



CEPS POLICY BRIEF

**FROM MYTHS TO REALITY:
MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF
ENLARGEMENT ON THE EU'S COMMON
BUDGET, THE CAP AND COHESION POLICY**

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SUMMARY

The debate on the budgetary consequences of future EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, and the ‘Eastern Trio’ (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), often boils down to exaggerated fears over unsustainable costs and the large-scale redistribution of EU funds. However, evidence from previous enlargements and current estimates suggests a more nuanced picture.

Except for Ukraine, today’s candidate countries are small economies, and their accession would only have a limited fiscal impact on current EU member states. The combined allocations for these eight acceding countries under the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy, would amount to EUR 9.5 billion per year, which is roughly equivalent to what Poland would receive annually under cohesion funds (EUR 8.79 billion) or France under CAP (EUR 8.29 billion) within an enlarged EU.

Ukraine is a larger challenge given the size of its agricultural sector. According to estimates, cohesion policy payments for Ukraine wouldn’t exceed EUR 4.8 billion annually, which is less than what Italy (EUR 5.79 billion) or Spain (EUR 4.88 billion) would receive, and roughly half of what Poland (EUR 8.79 billion) would receive within an enlarged EU. But Ukraine could become a large beneficiary of the CAP. As in past enlargements, it will be necessary to combine transitional periods, capping mechanisms and safeguard clauses included in the Accession Treaty to manage these budgetary pressures and competitiveness concerns.

Delaying or freezing accession wouldn’t eliminate financial costs, as the EU would continue providing significant pre-accession assistance and macro-financial support (estimated around EUR 99.4 billion in both grants and loans during 2021-27) without securing the broader economic and geopolitical benefits associated with EU enlargement.

This CEPS Policy Brief provides four recommendations on how the EU can steer a more informed and evidence-based debate on how to adapt the EU budget and EU policies before the next enlargement.



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INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequent concerns about the possible EU accession of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and potential candidate Kosovo) and the ‘Eastern Trio’ (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) is a potential increase of the EU’s budget and the redirection of EU cohesion and agricultural funds towards new members, disadvantaging current beneficiaries. Critics argue that this would impose an excessive burden on current EU members, turning several net beneficiaries of the EU budget [into net payers](#).

Looking back at previous EU enlargements provides a more nuanced picture. Past enlargements haven’t always resulted in a larger EU budget. The 1986 Iberian enlargement was accompanied by a substantial strengthening of cohesion policy and thus a larger EU budget. By contrast, the 2004 ‘big bang’ enlargement, which added 10 countries with more than 74 million citizens whose GDP per capita was well below the EU-15 average at that time, [didn’t lead](#) to a comparable increase of the EU budget. Cohesion policy expenditure remained broadly stable at around 0.45% of EU GNI and, despite the accession of countries with sizeable agricultural sectors, the EU budget’s share of agricultural spending didn’t increase but actually declined over time.

The 2004 enlargement was an [economic success](#) – it boosted trade, investment and growth accelerated across the EU-25, with [older Member States](#) reaping the benefits of new market opportunities. Costs were absorbed within the EU budget’s existing ceilings and the new members’ limited absorption capacity eased budgetary pressure.

That’s not to say that enlargement doesn’t pose a budgetary challenge. As in previous enlargements, both the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy would need to be adjusted for accessions. However, experience also shows that current Member States retain significant agency in deciding how these adjustments are designed and implemented.

EU ENLARGEMENT AND THE EU COHESION POLICY – A COST OR AN INVESTMENT?

The concern that new Member States would receive large amounts of EU cohesion policy funding is ungrounded. This is because existing cohesion mechanisms impose an upper limit on the amount of cohesion funding a country can receive, in proportion to its GDP. This is to ensure that the country has sufficient administrative and operational capacity to plan for and implement the funds received. During the 2004 enlargement, this limit

was fixed at 4 % of the acceding country's GDP. Today, the limit is set at 2.3 % of GDP for the poorest EU Member States.

Applying this limit today, if the six Western Balkans joined the EU by 2030, together they would receive approximately [EUR 4.6 billion per year](#) in cohesion funds. **Georgia** would receive EUR 1 billion and **Moldova** EUR 0.6 billion. **Overall, this would represent 12 % of today's EU cohesion budget.**

Ukraine's accession is more challenging because of its size and population. Yet Ukraine's GDP is very low – just over half of Romania's total GDP. This limits the amount of EU cohesion policy funds it could access under the cap of 2.3 % of its GDP. [Applying this rule, if Ukraine joined by 2030 with the same GDP as it has today, it would receive EUR 4.83 billion in cohesion funds per year up to 2034](#), less than Italy (EUR 5.79 billion) or Spain (EUR 4.884 billion) and roughly half of Poland (EUR 8.79 billion).

