



**Instrument for Pre-Accession
Assistance (IPA) III
Programming Guidance
2021-2027**

January 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III programming guidance for the period 2021-27 aims to present the main new elements of the IPA III programming approach, as provided for in the IPA III legal framework, the new IPA III strategic framework, i.e. the IPA III programming framework, and the guidance notes and the IPA III templates that the Commission has provided to IPA III beneficiaries since 2020.

Under IPA III, programming is a process through which the strategic and thematic priorities of the IPA III Programming Framework are translated into implementable actions and activities on the ground. Programming entails both identification and formulation of actions presented in annual and/or multiannual action plans/programmes or measures. The programming phase also includes the formal processing of the selected actions by the Commission through inter-service consultation, consultation of Member States in the IPA III Committee and adoption of the Commission financing decision.

The main purpose of this guidance document is to bring under one ‘cover’ the IPA III programming guidance and advice that the Commission has already provided in 2021 and 2022, and explain key novelties and processes in more detail. However, this document does not aim to provide methodological guidance for identifying and formulating IPA III actions, as such guidance is available in various guidance documents, including in the instructions included in the IPA III action document template. Also, this document does not aim to provide thematic guidance, which is provided by dedicated teams in DG NEAR and/or through technical assistance, which IPA III beneficiaries can request via EU Delegations and/or DG NEAR. Finally, this document does not cover programming of the global thematic actions under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) Regulation, from which IPA III beneficiaries may also benefit, as the programming is subject to the specific rules of the NDICI-GE Regulation.

In short, this programming guidance primarily provides information about the IPA III programming architecture, processes, roles and responsibilities, in particular:

- Overview of the IPA III financial assistance framework for 2021-27, especially the main legal and strategic documents;
- The key IPA III programming terminology and definitions;
- The main actors in the IPA III programming process;
- The main IPA III programme types and methods of implementation;
- The main delivery modes of IPA III assistance;
- The bilateral and multi-country programming process with main steps, roles, responsibilities and timelines;
- The main elements of programming of other programmes;
- The programming guidance on specific topics; and
- The list of main IPA III programming templates provided to IPA III beneficiaries.

This document focuses on programming processes under direct responsibility of DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR). While general information is provided on IPA III rural development (IPARD III) programmes and Interreg VI-A, VI-B and VI-C programmes, their programming is the responsibility of DG Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) and DG Regional and Urban Policy (REGIO) respectively.

2. THE IPA III FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FRAMEWORK

The Regulatory Framework

The IPA III Regulatory Framework consists of the following primary and implementing legislation:

- The [Financial Regulation](#) applicable to the general budget of the Union was adopted on 17 July 2018 and is applicable since 2 August 2018.
- The [Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe \(NDICI-GE\) Regulation](#) was adopted on 9 June 2021, came into force on 14 June 2021 is applicable retroactively since 1 January 2021. It sets out a number of horizontal provisions, which are also applicable for IPA III assistance.
- The [European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund Regulation 2021/1058](#), the [European Territorial Cooperation goal \(Interreg\) Regulation 2021/1059](#), and the [Common Provisions Regulation \(CPR\) 2021/1060](#) apply to the cross-border cooperation programmes between Member States and IPA III beneficiaries and the transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, where IPA III beneficiaries participate. The regulations were adopted on 24 June 2021 and came into force on 30 June 2021.
- The [IPA III Regulation](#) provides the primary legal basis for the provision of EU financial assistance under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III. The IPA III Regulation was adopted on 15 September 2021, and it came into force on 20 September 2021. It is applicable retroactively since 1 January 2021.
- The [Commission Delegated Regulation](#) supplementing the IPA III Regulation was adopted on 1 October 2021 and came into force on 3 December 2021. It sets out specific objectives and thematic priorities for IPA III assistance.
- The [IPA III Implementing Regulation](#) was adopted by the Commission on 15 December 2021 and came into force on 16 December 2021.

The Financial Regulation

The Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the Union is the legislation governing the establishment and the implementation of the EU budget and the presentation and auditing of EU accounts.

The Financial Regulation contains specific provisions applicable to external actions financed from the budget providing particular rules concerning implementation of external actions, budget support, Union trust funds, indirect management, financing agreements, procurement, grants and audit that differ from rules established for internal policies.

