurement and digital transformation of the public procurement systems, as well as professionalization of the procurers, especially concerning strategic procurement (green, social, innovation, etc.). These reforms are vital to enable citizens to monitor how their taxes are spent, from the initial tender to final execution of contracts. Control mechanisms throughout the procurement process will also be strengthened.

The quality of **governance at sub-national levels** is very important in the enlargement context, as regional and local governments are closest to the citizens and play a key role in providing public services as well as in building citizens' trust in public institutions. They will also play a key role in the management of EU funds and with the implementation of a large part of the EU *acquis* upon accession, including in areas, such as public procurement, internal control, competition, state aid, communal services, agriculture and rural development, employment and social policy, energy efficiency and environment/water and waste management.

¹³ <http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/principles-public-administration-eu-candidate-countries-and-potential-candidates.htm>

The local level is the place where direct democracy and civic representation are exercised, where services are provided, and where social and economic development takes place. Local governments should play a more critical role in shaping and developing the social and economic life of their territories, bringing communities together, and providing local solutions to local problems. The performance of local government and how it interacts with citizens, will affect the latter's behaviour as well as cohesion and trust within and among communities; this will legitimize the local government's efforts and drive sustainable development. Inadequate local governance would affect all citizens, but especially the vulnerable, often enhancing exclusion. Enhancing governance, popular engagement, transparency and accountability at regional and local levels in compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government should accordingly be another fundamental policy priority.

Improving governance at sub-national levels, especially the capacity for inclusive and evidence-based policy development, merit-based human resources management, e-Governance, public financial management, transparency and accountability towards citizens and efficient service delivery will be among key priorities together with the fight against corruption (in complementarity with the assistance provided under Window 1). The priority will be to support those administrations at sub-national levels that are committed to improving the quality of their governance, and develop or upgrade relevant governance reform plans that can be monitored over time. Interoperable, trusted and inclusive digital public services are a major change vector at local government level. In addition, support will be provided to decentralisation processes, in line with the beneficiaries' constitutions and policies, including the development of credible and relevant strategic frameworks and their implementation.

The concerned EU *acquis* chapters are in particular chapters 3 (Right of establishment and freedom to provide services), 5 (Public procurement), 8 (Competition policy), 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development), 16 (Taxation), 19 (Social policy and employment), 22 (Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments), 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights), 27 (Environment) and 32 (Financial control).

Statistics provide the basis for evidence-based policy development and monitoring and evaluation of implementation of policies. In addition, data should be collected and presented as much as possible disaggregated by sex and reflect gender issues. They are equally important for citizens to scrutinise governments' performances, the use of public finance and ultimately build their confidence into their institutions. The priority will be to ensure support to IPA III beneficiaries in meeting the EU *acquis* requirements under chapter 18 (Statistics) and to build capacity for administrative data and high quality statistics production and use in all sectors. Under chapter 18, the beneficiaries are required to ensure a statistical infrastructure based on principles of impartiality, reliability, transparency, confidentiality and protection of individual data and dissemination of official statistics. The national statistical institutes will be supported to develop the methodology and ensure the production and dissemination of statistical information in various areas such as macro-economic and price statistics, demographic and social statistics, regional statistics, and statistics on business, transport, external trade, agriculture, environment, science and technology. Sex-disaggregated data should be made available where relevant. The line institutions will be supported in building capacity for administrative data and statistics production, storage and use for evidence-based policy-making.

From the EU policies, the accession negotiation chapters 5 (public procurement), agriculture and rural development (11), taxation (16), statistics (18) and financial control (32) are integrally linked to public administration reform together with chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights), especially the area on fight against corruption. IPA III support should in particular help addressing recommendations from the enlargement reports in these areas and

support the implementation of the roadmap on the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform.

Economic governance has emerged as one of the key priorities in the EU since the financial crisis and the creation of the European Semester. IPA III beneficiaries face major structural economic challenges, including high unemployment, low levels of foreign direct investments (often concentrated in selected industries), and weak competitiveness. Also, weaknesses with the rule of law and public financial management exacerbate the risk of corruption, leading to poor quality of public spending, and negatively affecting investment climate and economic development.

IPA III support in this area will contribute to significantly increase levels of investment and growth rates in the enlargement region, by strengthening economic governance, in particular the capacity to maintain macroeconomic and financial stability, and to pursue growth-enhancing public investments and structural reforms.

As of 2015, medium-term Economic Reform Programmes (ERP) are submitted annually to the European Commission by the beneficiaries. The ERPs include a macroeconomic and fiscal policy framework as well as structural reform plans to boost competitiveness and long-term growth. The ERP process aims at helping beneficiaries to develop their institutional and analytical capacities and to prepare them for eventual participation in the EU's multilateral surveillance and economic policy coordination procedures. Therefore, they prepare the beneficiaries for the design and implementation of key policies to address structural weaknesses and fiscal imbalances in view of their future participation in the EU's economic policy coordination procedures.

IPA III will give priority to supporting the continuous improvement of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) process, by focusing on:

- a) enhancing the institutional capacity for medium term economic planning (analysis, design and implementation of economic policies in general and structural reforms to boost competitiveness in particular);
- b) improving the ownership of the process in the IPA III beneficiaries, as well as important economic governance aspects, such as inter-ministerial coordination, budgeting of structural reforms and public consultations.

Support to structural reforms and related investments envisaged in the Economic Reform Programmes will be mainly covered under Windows 3 and 4. Under this window support will focus on further improvement of institutions involved in the annual ERP process. The main concerned chapter of the EU *acquis* under this section is chapter 17, but chapters relevant for the internal market will also be taken into account (chapters from 1 to 10).

Thematic Priority 2: Administrative capacity and EU acquis alignment

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to bring beneficiaries' policies and legislation in line with the EU policies and the EU *acquis*, and to build administrative capacity to fully and effectively implement sector policies and the adopted legislation, building the ability of beneficiaries to take on the obligations of membership as well as the digitalisation efforts. This objective constitutes a crosscutting priority and complements administrative capacity building under other Windows in line with the sector approach.

Effective administrative and institutional capacity does not only require legal expertise for EU *acquis* alignment, setting up specific sector institutions required by the EU *acquis*, and ensuring staff to implement new policies and legislation. It also requires that sector institutions operate under the same standards, rules and procedures that the governments have

either already adopted or are committed to adopt under ongoing public administration reform efforts

Priority will be given to those proposed actions that build on public administration reform and digitalisation efforts and realistically assess the administrative capacity needs at sector level. Such needs include sector specific administrative data and statistics production; strategic planning, monitoring and reporting; inclusive and evidence-based policy and legislative development; institutional capacity building in terms of appropriate accountability arrangements (supervision/reporting); human resources management, including delegation of decision-making, respect to merit principle in recruitments and dismissals and professional development; service design; and public investment management, where relevant. The support to EU *acquis* alignment will systematically focus on the underlying capacities to use evidence and ensure engagement of stakeholders.

The beneficiaries may propose, at the time of project selection, to address these various aspects of administrative capacity at sector level, for example with additional support from an EU Integration Facility should it not be feasible to integrate such activities in broader sector reform interventions. The facility could also be strategically used to address the broader mechanisms that foster institutional learning and capacity building. TAIEX actions may provide the complementary short-term assistance.

Doing so would help future management and control systems better capture synergies within their programmes and across policy and/or priority axes, create more integrated investment processes, optimise programme implementation processes throughout the investment cycle, and eventually enhance investment impact.

Thematic Priority 3: Good neighbourly relations and reconciliation

Good neighbourly relations and reconciliation are intrinsically linked to rule of law, economic governance and regional cooperation. The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to contribute to societal cohesion and resilience by addressing the legacy of the conflicts of the past and bringing justice to all victims of the conflicts. Likewise, improving good neighbourly relations fosters citizens' confidence and contributes to removing impediments to political, economic and social exchanges and co-operation.

In light of this, and in full complementarity with the other windows, IPA III will give priority to actions that contribute to confidence building, societal cohesion and strengthening neighbourly relations, especially:

- combating impunity for serious international crimes, including through strong regional co-operation, and effective domestic prosecutions;
- promoting victims' rights;
- promoting increased political and policy dialogue at political and technical levels and mediation efforts to address outstanding legacy issues; promoting education and youth, including inter-cultural dialogue, as vectors for social cohesion and peaceful relations as well as drivers of sustainable socio-economic development;
- developing local and people-to-people exchanges in various areas, including economic and environmental cooperation, good governance and justice, media, social inclusion, human rights, gender equality, children rights, youth, social services, minorities.

In the field of culture, the effective implementation of the UNESCO convention on the protection and promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression should also be ensured.

Thematic Priority 4: Strategic communication, monitoring, evaluation and communication activities

The specific objective of IPA III support in this area is to ensure public support for the EU values, policies and to necessary reforms entailed by the accession process by explaining

1. How the EU and the EU accession process work and
2. What the benefits and implications of the process are for citizens, both in candidate countries and potential candidates and in the EU Member States.

Raising awareness and having well informed citizens will contribute to increased support and understanding for the benefits of the accession process and EU membership and for the necessary reforms, effectively addressing disinformation and counter opposing narratives by other actors in the region. This requires a joint effort of the EU and its Member States, and in particular of the beneficiaries' governments and civil society. To achieve this, communication should be based on a strategic approach identifying the main objectives, target groups (e.g. general public, stakeholders, media, and youth), key messages, appropriate communication channels and monitoring of its impact. Activities can cover different layers of information about the EU, which are complementary to one another:

- The EU values, policies and programmes and their impact on people's everyday life;
- The EU accession process with the accompanying socio-economic transformation and its long-term benefits and opportunities for citizens and economies, with a focus on human stories/success stories;
- The EU funding provided in the IPA III region and its correlation with the EU values and policy objectives, with a focus on tangible positive impact of EU funded projects on citizens and economies.