While new, poorer countries may not receive large cohesion transfers in absolute terms, enlargement can still have major implications for existing Member States' allocations. Because candidate countries are much poorer, their accession would lower the EU's average GDP per capita. As cohesion allocations depend on the gap between a region or Member State's GDP per capita and the EU average, a sudden fall in the EU average could lead to some existing Member States and regions being reclassified into different cohesion policy categories, which would reduce their funding.

[Estimates suggest](#) that if the nine countries (the six Western Balkan countries, plus the Eastern Trio) joined the EU at once, the EU's average GDP per capita would decrease by roughly 10 %. Applying current EU cohesion policy allocation rules, this would mean that Spain, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Latvia could face large cohesion fund reductions, falling anywhere from 15 % to 22 %.

This phenomenon, known as the 'statistical effect', also [occurred during previous enlargements](#). The 2004 accession [reduced](#) the EU's average GDP per capita by 12.5 %. This resulted in 16 regions losing their status of 'convergence objective regions'. The negative consequences for these regions were mitigated by introducing temporary arrangements to cushion the impact on the reclassification.

Importantly, however, the statistical effect wouldn't materialise under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), at least based on the current Commission's proposal. This is because the distribution of funds managed under the new National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) – which will replace today's cohesion and CAP programmes – will be based on average GDP per capita data for the 202-23 period. This means the accession of any new Member States wouldn't affect the amount of EU funds allocated to existing Member States for the 2028-34 period.

Another lesson from the past is that cohesion policy transfers to newcomers generate economic returns for existing Member States. A [2011 study](#) shows that EUR 120 billion of cohesion policy funding directly invested in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia generated EUR 76.9 billion in direct export and capital gains for the pre-2004 EU-15.

Finally, economic gaps between existing and new Member States tend to narrow over time. Today's candidate countries are growing faster than the EU average and this convergence process would likely accelerate after accession, gradually reducing the redistributive impact of enlargement. The lesson from the 'big bang' enlargement is clear: the average income levels of central and eastern European Member states [have moved from around](#) 45 % of the EU average in the mid-1990s to almost 80 % by 2021.

EU ENLARGEMENT AND THE CAP

The CAP has historically been one of the most contentious aspects of EU enlargement negotiations, particularly when candidate countries were major agricultural producers. Farmers in existing Member States have often feared increased competition for both market share and EU subsidies from new members.

Agricultural funds are allocated according to the size a country's agricultural land. Most acceding countries are geographically small, even if they do have important agricultural sectors. The six Western Balkan countries account for only around 6-7 % of the EU's agricultural area. If they received similar CAP funds per hectare as current Member States, [according to recent estimates](#), this would be roughly EUR 2.2 billion per year of CAP funds, equivalent to 5 % of the current annual CAP budget. Georgia and Moldova, also being small countries, would receive EUR 0.6 billion and EUR 0.5 billion in CAP funds.

Ukraine would be more challenging. Given the size of Ukraine's agricultural sector, there are fears that it could absorb a large proportion of CAP funding, crowding out farmers in existing Member States. Ukraine would become the Member State with the largest agricultural land by far. Under current CAP rules, this would make Ukraine the CAP's largest beneficiary, receiving between EUR 10.3 and EUR 13.4 billion per year according to [different estimates](#). Yet these estimates assume that the EU would grant Ukraine immediate and full access to CAP funds on the same terms as current Member States. If CAP allocations to current members aren't reduced in parallel, this would result in an [increase of the CAP's overall budget](#) by 20-25 %. However, it's highly unlikely that current Member States would accept this.

In theory, a way of avoiding this increase following Ukraine's accession would be to reduce current Member States' CAP allocations. Alas, this option also appears politically

unrealistic. The Commission has already proposed a [10 % real-term reduction](#) in CAP support to farmers under the next EU long-term budget. While this is still being negotiated at the time of writing, if adopted, it would make it even harder to envisage additional cuts to existing Member States' CAP allocations to free up resources for new members.

