

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

THE ECONOMIC SECURITY GATEWAY

**WHY EU ENLARGEMENT NEEDS
ECONOMIC SECURITY ALIGNMENT**

POLICY BRIEF | JUNE 2026

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Problem

The EU economic security strategy will be ineffective if candidate countries do not co-design and implement it throughout the accession process.

Key facts

Foreign investment screening is now a closing accession benchmark. The new Global Europe Instrument totals 200.3 billion euros. Ukraine holds 22 of 34 EU-listed critical raw materials.

Western Balkan candidates face Russian gas dependency, Chinese Belt and Road debt, Huawei 5G deployments and port concessions. Serbia rejects EU sanctions on Russia.

A functioning Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) screening mechanism is now a formal closing benchmark for Cluster 6, Chapter 30 in the revised enlargement methodology.

Foresight

Lack of economic security strategy alignment in the EU enlargement process will jeopardise not only the process but will also add to the EU's vulnerability along the ongoing trajectory of economic integration with candidate countries.

Economic Security Gateway for EU Enlargement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- For candidate countries, alignment with the EU's economic security framework, matched by equal alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), is the entry condition to a system of mutual protection, market access and strategic partnership that membership alone provides.
- For the EU, genuine alignment of candidate countries with its economic security architecture is an immediate geopolitical necessity as the unaligned candidates on the EU's borders represent vulnerabilities that the EU cannot afford in the current security environment.
- Economic security alignment is the mechanism through which enlargement delivers its strategic purpose.
- The urgency should be reflected in 'Co-ownership as the operative concept' as the economic security *acquis* is being built in real time and needs to be designed not just for new Member States but together with them, implemented along the accession process.
- Hence, candidate countries should be co-architects of the economic security *acquis*, not merely its recipients: Ukraine, with its defence industrial base, Moldova, with its acute experience of Russian energy weaponisation, and the Western Balkan states, with their critical mineral assets and transit geography.
- The Three Seas Initiative shows that this integration can be operational before formal accession, and the policy brief will argue that connecting these elements into a coherent framework is politically urgent.
- Poland and other CEE countries must promote this perspective, drawing from their past experience in getting rid of Russian colonial tactics and its overall strategic culture that promotes EU integration based on CFSP-aligned Member States whose agency is not jeopardised by economic dependencies.

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Project

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THE GEOECONOMIC LOGIC OF ENLARGEMENT

The Geopolitical Reorientation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did more than prompt the EU to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova — it forced a fundamental reconsideration of what enlargement is for. The accession of eight Central and Eastern European (CEE) states in 2004, in which Poland's entry was paradigmatic, proceeded on the assumption that enlargement was, at its core, a transformative project — the EU exported its normative and institutional model westward to eastward, and candidate countries internalised it. The strategic rationale was real but largely implicit. Today that rationale is explicit and primary.

The EU's 2025 Enlargement Communication states unambiguously that enlargement is 'the most strategic geopolitical investment the EU can make in its own security and prosperity' [1]. This is not rhetorical inflation. It reflects a structural shift in how the EU understands the relationship between its internal governance model, its external resilience and the stability of its neighbourhood. For Member States located in Central Europe — which have long argued, often against Western European scepticism, that enlargement is not charity but a strategic self-interest — this shift validates a position Poland and many of its neighbours have held for decades. Namely, that the EU integration has been the other (softer) side of security guarantees sought against revisionist powers, pursued by many CEE countries on top of the hard security membership in NATO. With the evolution of the global security environment, the EU is building up its hard power capacity and protecting its economic base from coercive statecraft pursued by adversaries or by rivals.

Thus, the enlargement becomes a function of security system evolution and must be seen through the prism of building up Europe's power at least to resist and to deflect coercion in all domains, including economic security.