In general, communication on enlargement policy should be, as much as possible, sector-specific (e.g. EU4environment; EU4youth; EU4civil society, etc.), based on clear EU branding and a harmonised campaign approach. It should taking into account the main concerns of the population as shown by opinion polls (e.g. unemployment, corruption) and the thematic priorities set at beneficiaries/regional level and systematically ensuring visibility of the EU. Appropriate funding needs to be allocated for evaluation (ex-ante and ex-post) of communication activities.

Communication will be done as far as possible in local languages, identifying the best channels per each beneficiary and, where necessary, adapting the message to the local context. Working with young people and local multipliers should be the priority, formulating messages bottom-up rather than top-down.

On the EU side, it is incumbent upon Member States to inform their citizens and provide them with the facts about the opportunities and challenges of the process. The Commission will support these endeavours by stepping up its strategic communication in the region and in the Union.

Financing will also be provided for **support measures for the implementation, monitoring, audit and evaluation of IPA III programmes.**

3. Indicators

Thematic Priority 1: Good governance

- Public Administration Reform (source: European Commission)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x).

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x).

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

- Number of countries that have statistical legislation that complies with the European statistics Code of Practice – SDG indicator 17.18.2

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

- Number of countries with a national statistical plan that is under implementation, by source of funding – SDG indicator 17.18.3

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

- Degree of readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates on economic criteria (source: European Commission) - KPI 4 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

- Protecting the rights of local authorities (source: Council of Europe, Carta-Monitor)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 2: Administrative capacity and EU acquis alignment

- Degree of readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates in terms of *acquis* alignment (source: European Commission) – KPI 3 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

Thematic Priority 3: Good neighbourly relations and reconciliations

- Attitudes on regional cooperation and EU integration (source: Regional Cooperation Council's Balkan Barometer)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x)

4. Assumptions & Risks

Assumptions

Public administration reform

- There is a continuous commitment to public administration reform, including public financial management, steered and coordinated at the highest level of the government.
- IPA III beneficiaries are committed to upgrading and implementing their public administration and public financial management reform strategies in line with the monitoring results against the Principles of Public Administration and other relevant assessments.

Governance at sub-national level

- Governments are committed to credible and relevant decentralisation policies and sub-national levels of government are willing to address systematically the identified governance weaknesses.

Statistics

- Statistical institutes will actively engage in defining the statistical requirements and provide methodological support for line institutions to improve their capacity for administrative and statistical data collection and use for decision-making.

Economic governance

- There is continuous commitment by beneficiaries towards macroeconomic and financial stability.
- There is continuous commitment to the implementation of structural reforms designed to boost competitiveness and inclusive growth.
- There is continuous commitment to participate in the ERP exercise and to implement the policy guidance as well as the outlined reforms and joint conclusions agreed in this larger process.

Administrative capacity in sectors/EU acquis chapters

- Beneficiaries are committed to address at sector level (from multiple levels of government, to private firms and non-profit entities) administrative capacity requirements deriving from the ongoing public administration reform efforts.
- The EU *acquis* alignment process increasingly focuses on the quality of the law-making process, including capacity to produce and use data/statistics as the basis of decision-making, capacity to prepare impact assessments and the capacity to ensure systematically inter-institutional and public consultations.

Communication

- Public and media remain interested in EU related information.
- The EU accession process remains a political priority for the authorities in the region and for the Member States, with commitment and willingness of all stakeholders to stimulate the debate on EU related issues.
- National authorities have sufficient institutional capacity for communication that is able to provide factual information and manage the understanding and perception of the general public regarding EU accession.

Good neighbourly relations

- Political commitment to strengthen good neighbourly relations and promote mutual understanding;

Risks

Primary risk is that cooperation and dialogue with the beneficiaries might be affected due to unstable political situations, the security situation or adverse events, as well as obstruction, lack of political commitment from the partners' governments or administrations and lack of willingness to engage in necessary reforms.

There could also be external factors influencing public support for accession process as a whole as well as reforms in the relevant areas. Unresolved bilateral issues can be a major driver of this risk with bilateral political disputes used instrumentally.

There is a risk that misinformation and hostile communication on EU policies, objectives and actions have a negative impact on the attainment of the strategic objectives as well as on the implementation of EU assistance. The potential consequence can be a reputational damage for the institution and a negative public image of the EU.

WINDOW 3 – GREEN AGENDA AND SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIVITY

1. Context Analysis

Europe must lead the transition to climate neutrality, a healthy planet and a more connected world. It can only do so by bringing people together and upgrading our unique social market economy to fit today's new ambitions. The European Green Deal together with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, including the accompanying Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, will provide a renewed commitment and a new strategic framework to achieve this global objective.

There is considerable scope for the IPA III beneficiaries to embark on a green agenda to improve energy efficiency, increase the share of renewable energy sources, assist beneficiaries in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals and address other environmental issues, such as, greening of transport and food production, advancing the efficient use of resources, reverting biodiversity loss and cutting pollution. It will also be important to improve the sustainable production of raw materials needed for the green transition and climate-neutral economy. Beneficiaries should shift their economic model to resource-efficient, safe, and sustainable low-carbon economies in line with the wider EU targets for climate action and environmental protection. In doing so, climate change mitigation and adaptation can be achieved and higher standards of environment and human health protection, together with a sustainable extraction and utilisation of natural resources, can be attained. This would not only directly benefit the health and well-being of the citizens, but also make the region attractive for investments and tourism, and tap on the significant economic potential of green growth, the circular economy and integration of EU and Western Balkan industrial value chains.

Investing in nature protection and restoration will also be critical for Europe's economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and is considered key to boosting resilience and preventing the emergence and spread of future outbreaks. Reducing the environmental and climate footprint of food systems will strengthen the capacity of food value chains to face future challenges. Considering its environmental footprint, there is also scope for a green transformation of the ICT sector.

Crucial for achieving sustainable economic development is to reach higher levels of diversification and innovation in both urban and rural areas, as well as coastal and insular communities. The economic diversification is of the essence for the coal regions in transition, since de-carbonising the economy brings together severe threats to the economic viability of the entire region. This should be accompanied by investments in infrastructure (energy, transport, water and environment, digital agenda), and comprehensive action to mitigate and adapt to climate change in order to shift to a low-carbon and climate resilient development path. Perceived corruption in the renewables incentives systems endangers public acceptance of the whole transition to an energy-efficient, renewables-based energy system. This urgently needs to be addressed by switching to a more transparent renewables support system, in line

with the EU's Guidelines on State Aid for Environmental Protection and Energy¹⁴, to ensure affordable and proportionate incentives.

For the IPA III beneficiaries to reap all the benefits from a massive injection of renewable energy in the system (energy security, affordability, sustainability and reliability) a fully functional regional energy market has to be set up. This requires a set of institutions and regulations in place that have to be designed and implemented by the different governments. However, the final objective is to have the regional energy market integrated within the EU internal market, so that the full potential of the continental resources can be harnessed. Even though some progress has been made in the adoption and implementation of the EU *acquis*, it is insufficient and unevenly distributed. Therefore, an accelerated uptake is of the essence. In particular, efforts have to be made in order to put in place a carbon price mechanism, ideally an Emission Trading System (ETS), that creates a level playing field for all the actors, both inside and outside the EU.

Internalising the carbon price will turn investments in coal-fired power plants non-competitive, effectively opening options to cleaner fuels such as natural gas to play a role as a transition fuel. The new routes diversifying the gas suppliers to the European market have to be seen as an opportunity for a targeted and proportioned gasification of the region, through future-proof infrastructures that will, step by step, be shifted from transporting natural gas to renewable gas, as soon as it is available and competitive. Gas infrastructure can help deliver low-carbon energy sources in the longer term and serve sectors that are difficult to decarbonise through direct electrification.

A perspective on energy system integration is key in this respect, because a green recovery plan requires both investments in more clean energy supply as well as key investments in the transport, industry, and buildings sectors to make these more efficient and compatible with renewable resources. Investing in the development and deployment of clean technologies alongside other types of renewables like wind and solar can contribute to the needed integration across the energy, transport, industry and building sectors, in line with the emerging Smart Specialisation priority domains in the region.

The improvement of the connectivity within the IPA III beneficiaries, as well as between them and the European Union, is a key factor for growth and will bring clear benefits for the region's economies and citizens. The transport sector has a strong potential to contribute to competitiveness and trade. Competitive and environmentally friendly transport solutions will require efficiently combining transport modes by road, rail and inland waterways. There is therefore a particular need for greater multi-modality. Transportation networks will have to be resilient to current and future disaster risks, particularly those aggravated by climate change.

Strengthening digital connectivity and the digital transformation of businesses and public services in particular can be used for innovations that create wealth for our societies and our business. Data and artificial intelligence are the ingredients for innovation that can help us to find solutions to societal challenges, from health to farming, from security to manufacturing.

2. Key priorities for IPA III support

The overall objectives of the EU's assistance under Window 3 are to promote the green agenda by reinforcing environmental protection, contributing to mitigation, increasing resilience to climate change, accelerating the shift towards a low-carbon and circular economy

¹⁴ (2014/C 200/01)

and develop the digital economy and society. This approach shall apply on land but also at sea with a new approach for a sustainable blue economy. It, will contribute to boosting resilience and preventing the emergence and spread of future health crises.

Window 3 will also contribute to increased connectivity of the IPA III beneficiaries to the EU and to the wider global market as well as among themselves and with the citizens of the EU.

