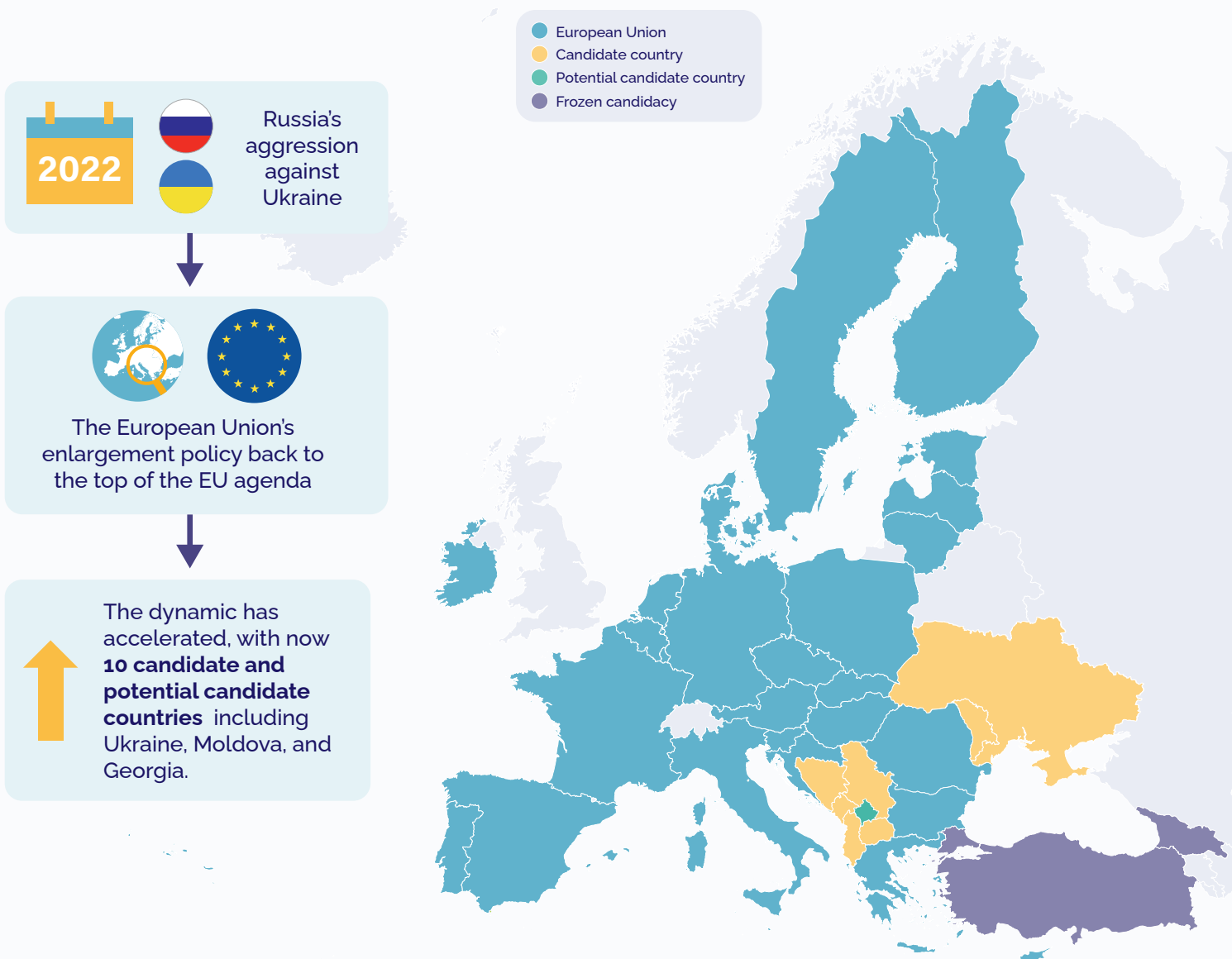




This infographic highlights key insights from a study coordinated by the Jacques Delors Institute and commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets: *Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements*¹. [↗](#)