The Dual Argument

This policy brief rests on a central dual argument. First, alignment with the EU's economic security framework that

must match the alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is, for candidate countries, not a technical compliance burden but a gateway — the entry condition to a system of mutual protection, market access and strategic partnership that is qualitatively unavailable outside membership. Second, for the EU, the genuine alignment of candidate countries with its economic security architecture is not a future benefit contingent on accession but an immediate geopolitical necessity: unaligned candidates on the EU's borders represent vulnerabilities — potential conduits for the circumvention of sanctions, vectors for hostile foreign investment and weak links in critical infrastructure chains — that the EU cannot afford in the current security environment.

The two sides of this argument reinforce each other. Candidate countries that align with economic security instruments strengthen their own resilience against economic coercion, protect their strategic assets and credibly signal the geopolitical orientation that is now an explicit condition of accession progress. The EU, by making this alignment a structured and supported dimension of the accession process — rather than a final threshold to be crossed before accession — gains both strategic depth and the political capital to make enlargement a credible proposition for its citizens.

The Economic Security Strategy as the New Framework

The June 2023 Joint Communication on the European Economic Security Strategy [2] established the conceptual architecture within which this argument operates, largely updated in December 2025. It identified four risk vectors: supply chain resilience, physical and cybersecurity of critical infrastructure, technology security and leakage prevention and the weaponisation of economic dependencies or economic coercion. For each, it outlined a three-pronged response: promote (invest in the EU's own competitive capacity), protect (deploy defensive instruments) and partner (build alliances with like-minded actors to diversify strategic dependencies).

From the perspective of the EU enlargement process this framing positions candidate countries in all three strands simultaneously. They are partners whose alignment the EU needs to address shared threats; they are territories whose

protection is a condition of the EU's own resilience; and they are sites of competitive advantage — in critical raw materials, digital manufacturing and energy transit — that the EU's promote agenda requires. The Strategy did not design itself with enlargement in mind, but its internal logic creates a powerful convergence between economic security objectives and accession conditionality. [3]

FDI Screening as the Paradigmatic Case

The clearest operational expression of this convergence is the designation of a functioning FDI screening mechanism as a formal closing benchmark for Cluster 6, Chapter 30 (External Relations) in the revised enlargement methodology. [4] This benchmark — introduced in screening reports from 2023 onwards — means that no candidate country can close its external relations chapter without demonstrating a credible legislative and institutional framework for screening foreign investment in strategic sectors.

The significance of this benchmark extends beyond its immediate operational content. By placing FDI screening at the closing stage of Cluster 6, which also encompasses CFSP alignment (Chapter 31), the EU has sent an unambiguous signal. It now treats the ability to protect strategic assets from hostile foreign investment as equivalent in importance to formal alignment with EU foreign policy positions. Both are understood as expressions of the same underlying requirement — that an EU Member State must be a reliable partner in the EU's collective geopolitical project, not merely a consumer of its institutions.

The revised FDI Screening Regulation, on which a provisional political agreement was reached in December 2025, [5] strengthens this framework by making screening mechanisms mandatory for all EU Member States (removing the previous optionality), expanding the mandatory scope to cover hyper-critical technologies, critical infrastructure, critical raw materials and electoral systems, as well as enhancing Commission oversight. For candidates, transposing this revised framework is now an accession requirement, not merely a best-practice recommendation.

THE ECONOMIC SECURITY INSTRUMENTS AND RELEVANCE

The Architecture of Economic Security Conditionality

The FDI screening benchmark is the most visible, but it is not the only instrument through which the EU's economic security strategy intersects with the accession process. Taken together, the following instruments constitute a coherent, if still evolving, architecture of economic security conditionality. For candidate countries, each represents both a compliance obligation and a form of structural protection — the *acquis* as a shield as much as a standard.