Under Window 3, IPA III will gradually integrate the new policy dimensions of the EU structural and cohesion policy in the enlargement region with the objective to better support the beneficiaries' understanding of the structural EU policies, support the transfer of best practices from the EU structural instruments to the enlargement area and prepare the beneficiaries for accession. Window 3 thematic priorities already reflect the objectives of the new cohesion policy (a smarter, greener and more connected Europe) and strongly refer to the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) embedding process and their flagship projects. The proposed actions will also be designed in a way to assess, address and mainstream gender and promote gender equality, reduce inequalities and enable better delivery of services to the vulnerable populations. Window 3 will be complementary to Window 4, which will more directly support the core actions of the EU structural and cohesion policies (private sector development, trade, research and innovation, agriculture, rural development and fisheries) in the IPA III beneficiaries.

The assessment and support of the structures, processes and procedures set up in the IPA III beneficiaries to select, prepare and implement infrastructure investments including with possible private engagement through public-private partnerships, will be of particular importance for the achievements of the strategic objectives of this Window. In addition, such investments should always be associated with those institutional and regulatory reforms undertaken in the context of the alignment with EU *acquis* and standards, and likely to ensure long-lasting and sustainable social and economic returns.

IPA III-supported investments should be in line with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans as well as relevant EU policies, including the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and relevant Macro-Regional Strategies. These investments should also follow the national development objectives, be compliant with sectoral strategic documents, and address a significant socio-economic need with major impact. To be eligible for IPA III support, large infrastructure projects should feature in the National Single Project Pipeline of the beneficiaries. They should also be in line with the medium term budget plans. The investment plans should systematically provide information on the planning process and the allocation of resources against the government policy priorities and foresee the implementation of projects on time and on budget in the short, medium and long-term perspective. Such investment plans should also include possible financing sources from the budget, borrowing plans, donor contributions, private sector participations and financial constraints.

IPA III assistance provided under this window will be in line with the five pillars identified in the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

Thematic Priority 1: Environment and climate change

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to support the protection of the environment, improve its quality and contribute to actions and policies against climate change to accelerate the shift towards a low-carbon economy.

More concretely, through this Window IPA III will support the beneficiaries to bring their **environmental protection** standards and **climate change policies** in line with EU requirements and policy priorities, including the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and relevant Macro-Regional Strategies. Institutions should be strengthened at all levels of the public administration, with the objective to create enough institutional and financial capacities to deliver, implement, enforce and monitor effective environmental and climate change policies and legislation.

The macroeconomic relevance of the **circular economy** and its benefits for economic growth, job creation and citizens' health should inform strategic programming choices. This will require additional efforts for long-term strategic planning and inter-ministerial coordination, as well as cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, the business community and civil society. Achieving climate neutrality will transform economies profoundly. This investment should help the European Green Deal become a job-creating engine.

Infrastructure and public investments in the environmental sector serve a twofold economic and social development purpose and support for their planning, design, construction and sustainable management is required, in terms of both capital investments and technical assistance. The challenging financial effort to bring water, wastewater and solid waste management infrastructure in line with EU standards requires innovative financing mechanisms and the application of cost-recovery and polluter-pays principles. Investments should also contribute to mitigate and adapt to climate change in order to shift to a low-carbon and climate resilient development path.

IPA III will also support actions to help addressing the global challenge of improving the environment and ensuring its preservation for future generations. It will focus on reversing environmental degradation, promoting conservation of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, monitoring and ultimately improving the quality of air, soil and water, abating levels of industrial and chemical pollution, as well as properly disposing of waste, including hazardous and extractive waste. Particular emphasis will be placed on transboundary issues and on the sustainable production and utilisation of natural resources, including the critical raw materials needed for the green and climate-neutral economy in line with green and circular economy principles; energy efficiency and renewable energy projects will be promoted in line with EU targets and policies.

Administrative capacity should be improved for **climate change action**. Activities aiming at mitigating effects, monitoring and reducing greenhouse gas emission should be promoted and financially supported. Capacity for disaster risk management should be improved also with enhanced participation in the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

Initiatives for raising awareness towards environment degradation including the issue of air pollution and plastic pollution and climate change will be supported. The mainstreaming of climate and environment related actions within the priorities highlighted for IPA III assistance shall be enhanced in order to contribute to the Union's efforts on climate with [18%, with the objective of reaching 20% by 2027] of its overall financial envelope. Finally, the mainstreaming of environment and climate action in other infrastructure projects and reforms should be strengthened in order to ensure their sustainability.

The main concerned chapter of the EU *acquis* under this section is chapter 27 (Environment and climate change).

Thematic Priority 2: Transport, digital economy and society, and energy

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to promote smart, sustainable, inclusive, safe transport and to remove bottlenecks in key network infrastructures, to improve access to digital technologies and services, to accelerate the shift towards a low-carbon, climate resilient economy, promote clean energy transition and a European integrated energy market.

In line with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the EU will support sustainable connectivity and the twin green and digital transition, and it will prioritise core transport and energy connections of interest to the region and to the EU.

Successful economic integration with the EU will only be possible with enhanced **connectivity** and therefore improving transport, energy and high speed internet networks, focussing primarily on the extension of the Trans-European Networks to the beneficiaries. This will increase competitiveness, improve access to services, boost economic growth and achieve regional integration.

However, a modern network of infrastructure will serve little purpose if the institutional and regulatory frameworks are not strengthened and aligned with EU requirements. In the **transport** sector this means providing support to promote efficient and sustainable management of the physical assets, introducing EU-compliant technical standards, simplifying border crossing procedures, road completion, maritime, railway and air market reforms. IPA III will also devote attention to transport safety, especially in road transport, and passengers' rights in accordance with the EU requirements and targets to reduce road fatalities and serious injuries.

Growing volumes of freight and passenger transport could exacerbate pollution and congestion levels. IPA III will accordingly support forms of mobility that are sustainable, energy-efficient and respectful of the environment. This means promoting intermodality for long haulage freight transports and green transport solutions, especially in urban mobility contexts.

IPA III will support the construction of new transport infrastructure and the upgrading of existing infrastructure, with the objective of bringing the core transport network up to EU standards. It will also support intermodal connections and the gradual shift from individual road transport to public or shared mobility. This will be done in a way that ensures their resilience to current and future disaster risks, particularly those aggravated by climate change.

Fast and efficient transport links, both within the region and with the neighbouring EU Member States, and greening transport with further investment in rail and waterways are crucial. In this context, to further spur regional cooperation and integration, connecting capitals in the region and with the EU will be an important priority.

The creation of these links will drive investment, facilitate regional trade and deliver sustainable economic growth, improving the daily lives of people in the region.

Satellite-based positioning and timing services are essential in efficient transport and logistics, in time synchronisation of electricity networks, in infrastructure construction, mapping and surveying. EGNOS, the EU's regional satellite-based augmentation system, helps build a single, safer and more sustainable transport area with the Western Balkans.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has proven the need for fast and ubiquitous connectivity across the EU to give all Europeans access to digital technology. Strengthening **digital** connectivity and the digital transformation of businesses and public services (with a special focus on e-Government, e-Procurement and e-Health in coordination with the other windows)

has a great impact on growth, productivity, innovation, services, fight against corruption and ultimately on people lives. As recalled in the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, digitalisation represents an opportunity as well as a challenge for many sectors of the economy and societies in the region. Digital services represent an increasing share of exports from the Western Balkans. It is important to include the IPA III beneficiaries in the EU's efforts to embrace technological change; this will hinge upon the alignment with and the implementation of the EU *acquis* and the implementation of the Digital Agenda.

With growing connectivity, the importance of cybersecurity and resilience will continue growing in the future. Operators of essential services in key sectors such as healthcare, transport, energy, banking, digital infrastructure and water supply should have the necessary capacities to take appropriate security measures based on EU values and principles. It is particularly important to reduce the digital gap between rural and urban areas.

Digitalisation of the industry and digital skills development in all layers of society are crucial to boosting employability and for active participation in and contribution to the digital economy in line with the recently adopted Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, which supports education and training systems in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis and the longer-term digital transformation. The media landscape has shifted, too, requiring adjusted actions towards regulatory independence and protection of minors in digital media.

The open and free data and services of the EU's space programmes Copernicus and Galileo create jobs, help tackle societal challenges in a cost-effective manner and are key in the modernisation and digitalisation of the economy. They contribute to smart and safe transport (including automated and connected solutions), green cities, sustainable management of natural resources and efficient agriculture. Space data and space-based applications can significantly contribute at national and regional level to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the climate objectives and emergency response. They can boost the private sector, enabling in particular start-ups and SMEs to develop local innovative solutions and services. Satellite-based positioning and timing services are essential in efficient transport and logistics, in time synchronisation of electricity networks, in infrastructure construction, mapping and surveying. EGNOS, the EU's regional satellite-based augmentation system, helps build a single, safer and more sustainable transport area with the Western Balkans.

Support in the field of **energy** will be reinforced. Strong emphasis will be put on energy market integration (including within the framework of the Energy Community Treaty), decarbonisation and just transition, increased digitalisation of the system and smart grids, energy efficiency, including modernisation of district heating, and energy security. Data and electronic communication technologies can support the decarbonisation of the energy system. Decarbonisation is a key pillar of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, in line with the aims of the European Green Deal. The role of gas as a transition energy source to replace coal remains one of the key ones in a fast reduction of GHG emission in the region. It is noted that energy efficiency remains the most effective way to meet carbon reduction targets, reduce energy costs and dependence on imports, in particular in a region featuring an energy intensity that is much higher than the average EU one.