1 The return of enlargement to the top of the EU agenda





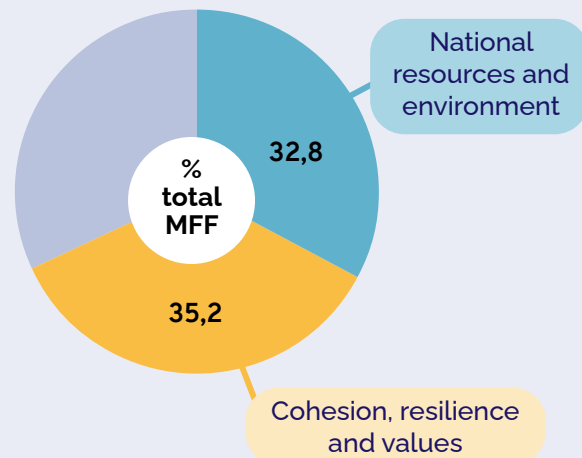
With the revival of the EU's enlargement policy come a number of uncertainties
↳ especially **the budgetary dimension**.

The accession of poorer countries, particularly those with large agricultural sectors such as Ukraine, **increases pressure on the EU budget**, (in the areas of cohesion and agriculture, which account for the largest shares of EU spending).

However, **forecasting the exact budgetary cost of enlargement is impossible**. The final outcome will not just be shaped by EU budget rules: it will also hinge heavily on political negotiations.

Even without factoring in politics, estimating the budgetary impact of new accessions is fraught with uncertainty.

Composition of the EU budget (2021-2027)²



1

The rules determining the allocation of EU funds by country are not always clear



→ for Cohesion Policy funds' allocations:

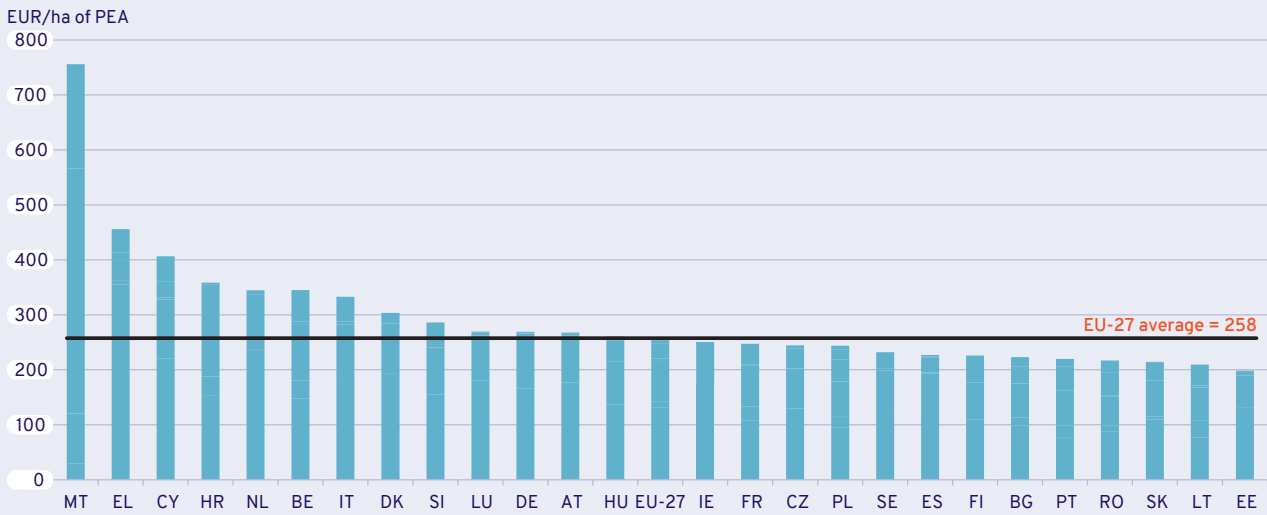
- ↳ formula relatively straightforward
- ↳ based on a country's GDP per capita and population size

→ for Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) allocations:

- ↳ National CAP transfers loosely correlate with the size of a country's agricultural land but they are not based on a numerical formula.
- ↳ CAP national allocations are based on historical decisions, this has resulted in significant disparities in CAP payments per hectares between Member States.



Average CAP direct payments in €/hectare/EU Member State, 2022³



2 The timing of accessions remains unknown



- By the time candidate countries join, the rules governing the EU budget may look different.

3 The key metrics that determine funding entitlements could shift before enlargement happens



- especially true in the case of Ukraine: 
 - ↳ post-war GDP, territory and population size remain deeply uncertain.

4 Impossible to predict how enlargement will affect non-allocated EU spending (such as research, transnational infrastructure, or external action).



- no legal requirement to increase this spending after new members join.
- In the past, the European Commission has proposed proportional increases linked to overall EU GDP growth, but these proposals have been scaled back during political negotiations.