As in past enlargements, the most likely scenario is that **Ukraine's impact on the CAP will be mitigated through different arrangements, such as long transitional phase-in periods, offering Ukraine access to CAP funds on less advantageous terms and/or changing CAP rules entirely.**

Before the 2004 enlargement, the Commission proposed excluding the new Member States from direct CAP payments. While this was partly driven by a desire to limit the budgetary impact on the CAP, the proposal was also justified on other grounds. In particular, the Commission [argued](#) that the large productivity gap between western and eastern European agriculture meant that granting immediate access to such payments would artificially inflate farm incomes in the new Member States, thus creating significant income disparities within these countries.

However, during the accession negotiations, candidate countries objected to this 'second-class treatment' and secured access to CAP funds. The compromise was granting them gradual access to CAP payments over a 10-year phase-in period. Payments began in 2004 at 25 % of their full value and gradually reached 100 % between 2008-13.

Something similar could be applied for Ukraine. **If Ukraine joined in 2030, it could initially receive only a limited share of its CAP allocation (say, 25 %), with this share progressively increasing over a period of 10 or more years.** This wouldn't reduce the long-term impact of enlargement but would make it more manageable.

It's also conceivable that, given how Ukraine's agriculture sector is structured, **the EU could offer Ukraine a specific CAP arrangement.** In 2004, newcomers were granted [lower per-hectare CAP funds](#) than existing Member States. Direct payments for the new members were calculated based on agricultural production between 1995-99, when agricultural output in many candidate countries had sharply declined following the post-Cold War transition to market economies. This resulted in a level of CAP aid well below the EU-15's then-average. Over time, east-west differences in CAP payments per hectare have been progressively reduced but they haven't been fully eliminated.

In Ukraine, large agri-enterprises, which are highly globally competitive and dominate certain commodity exports (grains, oilseeds and oils), wouldn't require EU direct payments for income support or competitiveness. As CAP direct payments are conditional on farmers complying with minimum EU legal standards on animal welfare and respect

for the environment as well as adopting certain agri-environmental practices, a different approach could be taken that excludes or limits CAP payments to Ukrainian's large agri-enterprises, while targeting CAP allocation to Ukrainian family farms and rural households.

A third possible option would be to reform CAP rules. Rather than distributing funds based on agricultural land area, [additional criteria could be introduced](#) to better reflect the CAP's environmental and social objectives – for example, the share of protected landscapes, the amount of carbon stored in soils or the prevalence of small farms. This would automatically reduce Ukraine's CAP funds.

While attractive in principle, this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. The Commission has just presented its [post-2027 MFF](#) proposal and despite important changes – notably integrating cohesion and CAP funding into single national plans – it doesn't fundamentally alter the logic underpinning the distribution of CAP resources across Member States. Allocation remains largely linked to the size of agricultural land.

Overall, there are different mechanisms already tested that could be used for monitoring and minimising the impact of Ukraine's accession on existing CAP beneficiaries. Ukraine's EU accession would also provide an opportunity for a much-needed CAP reform.

ENLARGEMENT EFFECTS ON THE EU BUDGET

[Estimates suggest](#) that for the period of 2021-27, EU support for the Western Balkan countries, including through the [Instrument of Pre-Accession \(IPA\) III](#) and the [Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans](#) (RGF), amounts to EUR 14.2 billion in grants and EUR 4 billion in loans for 2021-27.

For Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the total non-repayable support from the EU budget for 2021-27 amounts to roughly about EUR 18.2 billion (EUR 17 billion under the [Ukraine Facility](#), EUR 420 million for Moldova under the [Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova](#) and around EUR 700 million for Georgia under the [NDICI](#), if the EU lifts its current freeze on its financial support).

The EU budget also guarantees loans to Ukraine (EUR 33 billion under the Ukraine Facility and EUR 28.2 billion in [MFA+](#) loans) and to Moldova (EUR 1.5 billion under the new Facility and EUR 0.3 billion of MFA loans).

In other words, **from 2021-27 the EU is spending around EUR 99.4 billion in pre-accession support – EUR 32 billion in grants and EUR 67 billion in loan support.**

Table 1. Pre-accession support to the nine accession countries, 2021-27 (grants and loans), in EUR billion

EU pre-accession support from 2021-27	Amount (EUR billion)	Components
Grants	EUR 32.4 billion (EUR 4.6 billion on annual basis)	Western Balkans: EUR 14.2 billion Ukraine: EUR 17 billion; Moldova: EUR 0.42 billion; Georgia: EUR 0.7 billion
Loans guaranteed by the EU	EUR 67 billion	Western Balkans: EUR 4 billion; Ukraine: EUR 61.2 billion; Moldova: EUR 1.8 billion
Total EU support (grants + loans)	EUR 99.4 billion	

Source: Authors' own calculations, sourced from [Rubio, E. et al. \(2025\)](#).