Instrument	Legal Basis	Accession Relevance
FDI Screening (revised)	Reg. (EU) 2019/452; political agreement Dec. 2025	Closing benchmark, Cluster 6 / Ch. 30. Mandatory framework required; operational capacity assessed at closing stage
Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR)	Reg. (EU) 2022/2560	Applies immediately to candidate-country firms in EU procurement; transposition required for competition <i>acquis</i> alignment
Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI)	Reg. (EU) 2023/2675	CFSP Chapter 31 alignment; candidates must demonstrate resistance to third-country economic coercion and the capacity to report it
Dual-Use Export Controls	Reg. (EU) 2021/821	Chapter 31: full alignment required; direct test of Russia/China trade relationship credibility
Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA)	Reg. (EU) 2024/1252	Strategic partnership opportunity; Western Balkans mineral assets central to EU's 65% diversification benchmark
Outbound Investment Screening	Commission Recommendation C(2025) 300	Pre-accession alignment expected; candidates as potential transit jurisdictions for third-country technology acquisition
NIS2 / Cyber Resilience Act	Dir. (EU) 2022/2555; Reg. (EU) 2024/2847	Active transposition requirement; acute relevance given state-sponsored cyberattacks in Ukraine and the Western Balkans
CFSP Sanctions Alignment	Arts. 29 & 215 TFEU; Chapter 31 benchmarks	Geopolitical credibility test; near-universal alignment among candidates except Serbia (Russia sanctions)

The FSR, ACI and the Coercion-Resistance Argument

Two instruments deserve special attention because they directly operationalise the mutual benefit argument. The Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR) [6] addresses the competitive distortions created by state-backed investment, most visibly from China. Several Western Balkan candidate countries have received significant Belt and Road Initiative financing for infrastructure and energy projects. The FSR establishes that such subsidies are subject to EU scrutiny when companies active in the EU market are involved – and transposition of equivalent national frameworks is expected as part of the competition acquis. For candidates, this is simultaneously a constraint on opaque Chinese financing and a protection against the structural dependency it creates.

The Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) [7] is the other side of the same coin. It provides the EU with a retaliatory toolkit against third countries that use economic pressure to coerce policy changes. For candidate countries that have been subjected to precisely such pressure – Russian energy leverage over Serbia, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina; Chinese economic inducements tied to 5G contracts and port concessions – alignment with the ACI framework means both adopting a shared defensive posture and gaining access to the EU's collective deterrent capacity. This is the gateway logic at its clearest: CFSP and economic security alignment is the condition for accessing the protection the EU collective provides.

For Ukraine, the ACI framework arrives retrospectively. Ukraine signed onto the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, and Chinese companies financed infrastructure across the country, including in its ports. Yet Kyiv was simultaneously subject to sustained Russian economic pressure since at least 2008 that escalated to full military aggression in 2014 and 2022. Kyiv has since introduced legislation on the screening of foreign investments and moved to keep Chinese companies away from strategic sectors, most visibly in the blocked 2021 Skyrizon acquisition of Motor Sich. This trajectory places Ukraine ahead of most Western Balkan candidates in terms of the FSR alignment – not because it adopted the EU framework, but because it arrived at similar conclusions earlier under direct geopolitical pressure.

Critical Raw Materials as a Strategic Opportunity

The Critical Raw Materials Act [8] deserves separate emphasis because it inverts the standard conditionality dynamic. The EU needs what candidate countries have. Serbia holds some of Europe's largest lithium reserves (Jadar project); Bosnia and Herzegovina has significant bauxite and aluminium capacity; Kosovo and North Macedonia have substantial nickel and chromium deposits; Albania has chromite and copper. Ukraine sits at opposite ends of the geological spectrum but belongs equally within this analytical frame. In total, Ukraine holds reserves of approximately 22 out of 34 critical raw materials identified by the EU, including cobalt, rare earth elements and manganese, with many deposits located in central and western regions removed from the front lines. The Critical Raw Material Act's requirement that no single third country account for more than 65 per cent of any strategic material creates a structural EU demand for partnerships with these candidates.

This means that pre-accession alignment on raw materials governance, environmental standards and strategic investment frameworks is not a sacrifice candidates make in exchange for future membership, but a pathway to immediate investment flows and EU-backed supply chain integration. The policy brief will argue that the CRMA framework, properly designed, can serve as a prototype for how economic security conditionality can be made materially rewarding in the pre-accession period, not merely aspirationally so.

