

# ON GRADUAL INTEGRATION: BRINGING IN WB6 PEOPLES AND TERRITORIES

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The 2020 Enlargement methodology introduces the gradual integration concept, all by upholding the principles and procedures of a transformative Enlargement with a special focus on Fundamentals.

Gradual Integration (GI) is about streamlining the Enlargement by taking out political factors during technical and intermediary negotiations between EU and candidate countries. The most visible initiative in this direction is the introduction of QMV for certain intermediary and technical steps, such as opening of the clusters.

Gradual Integration allows candidate countries to participate in specific EU policies before full membership, contingent upon their alignment with and implementation of EU legislation. Conditionality is strictly applied based on measurable progress in EU acquis transposition and enforcement.

In practical terms, GI debate today focuses on supporting WB6 to have greater access to EU Single Market and to other policies and instruments of interest for EU such as CFSP or migration management. Other examples of gradual integration are the inclusion of WB6 in the European Networks of Transport and of Energy (TEN-T and TEN-E).

However, gradual integration does not anticipate involving future members in EU policy-making mechanisms responsible for designing and implementing relevant policy documents, programs or projects in which they are invited to participate. There is absolutely no indication whatsoever of their inclusion in discussions on the new MFF, even as 2030 is promoted as the prospective membership date for Albania and Montenegro.

The gradual integration debate also largely overlooks WB6's pressing development and convergence needs. While the Growth Plan introduces a robust conditionality and focuses on infrastructure investment and economic alignment, as well as and Rule of Law reforms, its financial scope and ambition remains limited: it offers a new financial instrument rather than a transformative investment strategy for the region.

In the current geopolitical climate, gradual integration serves both EU and WB6 interests. Deepening sector cooperation well beyond access to EU Single Market to include Critical Raw Materials, green technologies, defence or near shoring and other mutually benefiting endeavours – locks in WB6 economy to EU's, while delivering tangible benefits to their populations. It is a kind of Accession before Membership.

While gradual integration aims to streamline interim Enlargement steps, it must remain firmly linked to full EU membership, with the first wave expected by 2030. Avoiding excessive institutional layering and ensuring WB6 participation in ongoing EU discussions and policy-making on security, industrial policy, territorial development or competitiveness, are essential to make GI benefits real and tangible.

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Ultimately, gradual integration must bring in WB6 region and its peoples, while WB elites and institutions complete the required reforms and fulfill the stringent EU membership conditions. In an ever changing world, it is the only way to lock in WB6 progress and its EU aspirations.  
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