According to estimates, if the Western Balkan countries accede, they would receive around EUR 6.8 billion annually in EU budget transfers (EUR 2.2 billion in cohesion policy and EUR 4.6 billion under the CAP). Adding to this the estimated allocations for Moldova (EUR 0.6 billion in cohesion policy, EUR 0.5 billion under CAP) and Georgia (EUR 1 billion in cohesion allocations, EUR 0.6 billion in CAP funds) **the combined allocations for these eight acceding countries would amount to EUR 9.5 billion per year. This number is roughly equivalent to what Poland would receive annually under cohesion funds (EUR 8.79 billion) or France under CAP (EUR 8.29 billion) within an enlarged EU.**

Moreover, accession would not only entitle these countries to receive EU funds; once in the EU, they would also contribute to the EU budget. After deducting these contributions, **the aggregate net transfer would amount to around EUR 6.9 billion per year. Spread across the 27 Member States, it would have only a limited impact on current Member States' net contributions.**

Ukraine's accession would be much more challenging, although not unmanageable. With the application of the 2.3% GDP upper limit, allocations under cohesion policy wouldn't exceed EUR 4.8 billion annually, which is less than what Italy (EUR 5.79 billion) or Spain (EUR 4.88 billion) would receive, and roughly half of what Poland (EUR 8.79 billion) would receive in 2028-34 within an enlarged EU.

However, without transitional arrangements or temporary safeguard clauses, it could receive between EUR 10.3 and EUR 13.4 billion of CAP funds every year, depending on whether current Member States agree to increase the CAP overall budget. This would result in EU transfers of between EUR 15.2 and EUR 18.2 billion per year to Ukraine,

corresponding to net annual transfers of around EUR 13.4-15 billion. This would make Ukraine the EU budget's largest net beneficiary, right after Poland.

Table 2. Estimated cohesion and CAP transfers to new Member States in an enlarged Union (annual amounts), in EUR billion

Candidate countries	Cohesion funds allocation	CAP allocation	Net transfer (after deducting the Member State contribution to the EU budget)
Six Western Balkan countries	4.6 billion	2.2 billion	4.8 billion
Moldova	0.6 billion	0.5 billion	0.9 billion
Georgia	1 billion	0.6 billion	1.2 billion
Ukraine	4.83 billion	10.3-13.4 billion (without transition periods)	13.4–15 billion
Total	EUR 11.03 billion	EUR 13.5-16.6 billion	EUR 20.3-21.9 billion without transitional arrangements for Ukraine

Source: Authors' own calculations, sourced from [Rubio, E. et al. \(2025\)](#).

But this scenario is highly unlikely. Existing estimations are based on simplified assumptions – no transitional arrangements, no changes in CAP and cohesion policy rules after 2027 and no recognition of economic benefits of EU enlargement that will offset the budgetary costs. In the absence of official EU estimates, these projections have filled the information vacuum and fuelled fears of exorbitant costs in several Member States. Citizens and politicians are [forming views](#) about enlargement based on scenarios that don't reflect how previous enlargements were managed or how the next one is likely to be designed.

UKRAINE'S AGRICULTURE: COMPETITIVE OR COMPLEMENTARY?

Ukraine's possible EU accession has caused concerns among European farmers, who [fear](#) increased competition within the EU Single Market due to cheaper agri-food products from Ukraine.

But trade between the EU and Ukraine has already been liberalised under the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) and its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA, Title IV of the AA), provisionally in force since 2016. Since 2016, 82.2 % of agricultural tariffs were nullified and 1.2 % were cut to zero after the seven-year transitional period expired.

Following the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, the EU applied unilateral full trade liberalisation with Ukraine through [Autonomous Trade Measures](#) (ATM) to support Ukraine's war economy and sustain its exports. In parallel, the [Solidarity Lanes](#) offered vital logistical solutions for Ukraine's agricultural exports. This resulted in Ukraine's agricultural exports returning to pre-war levels and even some growth in certain categories.