Investing in renewable energy (including marine renewable energy) is another priority. In parallel, coal and carbon intensive regions (in transition) will be supported in the process of their economic diversification and transition to a low-carbon economy. Considerations for carbon pricing options as way to support climate objectives will be taken into account. IPA III beneficiaries will be encouraged to explore appropriate carbon pricing instruments that could trigger investments into renewable energy and energy efficiency while contributing to orienting consumers' behaviour towards more effective energy management. IPA III will also

continue supporting institutional and regulatory reform measures, through the alignment with and the implementation of the EU *acquis* .

A working energy transition must be underpinned by a functioning regional energy market since the need to de-carbonise can be addressed in a much stronger way if fragmented beneficiaries' markets are linked together, and if they are brought closer to the EU's energy market. Against growing global energy demand and competition, IPA III will support beneficiaries' energy security through regional cooperation, better cross-border interconnections, diversification of sources and routes and a balanced energy mix.

One of the Energy Union priority policy areas is reaching a fully-integrated internal energy market. This priority is at the core of the Energy Community Treaty to which all of the IPA III beneficiaries are members, except for Turkey, which is an observer. In this regard, the Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E) strategy, which is focused on linking the energy infrastructure of EU countries, is part of the legislative framework of the Energy Community and has to be adopted by all parties. Projects included either in the list of projects of the Energy Community interest ("PECIs") or in the list of projects of Mutual Interest (PMI) will be given a priority status.

Similarly, in the transport sector policy reforms and regulatory framework and integration with the EU market have to be strengthened through the Transport Community Treaty, which covers the six Western Balkans. IPA III support allocated to transport infrastructure should be granted on the condition that already agreed connectivity reform measures are being effectively implemented and that special attention is paid to the recently endorsed Transport Community "action plans". Only through the transposition and implementation of the EU transport *acquis* will the transport system in the region be in a position to fully benefit from "Green Agenda". Investments and interconnection projects in the region have to be aligned with extended Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) in the Western Balkans and in Turkey.

The main concerned chapters of the EU *acquis* under this section are: chapter 7 (Intellectual property rights), chapter 10 (Information society and media) chapter 14 (Transport policy), chapter 15 (Energy), chapter 21 (Trans-European networks)

3. Indicators

Thematic Priority 1: Environment and climate change

- Greenhouse gas emissions (source: European Environmental Agency) – KPI 9 of IPA III Proposal
Baseline (2018): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)
Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)
Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 2: Transport, digital economy and society, energy

- Logistics Performance Indicator (source: World Bank):
Baseline (2018): Western Balkans¹⁵ (2,75) and Turkey (3,15)
Milestone (2023): 5% increase, Western Balkans (2,90) and Turkey (3,30)
Target (2027): 10% increase, Western Balkans (3,05) and Turkey (3,50)

¹⁵ No data available in the report on Kosovo, therefore Kosovo is excluded from this average.

- “Digital gap between the beneficiaries and the EU average (source: European Commission DESI index)” – KPI 6 of IPA III Proposal¹⁶

Baseline (2018): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

- Energy intensity measured in terms of primary energy and GDP (source: Eurostat) – KPI 8 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[If the data are not available for Western Balkans and Turkey, an alternative could be the indicator “Primary energy consumption” (source: Eurostat).]

- Share of Renewable Energy in the final energy consumption (source: Eurostat) – SDG indicator 7.2.1

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

4. Assumptions & Risks

Assumptions

- There is a continuous commitment, steered and coordinated at the highest level of the government, to address the key priorities under this Window.
- IPA III beneficiaries are committed to upgrading their strategies and sectoral approaches in line with relevant assessments, including peer reviews.
- The necessary domestic financial and administrative resources are effectively and efficiently mobilised

Risks

From an institutional viewpoint there are risks related to variable capacities and high staff turnover in the public administration and more specifically in the operating structures and agencies set up to manage IPA III funds under the indirect implementation method, including all beneficiary institutions.

In the environment and climate change area, there is a risk that the political commitments taken to reduce carbon emission and improve the environment remain declarative and are not followed by decisive course of actions. Given the high number of social and economic sectors that play an important role in environment and more broadly in addressing climate action, effective policy coordination and implementation must be backed-up by a strong institutional cooperation and with a full involvement of stakeholders.

Infrastructure investments will yield the expected social and economic benefits if they are properly prepared in terms of both sound technical, environmental and financial studies and impact assessments and if they are free from possible disputes arising from land expropriation, and building permits. In addition, there is the risk that not enough national

¹⁶ No data available for Albania, therefore Albania is excluded from the average.

resources will be allocated for operation and maintenance costs of the IPA-funded investments (such as infrastructure, IT systems, equipment, etc.), jeopardising their proper utilisation and sustainability. Finally, there are also risks of delaying implementation and completion of environmental infrastructure notably due to late introduction of charges for the use of these infrastructures. In addition, transboundary projects and initiatives might not progress as expected due to lack of political commitment and dialogue

WINDOW 4 – COMPETITIVENESS AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

1. Context Analysis

Fulfilment of the economic criteria is a key requirement for EU membership, as set out in the Copenhagen criteria. It implies a functioning market economy is in place that has the capacity to withstand competitive pressure inside the EU single market. Despite some acceleration of growth, advances in job creation and increases in income in recent years, the Western Balkans and Turkey are still lagging behind in reforming their economic structures and improving competitiveness. They face high unemployment rates and low labour market participation, in particular among women and youth, as well as low levels of human development, increasing inequalities and demographic challenges, including low birth rates and brain drain. Beneficiaries also suffer from large skills mismatches, persistent informal economy, unfriendly business environments, and low levels of innovation.

The fundamentals first approach to EU enlargement encourages aspiring members to tackle economic fundamentals first: macroeconomic stability, high quality of economic governance, a welcoming business environment, including support to private sector development, as well as proper functioning of labour, financial and goods and services markets. In addition, beneficiaries should aim at ensuring sufficient amount of human capital, inclusive and good quality of education, research, innovation, infrastructure, changes in the sector and enterprise structure in the economy as well economic integration with the EU.

As outlined in the European Commission priorities, green transition, digital transformation and an economy that works for people are crucial for relaunching and modernising the economies of the IPA III beneficiaries, helping to create jobs and growth, addressing the long-standing challenges faced by young people in the region such as limited job prospects, skills upgrades and inequality. Research, innovation, education and culture are essential drivers in this process - underpinned by evidence-based policymaking.

In the context of the Economic and Investment Plan, the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport [*reference to be added after publication*] outlines a comprehensive, long-term strategy for cooperation with the Western Balkans in these areas. This includes supporting also R&I projects resulting from Smart Specialisation priority domains. It will contribute to the economic development and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans alongside the overall EU support for a rapid restart of the region's economy.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was a global shock that did not spare the enlargement region. It represented an unprecedented burden on the health and social protection systems of the IPA III beneficiaries. The final extent of its footprint in terms of loss of human lives and damage to the economies is still difficult to assess. Thousands of citizens are at risk of losing their jobs, and temporary government support measures

(unemployment benefits, deferrals/waivers to tax and social security contributions, etc.) have an important fiscal impact.

Given the potential for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, further support to tackle some of the private sector's key challenges remains crucial: expedite structural adjustment; foster an environment conducive to business creation and to domestic and inward foreign investment; promote small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs); promote entrepreneurship; encourage innovation. In particular, for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), challenges include lack of access to finance and of financial inclusion (for women and youth especially), to sustainable and reliable energy and to digital technologies. Access to financial services and finance for MSMEs and for small-scale farming needs to be supported, including through access to opportunities offered by digital technologies through digital financial services, which have extended to credit, savings, insurance and cross-border remittances.

The Small Business Act (SBA), the overarching framework for the EU policy on SMEs, will be the guiding reference. It aims to improve the approach to entrepreneurship in Europe and in the enlargement region, simplify the regulatory and policy environment for SMEs, and remove the remaining barriers to their development. Prosperity and stability also require investment in quality education systems that truly mitigate social inequalities rather than entrenching them. Education generates tangible multifaceted benefits for society through learning and acquiring skills, playing an essential role in personal, social and economic development. Human development policies need to be enhanced through the modernisation of education and employment policies, as well as skills enhancement. Access and quality of education need to be improved. This can be supported by the use of digital strategies supporting all citizens in making the best out of the opportunities created by new technologies and the digitisation of economies. Such developments may be underpinned through novel approaches to innovation in skills development as part of systemic reforms in the IPA III beneficiaries.

A well-functioning and resilient economy is crucial for the prosperity of citizens. It needs to be based on a vibrant and innovative private sector that is able to compete also at an international level, which in turn requires a well-trained, skilful and productive workforce. The knowledge-triangle, especially in the Smart Specialisation priority domains, academia-business cooperation, technology transfer, and support to regional innovation funds are key elements to boost the post-COVID economy recovery. In line with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, IPA III will support the development of human capital by increasing assistance in areas such as education and training, skills for innovation, health, employment, social protection and culture. It will also promote a better integration of the EU and Western Balkans industrial value chains, embedded in the industrial ecosystems' rationale.

As highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, strong health systems are of crucial importance for the security of society as a whole. IPA III may contribute to reinforcing the robustness of health systems in the IPA III beneficiaries. Where relevant, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) can enable a balanced recovery and an even playing field reducing regional disparities and increasing cohesion and convergence.

Labour market imbalances need to be addressed and employability improved, especially among women and young people, to ensure decent work at the appropriate skill levels. Through social dialogue and the engagement of social partners and civil society organisations, reforms can benefit all citizens in an inclusive manner. Support for the

development of better health systems and social protection policies contribute to the social cohesion and progress towards a more inclusive society for vulnerable groups, including Roma communities, persons with disabilities and LGBTI.