Why enlargement does not necessarily mean more EU spending

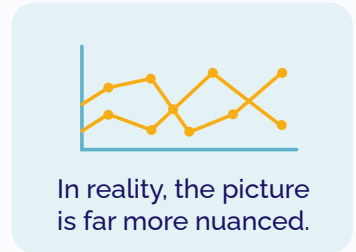
One of the most persistent myths in EU enlargement debates



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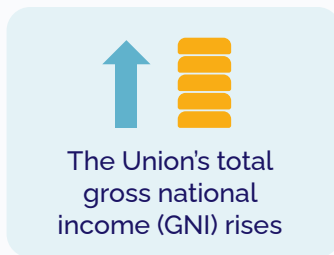
→



Additional transfers to incoming Member States can be offset by cuts elsewhere, whether in other spending categories or in existing allocations to Member States.



=



→

Even if the EU budget grows in absolute terms, this does not necessarily mean that it grows in relative terms (i.e. as a percentage of the EU's GNI).

Lessons from previous rounds of enlargement



The first rounds of enlargement did lead to budget increases, but this trend did not continue into the 21st century.

Since the mid-2000s

the EU budget has remained relatively stable at around



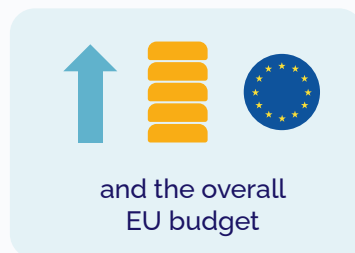
of EU's GNI.