Before 2022, Ukraine was already a [substantial source](#) of the EU's agricultural imports: 88 % of sunflower oil, 51 % of maize, 40 % of rapeseed and 36 % of soybean oil. Under ATMs, exports have grown in these categories but only within the range of six to 17 percentage points. However, the issue quickly became politicised, particularly from countries bordering Ukraine, leading to emergency breaks and the phasing out of ATMs on several sensitive agricultural products. Poland, Hungary and Slovakia also imposed [unilateral import bans](#) on selected Ukrainian agricultural products. In June 2025, the EU discontinued ATMs completely.

This shows that **the problem didn't stem from the EU's unilateral trade liberalisation with Ukraine but rather from the way this exceptional framework was managed**. Tensions could have been mitigated through targeted safeguard measures on selected imports into neighbouring Member States. In practice, these countries could have acted as transit corridors rather than final destinations for Ukrainian agricultural goods, if trade flows had been more effectively monitored and redirected towards markets where demand was higher.

With the ATMs discontinued, EU-Ukraine trade liberalisation has advanced under the reviewed-DCFTA which expands tariff rate quotas (TRQs), with full liberalisation only applying to non-sensitive goods (such as selected dairy products). If Ukraine were to now become an EU Member State with full access to the Single Market, this would imply the elimination of TRQs, as well as the residual duties of around [16 % tariff lines](#) on certain agricultural goods.

In terms of non-tariff barriers, while Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) already apply to Ukrainian agri-food exports entering the EU market, full EU membership would require the country to [comply with EU rules](#) on food safety, pesticide use, water quality, nature protection and animal welfare. Implementing these standards would increase production costs for Ukrainian agricultural producers by [around 10-15 %](#). **If Ukraine accedes, it would have to comply with the wider EU standards and rules beyond SPS, thus being a more [optimal option](#) for EU farmers compared to leaving Ukraine outside the EU but still benefiting from mostly tariff-free access to the EU's single market.**

Grain exports can generate competitive pressures in specific EU markets, especially in bordering countries that serve as entry points, but these tensions are geographically and

sectorally very concentrated and could be easily managed. [Both the Iberian and 2004 accession treaties](#) incorporated temporary safeguard clauses on post-accession export volumes to prevent market disruptions in existing EU Member States.

In the case of the Iberian enlargement, Spain had to respect production quotas for olive oil for seven years. In return, it was able to delay the opening of its own market for non-olive oil oils and oilseeds from other EU countries. The ATMs have already shown which products could be potentially sensitive to which destinations within the EU, and these could all be written into the accession treaties through trade safeguards and transition periods.

Finally, there's a clear complementarity between Ukraine and the EU's agricultural supplies – the EU's agriculture sector is predominantly oriented towards higher value-added, processed and highly regulated products. Meanwhile, Ukraine is a major producer of lower value chain commodities, intermediate goods and agricultural inputs, including grains and oilseeds, which play a foundational role in food and feed systems.

Ukraine is well-positioned to supply protein crops (such as soy), feed inputs, organic products and protein isolates. **Ukraine's agri-imports are hugely important given the EU's structural dependence on imports of protein crops and feed, currently [sourced](#) largely from South America (mainly Brazil and Argentina) and the US.** Ukraine, as one of Europe's largest producers of maize and soy, could help reduce these dependencies and strengthen the EU's internal resilience and strategic autonomy.

Ukraine is also a major global producer and exporter of fertilisers. The 2022 energy shock, as well as other geopolitical flashpoints, such as the ongoing conflicts in Middle East, showed how fertiliser shortages can amplify food prices and fuel inflation. **Ukraine's accession and the integration of its fertiliser production into EU markets would reduce external dependence, reduce price volatility and improve the EU's economic resilience.**

Over the longer term, this could also allow the EU to link market access to environmental and safety standards, encouraging investments in lower-carbon fertiliser technologies. There's also much potential in Ukraine for carbon farming, industrial crops, and the bioeconomy as well as capabilities in agri-tech, biotech and food-tech, all of which create additional avenues for boosting the EU's competitiveness.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Design 'new generation' Accession Treaties as the primary instrument to manage enlargement costs.

As in previous enlargements, transitional arrangements should be used to smooth integration while limiting market disruption and fiscal pressures on the existing EU countries. For the agricultural sector, direct CAP payments to newcomers potentially eligible for large sums, such as Ukraine, should be phased in gradually over a seven to 10-year period.

Similarly, in agri-food trade, sensitive products and destinations should be addressed through temporary safeguard measures and transition periods for the same seven to 10-year period.