Outbound Investment and Cybersecurity

The Commission's January 2025 Recommendation on outbound investment monitoring [9] covering semiconductors, AI and quantum technologies, is at an earlier stage of development as an accession condition, but its relevance is directional as the EU moves toward a mandatory outbound screening framework, candidates will be expected to align, and their potential role as conduit jurisdictions for technology acquisition by adversarial state actors will be explicitly assessed. Similarly, NIS2 transposition [10] — now an active accession benchmark — carries particular weight for Ukraine (which has withstood the most sustained state-sponsored cyberoffensive in history) and for Western Balkan candidates that have been targeted by hybrid information and infrastructure operations. [11]

THE NEW MFF AND THE ECONOMIC SECURITY SUPPORT ARCHITECTURE

Conditionality Without Financing is not Credible

The dual argument at the heart of this brief has a necessary financial corollary. Demanding that candidate countries build functioning FDI screening authorities, enforce dual-use export controls, establish cybersecurity agencies capable of meeting NIS2 standards and develop raw materials governance frameworks compatible with the CRMA requires institutional capacity that most candidates currently lack. Imposing this expanded conditionality without commensurate financial support is neither politically sustainable nor analytically coherent, as it would reproduce the dysfunction of earlier enlargement rounds, where formal legislative transposition concealed hollow implementation capacity. The investment by the EU in this domain should primarily take into account the mutual interdependence between the EU and the candidate countries in terms of the EU's own economic security.

The New MFF and the Global Europe Instrument

On 16 July 2025 the European Commission presented its proposal for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) totalling approximately two trillion euros. [12]. The proposal introduces a new Global Europe Instrument worth 200.3 billion euros — more than double the equivalent envelope in the current MFF — consolidating the existing Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) and neighbourhood instruments into a single strategic funding pillar. For enlargement, the proposal nominally increases pre-accession support for the Western Balkans from approximately 7.8 billion (IPA III) to 11.7 billion euros, while Ukraine's post-conflict integration pathway is to be addressed through a successor to the current Ukraine Facility.

In real terms, however, this increase is more modest than it appears and accounts for projected EU consumer price increases of approximately 34 per cent between 2018 and 2028; the Western Balkans allocation represents only around 12 per cent real growth. [13] This is inadequate relative to the expanded conditionality agenda the EU is simultaneously imposing on those same candidates. The gap between the

fiscal envelope and the expanded compliance requirements is not merely a budgetary footnote — it is a structural incoherence at the heart of the new MFF's enlargement architecture that, if unaddressed, will reproduce the very implementation hollowness the economic security conditionality agenda is designed to prevent.

Funding Dual-Use Defence Under ReArm/Readiness 2030

The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund, adopted by the Council on 27 May 2025 as the first pillar of the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, formally opens joint procurement to candidate countries, acceding states and potential candidates — not as beneficiaries of loans, but as procurement partners contributing to aggregated EU defence demand [14].

SAFE allows acceding countries, candidate countries and potential candidates to join common procurements, and those that have concluded bilateral or multilateral security and defence partnership agreements with the EU may participate on enhanced terms. This structural opening is more than a procedural accommodation because it embeds candidate countries in the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB) before formal accession, creating material interdependence most pronounced through military and defence cooperation with Ukraine. For the Western Balkan candidates, the most credible entry points are quite practical, including defence-industrial cooperation, which involves co-production in bottleneck areas such as ammunition, propellants and maintenance capacity, alongside military mobility and dual-use infrastructure that strengthens reinforcement routes linking the Adriatic to the Black Sea.

Read alongside the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), adopted on 8 December 2025 with a dedicated 300-million-euro Ukraine Support Instrument aimed at modernising and supporting Ukraine's defence industry and fostering its integration into the wider European defence industrial ecosystem, the defence investment architecture begins to replicate, for the security sector, the conditionality-financing linkage found in the Ukraine Facility [15].