The NDICI-GE Regulation

The NDICI-GE Regulation lays down the common rules and procedures for the implementation of the external actions, including IPA III. The new architecture of the external action instruments will facilitate coherence and synergy between the IPA III and the NDICI-GE Instrument. The common NDICI-GE Regulation provisions applicable to IPA III concern ERASMUS+ (Article 13), direct management or indirect management through annual or multi-annual action plans and measures as referred to in Chapter III of Title II (Articles 23-30 except Article 28(1), EFSD+ in Chapter IV of Title II (Articles 31-40), Monitoring and Evaluation in Chapter V of Title II (Articles 41 and 42), and Information and visibility (Articles 46 and 47).

The Cohesion Policy Regulations applicable to IPA III beneficiaries

Three Cohesion Policy Regulations – the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund Regulation, the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation and the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) - apply to the cross-border cooperation programmes between Member States and IPA III beneficiaries and the transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, where IPA III beneficiaries participate.

The new CPR sets out common provisions for seven shared management funds. and reduces fragmentation of rules, delivering a common set of basic rules for seven funds: 1) Cohesion Fund (CF); 2) European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMF); 3) European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); 4) European Social Fund Plus (ESF+); 5) Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF); 6) Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI); and 6) Internal Security Fund (ISF). It no longer covers the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development, except for some provisions (e.g. financial instruments, territorial development).

Subsidiarity and proportionality of the individual funds above is set out in the explanatory memorandum for each fund. However, the CPR makes additional contributions to:

- Subsidiarity by promoting shared management: insofar as programmes are not managed directly by the European Commission, but instead implemented in partnership with the Member States.
- Proportionality, by unifying and consolidating rules (and therefore reducing the burden on stakeholders).

To enable consistency with other EU policies under shared management, the rules on delivery and implementation of ERDF and the Cohesion Fund are governed as far as possible by the CPR.

To simplify and clarify the legislation, the ERDF and Cohesion Fund Regulation defines provisions applicable to both ERDF and Cohesion Fund intervening under the "Investment for jobs and growth" goal and, with regard to the ERDF, under the "European territorial cooperation" goal (Interreg). However, due to the specific nature of programmes under the "European territorial cooperation" goal (Interreg) which involve several Member States and third countries, a specific regulation on the "European territorial cooperation" goal (Interreg) Regulation sets out specific rules additional to the Common Provisions Regulation and this Regulation.

The IPA III Regulation (2021-2027)

The IPA III Regulation highlights the overall objective to support 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 (*'acquis'*) with a view to future Union membership, thereby contributing to mutual stability, security, peace and prosperity. The Regulation outlines the need to have coherence between the enlargement policy framework and financial assistance. It defines the IPA III Programming Framework as the basis for providing assistance in line with the specific objectives of the IPA III Regulation.

The Regulation foresees that assistance is based both on a performance and the fair share principle and that it can be modulated in the case of a significant regression or persistent lack of progress by a beneficiary in rule of law, democratic institutions and public administration reform as well as economic development and competitiveness.

The Regulation defines that assistance is implemented in direct management by the Commission or indirect management by the beneficiaries through annual or multiannual action plans and measures. It also defines that the transition from direct management to indirect management is progressive and based on capacities of beneficiaries and the principles of good governance and will be subject to appropriate supervisory measures.

The Regulation further defines the scope of cross-border cooperation, eligibility for funding under IPA III and monitoring, reporting and evaluation rules and comitology procedure.

The Commission Delegated Regulation

The Commission Delegated Regulation supplements the IPA III Regulation, especially Article 3 (Objectives of IPA III) and Annex II (Thematic priorities for assistance) and Annex III (Thematic priorities for assistance for cross-border cooperation), as it sets out certain specific objectives and thematic priorities for assistance under IPA III.

The IPA III Implementing Regulation

The IPA III Implementing Regulation lays down specific rules establishing uniform conditions for implementing IPA III assistance, in particular for indirect management by IPA III beneficiaries, and for cross-border cooperation and for agriculture and rural development assistance.

The Strategic Planning Framework

The IPA III programming approach is defined in the [IPA III Programming Framework](#), a single strategy document replacing the former country and multi-country strategy papers for the duration of the 2021-27 multiannual financial framework.