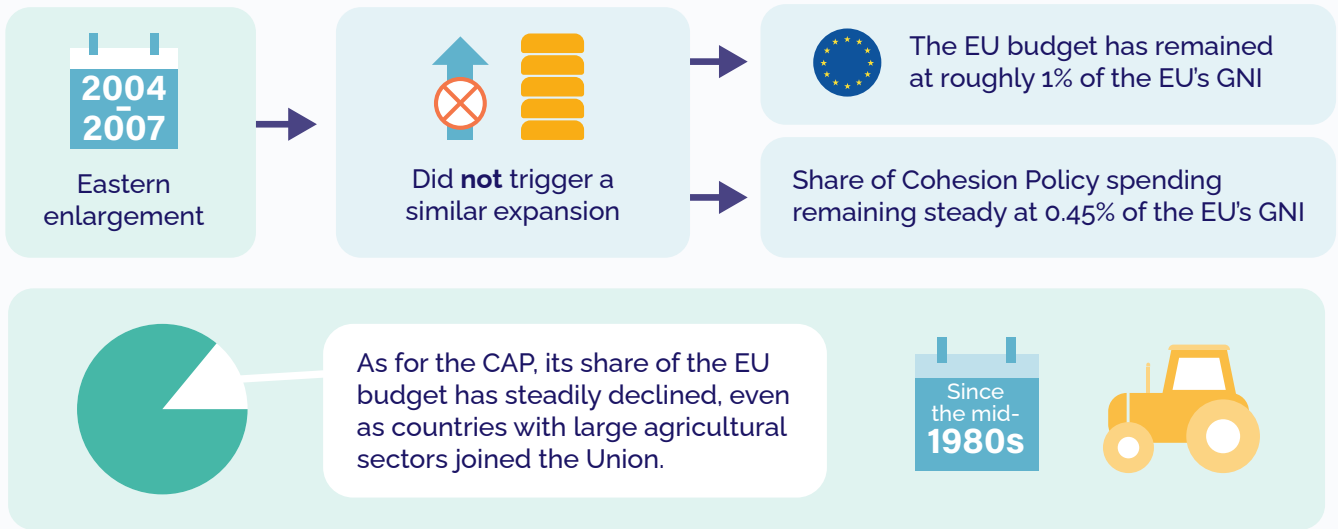


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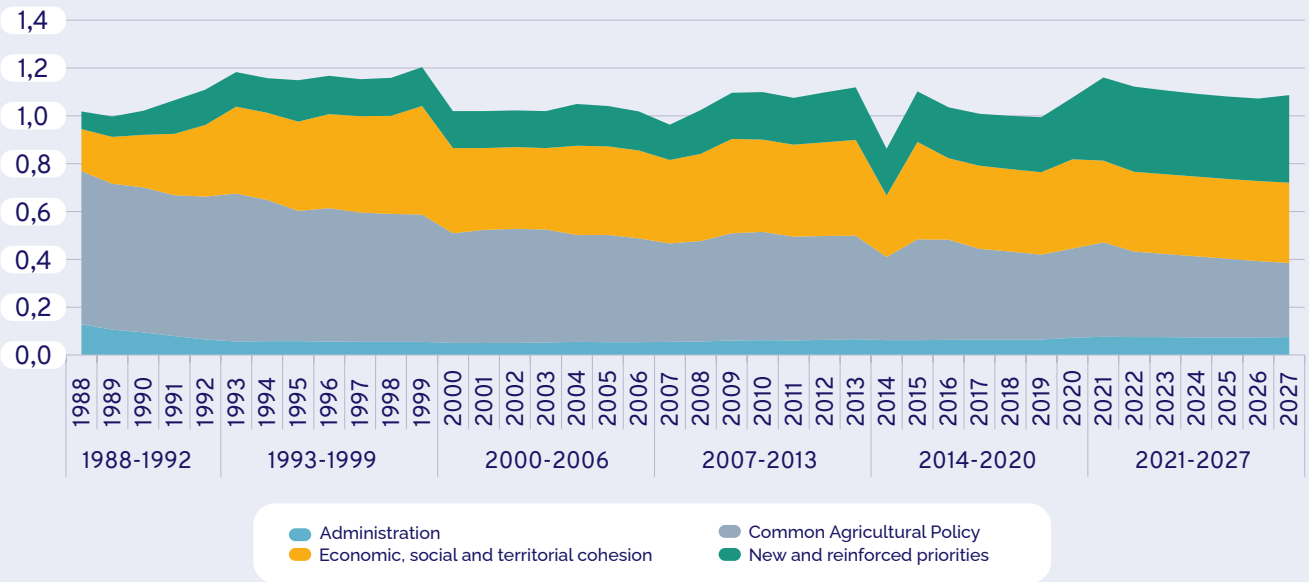
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Evolution of EU budget expenditure (main categories, 1988–2027)⁴