SAFE and EDIP together constitute an operational pre-accession integration pathway that runs in parallel to – and is currently disconnected from – the economic security conditionality architecture anchored in Cluster 6. The strategic potential of connecting these instruments lies in their dual-use character. SAFE-financed joint procurement involving candidate countries in ammunition production, drone technology and communications infrastructure directly addresses the technology security and supply chain resilience vectors that the Economic Security Strategy identifies as primary risk categories. A Western Balkan or Ukrainian defence firm integrated into an SAFE procurement consortium is, simultaneously, a firm whose ownership structure, technology transfer arrangements and export control compliance are subject to scrutiny compatible with the FDI screening and dual-use export control frameworks [16]. The European Chips Act and Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) are expected to benefit the European defence industry by ensuring it has the necessary supplies to tackle the substantially increased demand for its products [17], which means that candidate countries' mineral assets, central to the CRMA's 65 per cent diversification benchmark, acquire a further strategic dimension as inputs to SAFE-financed production.

The governance gap that remains is the absence of any formal linkage between SAFE and EDIP participation by candidate countries and the Commission's annual enlargement progress assessment framework. Hardwiring this linkage – making demonstrated participation in SAFE procurement consortia and EDIP co-production arrangements a named benchmark in the external relations cluster, and connecting it to the economic security convergence facility proposed in this brief – could transform the defence-economy nexus from a parallel institutional track into an integrated and operationally coherent component of the EU's enlargement strategy [18].

The Ukraine Facility as Design Template

The most important financial innovation of the current MFF period for the enlargement framework is not the size of any envelope but the architecture of the Ukraine Facility [19]. Its 130 specific qualitative reform conditions and 16 quantitative investment conditions, linked to quarterly disbursements and subject to Commission verification, represent the most

granular conditionality-financing linkage in EU history.

Crucially, several of those conditions are directly economic in their security implications: energy sector reform, state-owned enterprise restructuring, anti-corruption infrastructure, and — from 2025 — digital security and critical infrastructure protection benchmarks. The Council's February 2026 agreement on a 90-billion-euro successor framework for Ukraine for 2028-2034 signals that this architecture is not temporary but constitutive of the EU's relationship with Ukraine as a candidate country going forward. The same logic should be extended to the Global Europe Instrument as a whole — pre-accession financing for all candidates should be structured around verified, sequenced reform milestones, with economic security compliance as a named and weighted category of disbursement conditionality.

Hardwiring Economic Security Compliance into the Global Europe Instrument

The design of the Global Europe Instrument is currently in the legislative negotiation phase [20] and the Instrument's pre-accession strand should incorporate an explicit economic security convergence facility with the following characteristics: dedicated funding windows for the institutional infrastructure of economic security compliance (screening authorities, export control enforcement, cybersecurity agencies, sanctions implementation bodies); performance benchmarks drawn directly from the EU's economic security instrument portfolio, matched to accession milestones; and project financing for economic security-relevant infrastructure (energy diversification, digital connectivity, critical raw materials governance) that connects the pre-accession funding architecture to the Global Gateway.

The MFF and Poland's Perspective on the EU Enlargement

Poland enters the next MFF negotiation in a structurally different position from the previous rounds. It is a country graduating from the largest-recipient category of EU structural funds while simultaneously bearing the highest security costs of the war in Ukraine. The Polish interest is in ensuring that the new MFF's enlargement architecture is adequately financed and rigorously used in line with the CFSP,

including the prospective enlargement process. Poland knows, from its own post-2004 trajectory, that EU funding conditionality — when properly structured with clear benchmarks and verified disbursements — can drive institutional reform at a pace that purely normative pressure cannot achieve and therefore is favouring conditional instruments that incentivise CFSP alignment not merely in a declarative way but through a clear demonstration of progress on eradicating economic strategic dependencies, which could be weaponised by the EU's adversaries. This position stems from Warsaw's vulnerability to Russian but increasingly also Chinese dependency — followed through in the country's positions on economic security strategy in the EU. The Warsaw perspective is therefore not abstract, and the design of the Global Europe Instrument's pre-accession strand is a direct stake of Poland's foreign policy interests and a test of whether the EU has learnt the right lessons from its own enlargement history.

THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE – A CASE FOR FURTHER ECONOMIC SECURITY INTEGRATION

The Initiative as Proof of Concept

If the EU's economic security instruments define what candidates must align with, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) demonstrates how that alignment can be operationalised in practice even before accession. Founded in 2016 by 13 EU Member States between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas, the 3SI focuses on three connectivity vectors — energy, transport and digital infrastructure — that map directly onto the EU's economic security risk architecture in the critical frontline geography: supply chain resilience (transport), energy security and independence from Russian gas (energy) and technology security (digital). In a larger framework, it also provides a political off-ramp for CEE leaders willing to scale down on growing Chinese technological and investment presence in the region.

The initiative's governance model explicitly accommodates pre-accession integration through the status of associated participating states. Ukraine and Moldova received this status

in 2022 and 2023 respectively; Albania and Montenegro in 2025 [21].

Poland, as host of the 10th Warsaw Summit in April 2025 and as the 3SI's most consistently active champion, has been the principal architect of this enlargement dimension. Its perspective is thus structurally important here: Warsaw's support for 3SI expansion to candidates reflects the same strategic calculus that drove Poland's own post-2004 EU integration — that economic interdependence is the most durable foundation of political alignment, and that infrastructure connectivity creates facts on the ground that outlast any electoral cycle.

Energy Security Case

The 3SI's energy portfolio — LNG terminal linkages, Baltic-Adriatic gas corridor development, electricity interconnectors and pumped storage — directly addresses the supply chain resilience vector of the EU Economic Security Strategy. By incorporating candidate countries into regional energy infrastructure planning and the Three Seas Investment Fund (targeting 3-5 billion euros in priority projects), the initiative creates the physical preconditions for candidates' eventual integration into the EU's internal energy market [22].

This matters beyond the energy sector itself. The EU's economic security strategy identifies the weaponisation of energy dependencies as a primary risk vector — a risk that Russia has demonstrated with devastating effectiveness against Ukraine, Moldova and several Western Balkan states. A candidate country that remains structurally dependent on Russian gas cannot credibly claim to be aligned with the EU's energy security architecture, regardless of its formal legislative position. 3SI infrastructure investment therefore functions as a form of pre-accession conditionality enforcement, as it makes alignment physically possible where it is currently impractical.

Transport and the North-South Corridor

The development of north-south transport axes — Via Carpatia, the Baltic-Adriatic Rail Corridor and road connections through the Western Balkans — reduces the strategic dependence on east-west routes that traversed Russian-controlled or Russian-adjacent territory. For Poland

and for the Visegrad Four region more broadly, the north-south axis is not merely a logistics preference but a strategic architecture. It creates integrated supply chains that embed candidate countries in EU economic geography and reduce their exposure to the kind of transport leverage that has historically been a tool of Russian economic coercion.

Digital Security and the 5G Question

3SI digital projects — data infrastructure, connectivity corridors, EU-standard telecommunications deployment — address the technology security risk that the EU's Economic Security Strategy identifies as one of its four primary vectors. Several Western Balkan candidates have permitted or are considering Huawei 5G deployments. The 3SI's digital portfolio, supported by EU and US partner financing, offers an alternative to Chinese digital infrastructure — one that comes with alignment incentives and is compatible with NIS2 and the broader EU cybersecurity *acquis*. This is the ACI and NIS2 logic made concrete in project form — economic security alignment supported by an actual investable alternative, not merely a regulatory prohibition.

The Participation Gap and Its Implications

Ukraine, Moldova, Albania and Montenegro are associated participants. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo are not. Serbia's non-participation reflects the same geopolitical ambiguity that underlies its refusal to align with EU sanctions on Russia and its maintenance of Chinese strategic partnerships that sit in tension with EU economic security requirements [23].

Bosnia and Herzegovina's absence reflects both governance dysfunction and the Republika Srpska entity's systematic resistance to EU-oriented integration. The 3SI gap map is, effectively, a visualisation of the differentiation in candidate countries' geopolitical alignment and therefore an illustration of the argument in this policy brief that economic security alignment and CFSP alignment are not separate tracks but two expressions of the same underlying question about a candidate country's strategic orientation.