Sustainable economic development and increasing job opportunities are essential also to foster social inclusion and to stem the demographic challenges of the Western Balkans, with high emigration and low birth rates. Without stronger economies, these phenomena will continue, with the associated risks of widespread disenchantment, especially among the youth, brain drain and declining social cohesion.

The beneficiaries also need to achieve a balanced territorial development by raising social, environmental and economic standards in rural and coastal areas, strengthening the competitiveness and viability of the agri-food, fishery and raw materials sectors and ensuring sustainable management of natural resources in line with the EU Common Agricultural, Common Fisheries Policies and the EU industrial strategy.

2. Key priorities for IPA III support

The overall objective of the EU's assistance under Window 4 is to strengthen economic and social development, including through education, innovation, social inclusion and employment policies, with a specific focus on private sector development as well as agriculture, rural and industrial development. Gender equality, reduction of inequalities and enhancing of social cohesion need to be taken into account.

IPA III will also contribute to build resilience and support the socio-economic recovery of the region, including by ensuring the macro-economic stability of the IPA III beneficiaries. In complementarity with the priorities of the Green Agenda supported under Window 3, Window 4 aims to address the key sector priorities for structural reforms, capital investments and improvement of sectoral administrative and institutional capacities in a holistic way. This will allow bringing about inclusive, sustainable growth and employment, in line with the existing policy framework and requirements and standards contained in by the EU *acquis*. It joins up economic growth, encompassing both urban and rural development. The proposed actions will also be designed in a way to assess, address and mainstream gender and promote gender equality.

In parallel, the Window addresses the human and social aspects of this process, through support to education, employment and in a range of areas of social development such as health access, legal aid and social care services, addressing also the most vulnerable groups.

Similarly, to Window 3 IPA-supported investments should be compliant with the general investment plans of the beneficiary, which should include major investment needs with detailed information on their stage of preparation and in implementation on the short, medium and long-term perspective. Such investment plans should also include possible financing sources from the budget, borrowing plans, donor contributions, private sector participations and financial constraints.

Support under this window to agriculture, rural and industrial development will also help the beneficiaries to address the range of challenges and opportunities in this sector and strengthen the sustainable production and management of natural resources, the overall competitiveness of the sector and the balanced territorial development of rural areas.

The Commission may request, at the time of project selection, to use an EU Integration Facility to address administrative and statistical capacity development needs to accompany

the selected actions in different sectors, which would allow for stand-alone actions in areas where further trade and economic integration is targeted.

Thematic Priority 1: Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to strengthen access to and quality of education, including vocational education and training, participation in Early Childhood Education and Care and lifelong learning opportunities at all levels. IPA III will also contribute to fostering quality employment and access to the labour market, reducing the proportion of people engaged in informal employment as well as promoting equality and non-discrimination, social protection and inclusion and combating poverty.

IPA III aims to support candidate countries and potential candidates to achieve high employment levels, fair social protection and a skilled and resilient workforce ready for the future world of work, in line with the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights¹⁷ proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 17 November 2017. It will support, complement and add value to the policies of the IPA III beneficiaries to ensure equal opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion, and a high level of human health protection.

IPA III will support the quality, effectiveness and labour market relevance of education, including vocational education, and training systems in order to provide people with skills adjusted to digitalisation, technological change, innovation and economic change. It should in particular include support to low-skilled and/or poorly qualified people. This implies mobilising a range of public policies improving the governance and the financing of the education systems and the inclusion of the most disadvantaged, including children and marginalised communities. IPA III will also continue to support reforms to improve the governance and financing systems of the social policies and the education systems with a view of fostering inter-sectoral cooperation.

IPA III will focus on improving the access to and the completion of quality **education** with a greater focus on the training of teachers and school managers, governance and strategic policymaking. Women and girls are under-represented in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. IPA III will aim to address the different phases of education, from early childhood development, through to primary, secondary and tertiary education, including vocational training, and beyond to adult education and life-long learning, and in so doing, support access to the labour market. The region should work towards its inclusion in the European Education Area. There is a strong need for deeper cooperation in education across borders, disciplines and cultures to continue on the path of digital transformation in order to recover from the crisis and to build resilience. Diagnoses of the education systems will aim at improving the quality and the effectiveness of IPA III spending on education in IPA III beneficiaries. These diagnoses will also serve as a basis for the beneficiaries to develop multi-year sector plans aimed at improving the outcomes of spending on education by taking informed decisions on the allocation of resources. It will also strengthen the governance of the education systems.

In the **social sectors**, reforms and modernisation of the legal and regulatory frameworks should continue in order to modernise **employment** policies and employment-related social insurance systems, which provide incentives for formal employment relations. This should also take into account the changing nature of work and skills in the digital age. Such policies

¹⁷ 2017/C 428/09

should also address the challenges brought by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions focused on developing flexible economies and work force will be supported. Attention will be placed upon building strong links to the education sector and in developing a broad range of active labour market measures, for increasing labour market participation and employment in particular for youth, women and people further away from the labour market. More focus will be given to the development of on-the-job training, re-skilling and up-skilling active labour market measures as well as adult remedial education. Attention will also be given to reducing the wage gap and gender discrimination, which is more pronounced in the private sector. The equal access to finance for microenterprises, social economy and social enterprises should be facilitated for business creation especially among people furthest from the labour market. Social dialogue, consultation of social partners and civil society organisations should be enhanced and their capacities strengthened in order to guarantee inclusive reforms for employment and social policies anticipating and accompanying the impact of digitalisation on the labour market.

IPA III will support the development of **social protection and inclusion** policies and sustainable financing mechanisms of these, including health insurance and unemployment benefits. An assessment of the public policies and a public expenditure review in these areas would enhance their effectiveness. Targeted policies to enhance social cohesion will be needed also in the context of COVID-19 recovery. The governance of public expenditure should also be improved in order to increase the impact of social policies. In that context, financial assistance will work to solidify community-based services with a particular emphasis on child-protection systems and other social services. Therefore, IPA III assistance will endeavour to further the development of social entrepreneurship in line with EU standards helping to create both societal and economic benefits.

IPA III will focus on enhanced employment opportunities for **women, youth and persons with disabilities**, in addition to addressing social and employment issues for minorities, including Roma communities. Financial assistance will aim to make tangible improvements in housing, education, legal aid, health and social protection for these vulnerable and minority groups, including addressing the needs of communities living in remote or less economically developed regions and peripheral rural areas.

In terms of public health, IPA III should also, where appropriate, contribute to **health systems** reforms with regard to raising the coverage and standards of care provided to the population as a whole. In addition, in light of lessons learnt from tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, IPA III will support beneficiaries in strengthening their public health systems preparedness and resilience to cross-border health threats.

The main concerned chapters of the EU *acquis* under this section are chapter 19 (Social policy and employment), chapter 26 (Education and culture) and chapter 28 (Consumer and health protection).

Thematic Priority 2: Private sector development, trade, research and innovation

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to improve the business environment, innovation ecosystem and investment climate of the beneficiaries, promoting integration with EU industrial value chains, in view of supporting the socio-economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing the competitiveness of these economies. It will build on smart specialisation to strengthen research, technological development and innovation.

As recalled in the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, supporting **private sector development** and **trade** is essential for socio-economic development and regional integration, and to improve the region's competitiveness and job creation. This

entails supporting beneficiaries in fostering private sector investment, boosting trade and increasing the innovativeness and productivity of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which constitute the vast majority of companies in the region. Digitalisation can provide great opportunities for MSMEs to improve the efficiency of production processes and ability to innovate products and business models. IPA III should address MSME's lack of access to markets, to finance, and to human capital with appropriate skills. Enhancing integration in global value chains provides the opportunities for the economies to increase their competitiveness and strengthen export, but need public support services, which could be strengthened and developed with IPA III support where needed.

IPA III will address the current structural challenges to the overall business environment, notably with regards to the significant state presence in the economy, high levels of state aid, low levels and structural distortions of competition and the issues related to legal uncertainty and the lack of regional market integration. Support will be provided to the on-going structural reform processes, *inter alia* in the areas of strengthening the protection of intellectual property rights (chapter 7 of the EU *acquis*), of competition and state aid control (chapter 8 of the EU *acquis*), information society (chapter 10 of the EU *acquis*), science and research (chapter 25 of the EU *acquis*), education and culture (chapter 26 of the EU *acquis*), consumer protection (chapter 28 of the EU *acquis*), company law (chapter 6 of the EU *acquis*) and free movement of goods, capital and services (chapters 1, 3 and 4 of the EU *acquis*), as well as for reducing regulatory barriers for businesses and for strengthening green growth (chapters 20 and 27 of the EU *acquis*). IPA III programmes under Window 4 should in priority help addressing the specific challenges elaborated in the Commissions assessments of the relevant Economic Reform Programmes as well as the jointly agreed policy recommendations with all IPA beneficiaries in the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey. These reform priorities should inform and guide programming under Window 4.

In parallel, a strengthened quality infrastructure will be supported and developed, particularly as this concerns metrology, standardisation, accreditation, conformity assessment and market surveillance of products.

At regional level, the Western Balkans in particular will benefit from the implementation of the Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, and from Regional Economic Area Multiannual Action Plan of the Regional Cooperation Council, as initiated in the 'Berlin Process'. This ambitious agenda requires support efforts in order to yield concrete benefits, through removed barriers, economic integration, and tangible business opportunities. Accordingly, IPA III will support its implementation.

Recognising the increasingly **important role of financial markets** in funding the economy, IPA III will support beneficiaries in diversifying their financial markets and financial literacy and inclusion of MSMEs with the objective to enlarge the financing options to entrepreneurs and encourage investment, innovation and growth. Support will be provided for sustainable finance, promoting environment-friendly investments while preserving the stability of the financial system.