Commitments, in % GNI

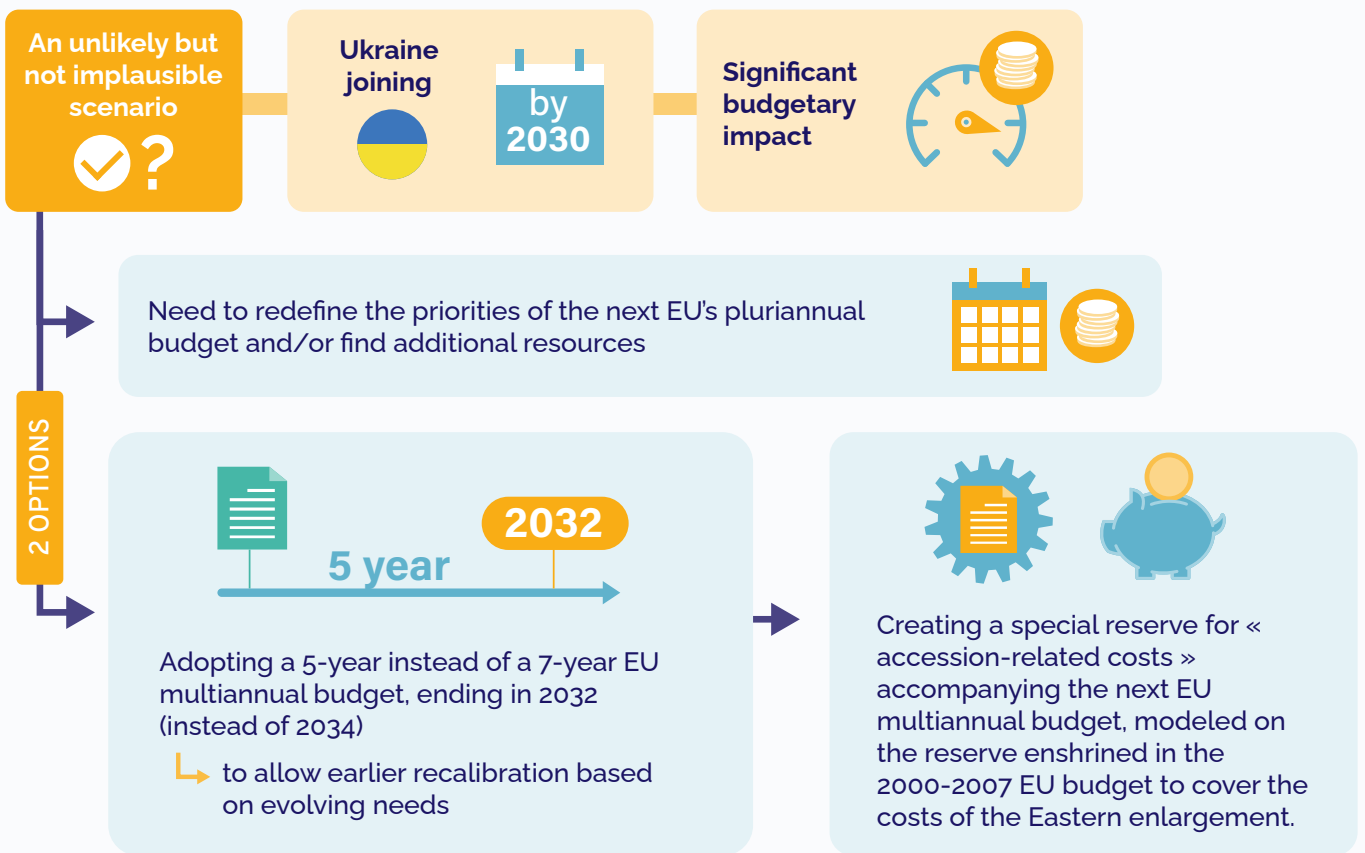


4

Preparing for enlargement in a highly uncertain context



The EU budget will need a high degree of flexibility to adapt to a range of possible enlargement scenarios.



The next budget and enlargement: a test for the EU's strategic credibility



The European Commission is preparing the proposal for the post 2027 EU's multiannual budget.

Based on the current state of play, and barring any extraordinary geopolitical upheaval that might fast-track accessions, there is little reason to expect a large wave of new members joining before 2034.

Therefore, the enlargement agenda is unlikely to dominate the upcoming MFF negotiations

A whole range of political and strategic priorities (defense, competitiveness, migration...) are crowding the EU's budgetary landscape, leaving limited space for a topic whose urgency is not yet universally recognised.



However, the upcoming EU budget will serve as a credibility test for the EU's commitment to enlargement



A credible commitment

- maintaining today's level of pre-accession support for Ukraine, the Western Balkans and Moldova
- while extending similar support to Georgia – conditional on reforms

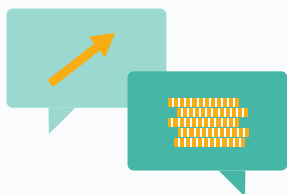
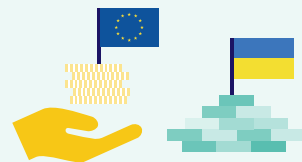


Weak support would damage the EU's credibility in the eyes of aspiring members

- ↳ would be exploited by rival powers to undermine pro-European sentiment on the ground.



Beyond enlargement, a core strategic question will be **how the EU budget can contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction.**



At the same time, the EU must confront persistent myths about the "exorbitant" costs of enlargement. Public narratives often exaggerate the costs, while ignoring the longer-term benefits.



The Commission should build a robust communication strategy, that clearly and transparently outlines the budgetary implications of enlargement. The costs are real – but they are manageable, they can be mitigated, and most importantly, **enlargement should be framed as a strategic investment**. An investment in:



Securing the European continent, and with it, the EU itself



Expanding economic opportunities, especially in trade and investment



Strengthening and spreading EU values, in particular democracy, and rule of law



Driving internal reform, to ensure a more effective and responsive Union



Enlargement is not just a political choice: it's a long-term investment on the EU's relevance, resilience, and role on the continent.

1. Eulalia Rubio, Cinzia Alcidi, Romy Hansum, Tina Akhvediani, Iain Begg, Johannes Lindner & Benjamin Couteau, *Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements*, Study prepared at the request of the Committee on Budgets (BUDG) of the European Parliament, 2025.
2. European Parliament, *Budgetary Outlook for the European Union 2025*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025.
3. European Commission, *Summary report on the implementation of direct payments (except greening)*, Claim year 2022, April 2024.
4. European Commission, Directorate-General for Budget, *EU budget policy brief – The evolving nature of the EU budget. #1*, October 2021, Publications Office, 2021.