Formalising the 3SI's role as a structured pre-accession economic security integration pathway — with explicit linkages to the *acquis* benchmarks, IPA III financing and the

Commission's progress assessment framework — would address a current governance gap. At present, 3SI participation by candidate countries is politically significant but institutionally informal. Making it a scored dimension of the accession process, linked to energy independence benchmarks, digital security compliance and transport corridor connectivity targets, would transform a political gesture into an operational instrument.

CONCLUSION. CO-OWNERSHIP OF ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

This brief converges on a single argument that is as much political as it is technical. The EU's economic security architecture and its enlargement process, developed in relative institutional separation, are in practice pursuing the same objective, namely to build a zone of strategic resilience around the EU's core in which states share not only rules but the values and material conditions that make those rules durable. Across the four instrument families examined here, investment screening, anti-coercion and foreign-subsidy controls, critical raw materials governance and the defence-industrial track, alignment functions as both a compliance obligation for candidates and a form of structural protection. The *acquis* operates as a shield as much as a standard.

What makes the present moment distinctive is that the economic security *acquis* is being written in real time. The outbound investment regime is unsettled, the defence-industrial strategy is embryonic and the strategic partnership framework under the CRMA is still being operationalised. This creates an opportunity that earlier enlargement rounds did not offer. Candidates can be co-architects of the framework rather than recipients of a finished text. Ukraine brings a defence-industrial base and battlefield experience, Moldova brings acute exposure to Russian energy and information warfare and the Western Balkan states bring critical mineral assets and transit geography. Co-ownership is therefore not a rhetorical courtesy but the operative concept for an enlargement conducted under live geopolitical pressure [24].

Translating that concept into practice requires connecting instruments that currently develop in parallel institutional silos. Three steps follow from the analysis above.

First, the pre-accession strand of the Global Europe Instrument, now in legislative negotiation, should incorporate an explicit economic security convergence facility, with dedicated funding windows for screening authorities, export-control enforcement, cybersecurity agencies and sanctions-implementation bodies, as well as with disbursement benchmarks drawn directly from the EU's economic security instrument portfolio and matched to accession milestones.

Second, demonstrated participation in the SAFE procurement consortia and EDIP co-production arrangements – similar to the ReArm Europe initiative, the European Peace Facility and the emerging European Defence Industrial Strategy [25] – should become a named benchmark within the external relations cluster, closing the gap between the defence-industrial track and the conditionality architecture anchored in Cluster 6.

Third, the 3SI should be formalised as a scored pre-accession integration pathway, with explicit linkages to acquis benchmarks, pre-accession financing and the Commission's progress assessment, converting a politically significant but institutionally informal arrangement into an operational instrument. Underpinning all three, pre-accession financing for every candidate should be structured around verified, sequenced reform milestones on the model the Ukraine Facility has already established.

These recommendations are bound by one binding constraint. Economic security instruments are only as effective as the institutions that implement them, and several Western Balkan candidates face capacity deficits that are not merely technical but governance vulnerabilities exposed to political interference and corruption [26]. This is not an argument against conditionality. It is an argument for supported conditionality, in which institutional capacity is built as a condition of accession progress rather than treated as a prerequisite for it. IPA III financing, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, [27] and the Ukraine Facility all provide a financing envelope that must rise to meet the expanded

compliance agenda, since imposing the latter without the former would reproduce the implementation hollowness that the economic security agenda is designed to prevent.

Poland and the wider Visegrad region are positioned to carry this argument. Polish contributions to the eastern flank, Polish leadership in the 3SI and Polish advocacy for Ukrainian accession rest on a strategic understanding that the Union's resilience is indivisible and that the states on its frontiers are assets rather than liabilities, provided their alignment is genuine and their capacity is developed. That insight, grounded in two decades of post-2004 experience, is the contribution the region brings to a debate too often conducted from the comfortable distance of Western European capitals. Whether the EU hardwires economic security into the next enlargement, or allows it to drift as a parallel track, is the test of whether it has learnt the right lessons from its own history.

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