In the area of **research and innovation**, IPA III will provide support to the quadruple helix model of innovation with interactions between academia, industry and governments and civil society. The aim is to foster economic and social development including the development of new technologies, research, training and education, improved access to research infrastructure. It will also contribute to fostering international collaborations and networking with other research institutes, enhanced transfer of technology to the commercial sector and access and sharing of Intellectual Property protected assets as well as market uptake of

Research and Innovation results. Continuous dialogue between academia, industry, governments and civil society is one of the main pillars of the smart specialisation approach. As smart specialisation has been recognised as a key approach for strengthening research, technological development and innovation, IPA III will support the implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategies. Within this context, it is of particular relevance the role and collaboration with the European Institute of Innovation and Technology for reinforcing cooperation with its knowledge and innovation communities, including those dealing with energy, raw materials, food management and urban mobility.

Investments directed towards innovations in broad sense will be supported, as well as actions that create sustainable and human capital development and a digital future. The ongoing process of reforming education, training and research systems in the region will be reinforced and accelerated, by providing more opportunities for capacity building and business orientation, and increasing the innovation potential. Efforts supported by IPA III will stimulate the region's ability to effectively use resources in support of innovation, especially through the establishment of mechanisms to create, support and promote start-ups oriented towards a circular and sustainable economy.

Thematic Priority 3: Agriculture and rural development

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is gradually building an agricultural sector capable of competing with market forces, while progressively aligning with the EU legal framework in the field of agriculture and rural development and the relevant veterinary, food safety and phytosanitary standards (SPS standards). Major efforts are still necessary for food safety, animal welfare and the transition towards sustainable food systems, being increasingly important in view of the necessary alignment with the EU food safety *acquis* and the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, which is at the heart of the EU Green Deal aiming to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly. IPA III will also contribute to ensuring food security in the region, improve the life of rural residents through the economic and social development of rural areas and to build resilience to adverse effects of climate change.

IPA III will help tackling the existing structural challenges in the sector, such as low productivity and lack of diversification, labour-intensive subsistence farming, land fragmentation, difficulties in accessing financial credit to increase investments, as well as lack of proper advisory services and modern technology, poor quality rural infrastructure.

In particular, actions funded under this Window should aim to improve market orientation and competitiveness of the agri-food sector, improve the sector's response to social demands for safe, healthy, nutritious food and animal welfare and enhance farmers' position in the food chain. The actions will also be channelling investments in farm buildings and technologies, processing and marketing with the view of meeting EU food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards, diversification of activities and development of rural business with a view to foster engagement of women from rural areas.

IPA III will also facilitate business development and employment in rural areas and encourage young farmers. Moreover, IPA III will contribute to adapting agricultural production to climate change effects and sustainable and renewable energy production, building resilience of the sector to address adverse climate change effects, as well as sustainable integrated management of soil, water and air. Finally, the IPA III programmes will enhance social capital in rural areas and together with the 'support for institution building' help ensure the application of good governance standards of a modern public administration in the structures for agriculture and rural development.

Further assistance will be needed to strengthen administrations at all level in order to meet the EU accession requirements. This entails continuing the support for the alignment with and the implementation of the EU legal framework in the field of agriculture and rural development and the relevant veterinary, food safety and phytosanitary standards (SPS standards), including overall well-functioning control systems and accredited laboratories. Structures and systems should be established or further developed for the management, implementation and control of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), in particular the various elements of the Integrated and Administrative Control System (land parcel identification system, farm and animal register) and capacities developed to implementing the common market organisation for agricultural products.

For agriculture and rural development, considerable amount of actions will be implemented through indirect management, on the basis of the national multiannual Rural Development Programme (IPARD) through a set of measures further specified in the Sectoral Agreement. These programmes shall be based on relevant priorities set out in the sector strategies. The programmes shall be prepared by the Managing Authority and implemented through management and control systems, which are compliant with good governance standards of a modern public administration.

Natural resources should be managed to reinforce the sustainability of their conservation. Particular vulnerabilities of ecosystems and rural environments triggered by climate change consequences should be anticipated and addressed in line with the goals of the European Green Deal.

Agriculture and forestry play a crucial role in the global greenhouse gas budget, as source and sink and holds an important carbon stock in biomass and soils. IPA III will contribute to unleashing the sectors' potential to contribute to greenhouse gas emission reduction and carbon sequestration in a sustainable manner.

The main concerned chapters of the EU *acquis* under this section are: chapter 11 (Agriculture and rural development), chapter 12 (Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy).

Thematic Priority 4: Fisheries

The specific objective of IPA III in this area is to increase the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces, and to progressively align with the Union rules and standards and to promote aquaculture.

The management of natural resources in the fisheries sector should aim at reinforcing their sustainability. Fisheries is also an important industry and has a very long-standing activity in the region. Rational exploitation of renewable resources and the issues of market regulations, structural policies, oversight, control, enforcement, information sharing and cooperation in the area of fisheries, both within Europe and internationally, will be addressed to ensure alignment with the EU *acquis* and the Common Fisheries Policy.

The main concerned chapter of the EU *acquis* under this section is chapter 13 (Fisheries).

3. Indicators

- Readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates on economic criteria (source: European Commission) - KPI 4 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

[Data to be collected from annual reports]

- World Competitiveness Index (as measured by the World Economic Forum)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 1: Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health

- Percentage of under-performers in PISA (Source of verification OECD)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (*Improve by 10%*) and Turkey (*Improve by 10%*)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (*Improve by 20%*) and Turkey (*Improve by 20%*)

- Employment rate of persons aged 20 to 64 (source: Eurostat) – KPI 5 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

- Public social security expenditure (percentage of GDP) (source ILO)¹⁸

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 2: Private sector development, trade, research and innovation

- Ease of doing business (source: World Bank) – KPI 7 of IPA III Proposal

Baseline (2018): Western Balkans (72,54) and Turkey (74,33).

Milestone (2023): Approximately 5% increase, Western Balkans (76) and Turkey (78)

Target (2027): Approximately 10% increase, Western Balkans (80) and Turkey (82)

Thematic Priority 3: Agriculture and rural development

- The agriculture orientation index for government expenditures (SDG indicator 2.a.1)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Thematic Priority 4: Fisheries

- Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP) (source Eurostat)

Baseline (2017): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (x) and Turkey (x)

¹⁸ Data available only for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

4. Assumptions & Risks

Assumptions

- There is a continuous commitment, steered and coordinated at the highest level of the government, to address the key priorities under this Window.
- IPA III beneficiaries are committed to upgrading their strategies and sectoral approaches in line with relevant assessments, including peer reviews.
- The necessary domestic financial and administrative resources are effectively and efficiently mobilised

Risks

Any deterioration of good neighbourly relations among IPA beneficiaries can affect the foreseen progress in the areas covered by this Window. Mitigation measures shall focus on addressing potential issues with intensified policy dialogue at the highest political level with all parties concerned and constant monitoring of progress in this concern.

At the same time, the influence of third countries in the region, which neglect socio-economic and financial sustainability and EU rules on public procurement, may result in high levels of indebtedness and transfer of control over strategic assets and resources. To mitigate such a risk it is necessary that the beneficiaries are encouraged to fully implement the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU and prioritise reforms in the relevant negotiation chapters of the accession process and the Economic Reform Programmes.

From an institutional viewpoint there are risks related to variable capacities and high staff turnover in the public administration and more specifically in the structures and agencies set up to manage IPA funds under the indirect implementation method, including other beneficiary institutions.

Lack of inter-institutional coordination and consistency between strategies and activities financed from IPA, own beneficiaries' resources and other external sources of funds can also undermine the effectiveness of EU financing.

Given the fragility of the regional economy, as well as the risks in the wider European and global context, the effectiveness of both educational reforms and employment policies could be damaged. Adequate safeguards and risk mitigation will have to be built into any systems and/or processes developed. There is also a risk that the political commitments made to protect and support vulnerable persons, disabled people, minorities and Roma communities are not followed by concrete actions by the authorities.

Limited access to credit and access to finance in general can play a negative effect on the development of agricultural activities and on the development of rural areas. It can also slow down private sector development and competitiveness and reduce investments in innovation and research. Weak advisory services and underdeveloped electronic document management and information systems may be other factors significantly impeding implementation of assistance in agricultural sector. Another risk is the rural depopulation and exodus of young people from rural areas.

Infrastructure investments will yield the expected social and economic benefits if they are properly prepared both in terms of sound technical, environmental and financial studies and if are free from possible disputes arising from land expropriation, and building permits. In addition, there is the risk that not enough resources will be allocated for operation and maintenance costs of the IPA-funded investments, such as infrastructure, IT systems, equipment, etc., jeopardising their proper utilisation and sustainability.

WINDOW 5 - TERRITORIAL AND CROSS BORDER COOPERATION

1. Structure

The EU actively promotes territorial cohesion to reduce disparities between regions and backwardness of the least favoured territories. European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) provides the necessary framework for implementation of joint actions and policy exchanges between national, regional and local actors across Europe, external borders and outermost regions.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) will continue to provide support for the participation of IPA III beneficiaries in the following territorial cooperation programmes, in accordance with the ETC Regulation¹⁹.

Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) between IPA beneficiaries (IPA-IPA CBC).

This relates to cooperation among IPA III beneficiaries that share a common border. The following sections of this chapter will be dedicated to outline the objectives and implementation modalities for IPA-IPA CBC programmes only (the other types of territorial cooperation will be covered in the ETC strategy documents).

These programmes will be prepared and submitted by two (or more) IPA III beneficiaries. They should cover the whole duration of the MFF (2021 – 2027). CBC programmes involving more than two beneficiaries are also encouraged.