These periods should be firmly embedded in the Accession Treaties.

2. Adapt the CAP to the next EU enlargement.

EU Member States should adapt CAP instruments before the next enlargement. This is particularly needed for Ukraine's EU accession.

In Ukraine's case, transitional arrangements are necessary but not sufficient. Unlike the Iberian countries in the 1980s or the central and eastern European countries in the 2000s, **Ukraine is already a highly competitive and export-oriented agricultural power, dominated by large-scale commercial farms integrated into global commodity markets.** Its accession raises more fundamental questions about the principles underpinning the distribution of CAP funds across Member States – in particular the fact that direct payments remain largely linked to the size of agricultural land and totally unrelated to productivity or sustainability aspects despite being intended to support farmers' income and reward the provision of environmental public goods.

A thorough rethinking of the CAP's foundations and allocation principles should be actively considered. If such reform proves politically unattainable, then **introducing a permanent, tailor-made arrangement for Ukraine should be considered.** This could involve a partial or full exclusion from CAP direct payments, combined with increased support for reconstruction, environmental investments and alignment with EU sanitary, phytosanitary and environmental standards.

3. Provide temporary and targeted EU support mechanisms to Member States and territories that would be most negatively affected by the next enlargement.

In cohesion policy, the existing ceiling of 2.3 % of GDP already limits the scale of transfers to new Member States. However, some existing EU regions and Member States may face disproportionate adjustment costs due to enlargement. The best-known example is the 'statistical effect', where the accession of poorer countries may lead some Member States or regions to be reclassified into higher-income categories and consequently receive less cohesion funding.

While this won't be an issue during the next MFF (as the distribution of EU funds across the Member States will be determined by the GDP and population data from 2021-23), the EU should acknowledge this expected asymmetric effect and **make a political commitment to mitigate any such impacts in future programming periods.**

More broadly, the EU should anticipate and mitigate any other asymmetric effects of future enlargements through targeted support mechanisms. For example, **targeted financial support could be provided to regions bordering candidate countries**, which may be more directly impacted by an influx of migrants or agricultural regions facing market adjustment pressures.

4. Inform EU citizens about the real costs and benefits of enlargement.

Misleading narratives and unfounded fears over the costs of future EU enlargement should be addressed through credible estimates, robust data and independent evidence-based assessments. This should be embedded both in policy design and public communication strategies.

The European Commission, as well as Member States should communicate more clearly that the net EU budgetary costs of enlargement do not capture its broader economic effects, including expanded market opportunities and reduced strategic dependencies on non-EU countries in key economic sectors.

Citizens in both the EU and candidate countries should be better informed about the actual costs of enlargement, as well as the mechanisms to manage and mitigate them, to support informed public debate and more realistic expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on previous EU enlargements, the accession of the current candidate countries is unlikely to trigger a large increase in the EU budget or a major redistribution of cohesion and CAP funds away from existing beneficiaries. While new Member States would become eligible for higher levels of EU support, current members would retain full control over the pace, scope and conditions of this access through the accession process itself.

Accession treaties can include transitional periods, capping mechanisms and temporary safeguard clauses specifically designed to manage fiscal and economic implications in a gradual and predictable manner. There's no structural reason why the next enlargement should be managed differently from previous rounds or lead to a sudden explosion of budgetary costs or major redistribution pressures.

EU budgetary costs are only part of the picture, though. The net cost of enlargement to the EU budget doesn't capture the broader economic implications: the expanded market opportunities for current Member States through extending the Single Market, supply chain integration gains, reduced energy and strategic material dependencies, enhanced defence capabilities (especially relevant for Ukraine) and geopolitical stability via anchoring the candidate countries into the EU's governance frameworks.

That said, the costs of enlargement shouldn't be assessed against a static status quo but against the realistic alternative. Delaying or blocking accession wouldn't eliminate costs as the EU would continue providing substantial financial assistance through pre-accession instruments, while forgoing the economic and geopolitical benefits of deeper integration. The relevant comparison isn't enlargement versus the status quo, but rather enlargement with well-designed transitional arrangements versus undefined delays that result in ever-growing costs.

Acknowledging these realities means initiating a transparent, evidence-based debate on how to adapt the EU budget for the next enlargement – more urgent given the ongoing MFF negotiations (at the time of writing) and the structural changes entailed. Member States and the EU institutions should fully support an informed debate that also points to the real benefits of the EU enlargement, beyond the simple desire to contain costs.