In addition to the programmes supported with the previous instruments, in line with the objective of reconciliation and normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and once the conditions are in place, IPA assistance shall also support territorial cooperation between these two IPA Beneficiaries.

Cross-Border Cooperation between IPA III beneficiaries and Member States (Interreg-IPA CBC).

IPA III will financially support cooperation between adjacent land border regions of at least one Member State and one or more IPA III beneficiary. IPA III funds are pooled together with European Regional Development Funds (ERDF). These programmes are implemented in shared management under the rules for implementation defined in the ETC Regulation. The strategy document covering Interreg-IPA CBC Programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming.

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) transnational and interregional cooperation programmes.

IPA III will financially support the participation of IPA III beneficiaries in ERDF transnational, and interregional cooperation programmes. The participation of IPA III

¹⁹ [COM(2018)374]

beneficiaries in these programmes is decided by the participating Member States (i.e. Member States "invite" the IPA III beneficiary and/or the Partner Countries covered by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation (NDICI) regulation to participate). IPA III funds are pooled together with European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) and where relevant NDICI/NEXT Funds. These programmes are implemented in shared management under the rules for implementation defined in the ETC Regulation. The strategy documents covering these programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming.

Additionally IPA III beneficiaries will make strong references to the **EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)** embedding processes and their flagship projects in their strategic responses for the qualified projects. A '**Macroregional strategy**' is an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council, which may be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds among others, to address common challenges faced by Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Macro-Regional Strategies set a new model of governance based on effective cooperation and coordination of policies and actions over the national borders.

Macro-regional strategies are supported by the highest political levels of the EU, the Member States and the regions concerned and have become an integral part of EU regional policy. IPA III beneficiaries must be aware of their priorities and alignment to one of them will be one the criteria for assessing an action for its further selection for IPA III.

In this context, the proposal is calling for a stronger integrated and coordinated approach at European, national and regional levels. A strong coordination mechanism should be built in order to enhance the integrated use of all relevant EU funds. Overall, many more synergies programmes could be pursued on the levels of programming, implementation and projects in the IPA III beneficiaries.

2. Strategic Objectives of Cross-Border Cooperation between IPA III beneficiaries

There is a particular need to foster sustainable local development and increasing the prosperity of people and communities in remote coastal and rural border areas, which are often lagging behind economically. Over the years, border regions have turned into marginalised peripheries, where access to markets is limited, knowledge and technology transfer from the core difficult, and demographic indicators deteriorating. However, in many of those areas a considerable potential exists, which, if unleashed, would reverse the trend and lead to an increase in prosperity and trust building between communities. Sustainable development of targeted border areas would foster employment and contribute to furthering regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations.

Cross-border cooperation between IPA III beneficiaries also constitutes an important part of the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans. Due to the civil wars in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the strengthening of good neighbourly relations in border areas was a prerequisite for growth and prosperity for the regions as well as for the beneficiaries involved. CBC programmes concentrate on overcoming the legacy of past conflicts and building reconciliation by creating direct contacts between entities and administrations at all levels on both sides of the border.

The **strategic objectives** of the cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries are:

- Promotion of reconciliation and confidence building and good neighbourly relations;
- Economic, social and territorial development of border areas, fostering the cooperation among national local/regional authorities, associations, non-governmental organisations and enterprises from neighbouring regions;
- Building the capacities of local, regional and national institutions to manage EU programmes and to prepare them for the management of future Structural Funds under the territorial cooperation goal, which will be implemented upon accession.

3. Strategic Objectives of Cooperation between Member States, IPA III beneficiaries and/or the Partner Countries covered by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation (NDICI) regulation

The objective of such actions at multilateral level and in third countries is to contribute to the strategic objectives and priorities of the Commission and EU external relations by strengthening its role through urban policy dialogues and cooperation with EU global and strategic partners, IPA III beneficiaries and neighbouring countries while supporting EU regions and cities.

More specifically, these activities and cooperation programmes aim to:

- Reinforce relations with the enlargement (IPA) and neighbouring countries, and regional organisations by ensuring their active involvement in mainstream and territorial cooperation programmes, and macro-regional strategies and by enhancing people-to-people and grass root apolitical cooperation with IPA III beneficiaries and NDICI partner countries.
- Strengthen policy dialogues with EU global and strategic partners and enhance effective coordination of regional and urban related multilateral, regional and bilateral policies at the level of the concerned partners while contributing at the same time to developing a regional and urban policy agenda based on international objectives and experience, providing relevant cities and regions with networking opportunities worldwide.

4. Thematic Priorities and Thematic Clusters

The Interreg-IPA CBC, ERDF transnational and interregional cooperation programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming process. Therefore, this section addresses IPA-IPA CBC exclusively.

The **Thematic Priorities (TP)** for CBC programmes between IPA beneficiaries are identified in Annex III of the [IPA III Regulation] as follows:

(a) promoting employment, labour mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders through, inter alia: integrating cross-border labour markets, including crossborder mobility; joint local employment initiatives; information and advisory services and joint training; gender equality; equal opportunities; integration of immigrants' communities and vulnerable groups; investment in public employment services; and supporting investment in public health and social services (TP1);

(b) protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management through, inter alia: joint actions for environmental protection;

promoting sustainable use of natural resources, coordinated maritime spatial planning, resource efficiency and circular economy, renewable energy sources and the shift towards a safe and sustainable low-carbon, green economy; promoting investment to address specific risks, ensuring disaster resilience and disaster prevention, preparedness and response (TP2);

(c) promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructures by, inter alia, reducing isolation through improved access to transport, digital networks and services and investing in cross-border water, waste and energy systems and facilities (TP3);

(d) promoting the digital economy and society by inter alia the deployment of digital connectivity, the development of eGovernment services, digital trust and security as well as digital skills and entrepreneurship (TP4);

(e) encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage (TP5);

(f) investing in youth, education and skills through, inter alia, developing and implementing joint education, vocational training, training schemes and infrastructure supporting joint youth activities (TP6);

(g) promoting local and regional governance and enhancing the planning and administrative capacity of local and regional authorities (TP7);

(h) enhancing competitiveness, the business environment and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, trade and investment through, inter alia, promotion and support to entrepreneurship, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, and development of local cross-border markets and internationalisation (TP8);

(i) strengthening research, technological development, innovation and digital technologies through, inter alia, promoting the sharing of human resources and facilities for research and technology development (TP9).

These thematic priorities have been grouped in **Thematic Clusters** in line with priorities identified under the ETC regulation (see table 1) in order to ensure alignment with the corresponding Priority Objective of the ERDF.

The thematic cluster ‘improved capacity of regional and local authorities to tackle local challenges’ should be mainstreamed by the IPA beneficiaries in each cross-border cooperation programme. In addition to this, maximum two thematic clusters from those listed in the table below shall be selected. The selection of the thematic clusters/priority areas will be done jointly by the regions participating in a programme, following an analysis of the needs of the programme area and extensive consultation with local stakeholders.

The IPA III beneficiaries will design an intervention logic at programme level demonstrating how the chosen thematic clusters, thematic priorities and activities lead together to the achievement of the strategic objectives of territorial programmes. Finally, the programmes shall also include a specific budget allocation for technical assistance operations. The proposed actions will also be designed in a way to assess, address and mainstream gender and promote gender equality.

Table 1: Correspondence IPA Thematic Priorities and ERDF Priority Objectives

Thematic Cluster	Thematic Priorities IPA	Corresponding Priority Objective ERDF
<p>Improved employment opportunities and Social Rights</p>	<p>TP1: promoting employment, labour mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders through, inter alia: integrating cross-border labour markets, including cross-border mobility; joint local employment initiatives; information and advisory services and joint training; gender equality; equal opportunities; integration of immigrants' communities and vulnerable groups; investment in public employment services; and supporting investment in public health and social services;</p> <p>TP6: investing in youth, education and skills through, inter alia, developing and implementing joint education, vocational training, training schemes and infrastructure supporting joint youth activities</p>	<p>‘A more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' ('PO 4') by:</p> <p>i) enhancing the effectiveness of labour markets and access to quality employment through developing social innovation and infrastructure;</p> <p>ii) improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and life long learning through developing infrastructure;</p> <p>(iii) increasing the socioeconomic integration of marginalised communities, migrants and disadvantaged groups, through integrated measures including housing and social services;</p> <p>(iv) ensuring equal access to health care through developing infrastructure, including primary care;</p> <p><u>Specific ETC:</u></p> <p>(b) improving access to and the quality of education, training and lifelong learning across borders with a view to increasing the educational attainment and skills levels thereof as to be recognised across border</p>
<p>Greener and Improved resource efficiency</p>	<p>TP2 protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management through inter alia: joint actions for environmental protection; reduction of plastic pollution, promoting sustainable use of natural resources, coordinated maritime spatial planning, resource efficiency and circular economy, renewable energy sources and the shift towards a safe and sustainable low-carbon, green economy; improving waste and water management, promoting investment to address specific risks, ensuring disaster resilience and disaster prevention, preparedness and response.</p>	<p>‘A greener, low-carbon Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate adaptation and risk prevention and management ('PO 2') by</p> <p>i) promoting energy efficiency measures;</p> <p>(ii) promoting renewable energy;</p> <p>(iii) developing smart energy systems, grids and storage at local level;</p> <p>(iv) promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and disaster resilience;</p> <p>(v) promoting sustainable water management;</p> <p>(vi) promoting the transition to a circular economy;</p> <p>(vii) enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution;</p>
<p>Improved public infrastructures / connectivity</p>	<p>TP3 promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructures by, inter alia, reducing isolation through improved</p>	<p>‘A more connected Europe by enhancing mobility and regional ICT connectivity' ('PO 3')</p> <p>i) enhancing digital connectivity;</p>

<p>(transport, digital, energy, waste and water)</p>	<p>access to transport, digital networks and services and investing in cross-border water, waste and energy systems and facilities.</p> <p>TP4 promoting the digital economy and society by inter alia the deployment of digital connectivity, the development of eGovernment services, digital trust and security as well as digital skills and entrepreneurship.</p>	<p>(ii) developing a sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, secure and intermodal TEN-T;</p> <p>iii) developing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent and intermodal mobility at all levels, including improved access to TENT and cross-border mobility;</p> <p>(iv) promoting sustainable multimodal urban mobility;</p>
<p>Improved business environment and competitiveness</p>	<p>TP5 encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage;</p> <p>TP8 enhancing competitiveness, the business environment and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, trade and investment through, inter alia, promotion and support to entrepreneurship, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, and development of local cross-border markets and internationalisation;</p> <p>TP9: strengthening research, technological development, innovation and digital technologies through, inter alia, promoting the sharing of human resources, capacity building in research and innovation systems, mobility and grant schemes adapted to promote the principle of scientific excellence and facilities for research and technology development.</p>	<p>‘A Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives’ ('PO 5') by:</p> <p>(i) fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental development, cultural heritage and security in urban areas;</p> <p>(ii) fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental local development, cultural heritage and security, including for rural and coastal areas also through community-led local development.</p> <p>‘A smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation’ ('PO 1') by</p> <p>(i) enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies</p> <p>(ii) reaping the benefits of digitisation for citizens, companies and governments;</p> <p>(iii) enhancing growth and competitiveness of SMEs; (iv) developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship</p>
<p>Improved capacity of local and regional authorities to tackle local challenges</p>	<p>TP7: promoting local and regional governance: by enhancing the planning and administrative capacity of local and regional authorities; developing E-Government services, digital trust and security; capacity building on the management of structural funds (e.g. exchange visits with EU Member States’ local administrations).</p>	<p>Under components 1, 2, and 3, the ERDF and, where applicable, the external financing instruments of the Union may also support the Interreg-specific objective ‘A better Interreg governance’, in particular by the following actions:</p> <p>(a) under component 1 and 2B Interreg programmes:</p> <p>(i) enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders;</p> <p>(ii) enhance efficient public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and</p>

		cooperation between citizens and institutions, in particular, with a view to resolving legal and other obstacles in border regions;
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5. Indicators

The Interreg-IPA CBC, ERDF transnational and interregional cooperation programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming process. Therefore, this section addresses IPA-IPA CBC exclusively.

Reconciliation, Confidence Building and Good Neighbourly Relations

- Number of organisations participating in cross-border networks/partnerships formed (source: Regional Monitoring System)

Baseline (2019): Western Balkans (754)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (1000)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (1500)

- Number of organisations directly involved in the implementation of the projects (source: Regional Monitoring System)

Baseline (2019): Western Balkans (1,415)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (2,000)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (3,000)

Economic, Social and Territorial Development of Border Areas

- Number of new jobs resulting from programme activities (source: Regional Monitoring System)

Baseline (2019): Western Balkans (218)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (300)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (500)

- Number of new businesses established (source: Regional Monitoring System)

Baseline (2019): Western Balkans (67)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (100)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (200)

Capacity Building of Institutions at all Levels

- Number of organisations/institutions with increased capacities (source: Regional monitoring system)

Baseline (2019): Western Balkans (15)

Milestone (2023): Western Balkans (25)

Target (2027): Western Balkans (40)

Each IPA CBC programme will also define indicators for each specific objective under the selected thematic priorities.

6. Preferred types of financing and implementation methods

The Interreg-IPA CBC, ERDF transnational and interregional cooperation programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming process. Therefore, this section addresses IPA-IPA CBC exclusively.

Types of financing

Support to cross border cooperation will be provided through specific seven years CBC programmes prepared jointly by at least two IPA beneficiaries participating in the programme. The CBC programmes define the cooperation strategy for the specific border region for the seven years and include, among others, the eligible territory and the thematic priorities selected by the IPA beneficiaries following an analysis of the needs of the programme area and extensive consultation with local stakeholders including local authorities and the Commission. They need to highlight the link between the objectives of the programmes and the national regional development strategies in place in each of the participating beneficiaries and with the macro regional strategies. These CBC programmes are implemented through calls for proposal, strategic projects and technical assistance:

Calls for proposals: The preferred tools for selecting operations for funding under CBC programmes are call for proposals. In view of achieving increased thematic focus for greater impact at local level and in order to be able to demonstrate results, the calls for proposals should target specific themes, size of projects and/or recipients. Information campaigns prior to the launching of calls will be key to ensure local visibility and genuine bottom-up approach. Calls for proposals should foster the participation of local authorities and provide for genuine bottom-up involvement and partnerships between the public, private and community sectors to create an environment conducive to sustainable socio-economic development and/or reconciliation.

In all cases, the projects shall deliver clear cross-border impacts and benefits, i.e. 'simple' projects (implemented on one side of the border and impacting the other side) should be avoided unless they are the only way to reach the intended objective and their added value is clear. CBC projects shall involve at least one beneficiary from each of the participating IPA beneficiaries.

Strategic projects. The possibility of having larger actions ('strategic projects'), when they have a clear cross-border effect can be contemplated as one more option within CBC programmes. These could be soft projects (for example, joint river information systems, Danube related projects coordinating ferries/shipping, etc.) or infrastructure projects.

Strategic projects for the purpose of CBC programmes between IPA beneficiaries are defined as actions with a clear cross-border impact and are more suitable for support under this window. CBC Programmes proposed by IPA beneficiaries may allocate a maximum of [30-35%] of the overall CBC programme budget for strategic projects. These will need to be presented (summary and budget) already in the programme document. Their implementation will be subject to prior assessment of their relevance and maturity by the Commission.

Technical Assistance to the specific programmes. A maximum of 10 % of each CBC programme budget can be devoted to activities aiming to reinforce the administrative capacity for implementing cross-border cooperation. The allocation shall be devoted to cover certain costs such as staff cost for joint programme structures, mission costs of programme staff in the CBC area, training of grant beneficiaries, visibility events, awareness raising, etc. It will also cover the costs of monitoring, evaluation, information and control activities related to the implementation of the programme.

Technical Assistance for cross- border cooperation among IPA Beneficiaries. The objective of this horizontal support is to generate and share knowledge among stakeholders for the improvement of procedures and tools to achieve a high level of quality in programmes implementation. It also facilitates spreading good governance approaches along the lines of the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective and preparing the stakeholders for the EU Cohesion Policy. An additional objective of this support will be specifically to support local authorities to strengthen their capacities as key local development partner.

Implementation methods:

CBC programmes are implemented in direct or indirect management depending on the level of preparedness of the participating IPA beneficiaries.

7. Assumptions and Risks

The Interreg-IPA CBC, ERDF transnational and interregional cooperation programmes will be developed as part of the ETC programming process. Therefore, this section addresses IPA-IPA CBC exclusively.

Assumptions:

- Local authorities and NGOs are interested in taking part in calls for proposals
 - This interest will have to be fostered by targeted information campaigns and appropriate technical assistance support to prepare applications as well as implement projects.
- Support is provided by the administrations where needed
 - Selection of strategic projects is likely to be the joint responsibility of the National administrations. To ensure their involvement, the link with regional development policies of the IPA beneficiary and the specific CBC programme will need to be established in the programme document.

Risks:

- Deterioration of good neighbourly relations and subsequent insufficient commitment to the success of these programmes by participating IPA Beneficiaries
 - Any deterioration of good neighbourly relations can be countered through addressing this at high political level. Insufficient commitment can be mitigated through emphasising, in political dialogue, the importance of such programmes.
- Lack of capacity in the beneficiary institutions or final beneficiaries to manage the complex CBC programming and implementation procedures.
 - Insufficient capacities of beneficiary institutions or final beneficiaries to apply and implement projects can be mitigated through information sessions, seminars and other educational and technical assistance-related activities. The targeted technical assistance planned under each programme and the regional technical assistance will help address this risk.

IPA III INDICATIVE ALLOCATIONS

The table below shows the indicative allocation for the period 2021-2027 to support the thematic priorities of IPA III programming framework. Prices are expressed in million Euro.

IPA III Windows	%	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Total
Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy	15,13%	281	287	293	299	304	311	317	2.091
Window 2: Good governance, EU <i>acquis</i> alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication	16,59%	308	315	321	327	334	341	348	2.293
Window 3: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	42,45%	789	805	821	837	854	871	889	5.867
Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth	22,31%	415	423	432	440	449	458	467	3.083
Window 5: Territorial and cross-border cooperation ²⁰	3,51%	65	67	68	69	71	72	74	485
Total Operational Budget	100,0%	1.858	1.896	1.934	1.973	2.012	2.053	2.095	13.820
Administrative Appropriations	n/a	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	342
Total	100,00%	1.904	1.943	1.982	2.022	2.062	2.104	2.147	14.162

Current prices are calculated by applying annually a fixed deflator of 2% to the amounts in 2018 prices. Totals do not tally due to rounding. This table will be resubmitted for consultation and updated with the final indicative figures after agreement on the MFF and the IPA III legal base.

²⁰ Up to 3% of the IPA III financial envelope shall be indicatively allocated to cross-border cooperation programmes between the IPA III beneficiaries and the Member States. In addition, the allocation under Window 5 will also cover IPA-IPA Cross-Border Cooperation and other Interreg-IPA cooperation strands.