The IPA III programming framework was prepared by the Commission in consultation with IPA III beneficiaries. It was adopted, after examination by the IPA III Committee, on 10 December 2021.

The IPA III programming framework reflects the specific objectives of the IPA III Regulation and focuses on the priorities of the enlargement process according to five thematic Windows, which mirror the clusters of negotiating chapters as per the revised enlargement methodology.

In addition, it emphasises the need to ensure the mainstreaming of a number of horizontal priorities across all thematic Windows, including climate change, environmental protection, civil society, gender equality, and rights-based approach. It emphasises the need to ensure that actions under IPA III are consistent with the principle of 'do no harm' and comply with Union taxonomy to the extent possible, in particular to ensure the sustainability of investments.

The programming framework does not include pre-defined financial envelopes for each IPA III beneficiary but an indicative financing for each thematic Window over the period 2021-27.

The progress in achievement of the specific objectives of the IPA III Regulation are measured by the indicators included in the IPA III programming framework. They are coherent with the key performance indicators of the IPA III Regulation.

In line with the IPA III Regulation, the Commission will prepare an annual assessment on the implementation of the IPA III programming framework, including the state of play of the allocations committed and planned for IPA III beneficiaries and implementation of the performance-based approach and the fair share principle. The Commission shall submit that assessment to the IPA III Committee. On the basis of the annual assessment or the mid-term evaluation, the Commission may propose to revise the programming framework as appropriate.

Financial Framework Partnership Agreements

The European Commission and each IPA III Beneficiary shall conclude a Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA) for the entire programming period 2021-27.

The FFPA sets out specific provisions for the management, control, supervision, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and audit of IPA III assistance. The FFPA also transposes into the legal order of the Beneficiary the relevant provisions of the Union's regulatory framework.

In principle, IPA III assistance can only be granted after the FFPA has been concluded. For multi-country and cross-border cooperation programmes, the FFPA has to be in principle concluded by all IPA III beneficiaries involved in the programme. However, the Commission may apply a derogation in case of a late ratification of a FFPA.

Sectoral Agreements

Sectoral agreements may be concluded between the Commission and an IPA III beneficiary to complement the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement.

Sectoral agreements set out specific rules and procedures for the management and implementation of IPA III assistance in specific policy areas (e.g. IPA rural development programmes).

Where sectoral agreements exist, they apply to all financing agreements concluded under that policy area or programme.

Financing Agreements

Bilateral programme

The European Commission and each IPA III beneficiary shall conclude annual or multi-annual financing agreements, which detail, inter alia, the terms on which the assistance shall be managed, including the applicable methods of implementation, implementation deadlines, as well as rules on the eligibility of expenditure.

By signing the financing agreement the IPA III beneficiary agrees on the terms on which the external aid is given. On the basis of the financing agreement, the IPA III beneficiary may also become a direct recipient of funds (budget support) or it may be involved in the implementation of the funds (indirect management).

Under indirect management by an IPA III beneficiary, the financing agreement constitutes the act of entrustment, and include the provisions of Article 158 of the Financial Regulation, laying down the role and responsibility of each party in the implementation of the funds.

Even where the IPA III beneficiary has no budget-implementation tasks, a financing agreement should still be signed as an acknowledgement of the EU support and as expression of the development effectiveness principle of ownership.

A financing agreement is signed, after the adoption of the Financing Decision and the global budgetary commitment, by the Commission. The IPA III action document(s) annexed to the Financing Decision become(s) annex I to the Financing Agreement.

Multi-country programme

No Financing Agreement is concluded in the case of multi-country programmes.

Cross-border cooperation between IPA III beneficiaries

A financing agreement for the cross-border cooperation programme between the participating IPA III beneficiaries and the Commission is signed after the adoption of the Financing Decision and the first global budgetary commitment for the 7-year programme. The financing agreement covers the whole duration of the programme and the first global budgetary commitment, while the successive financial commitments are added through a procedure of exchange of letters. In addition, the implementation of a cross-border-cooperation programme under indirect management by a beneficiary country (IMBC) requires bilateral arrangements being signed between the lead IPA beneficiary and the non-lead IPA beneficiary.

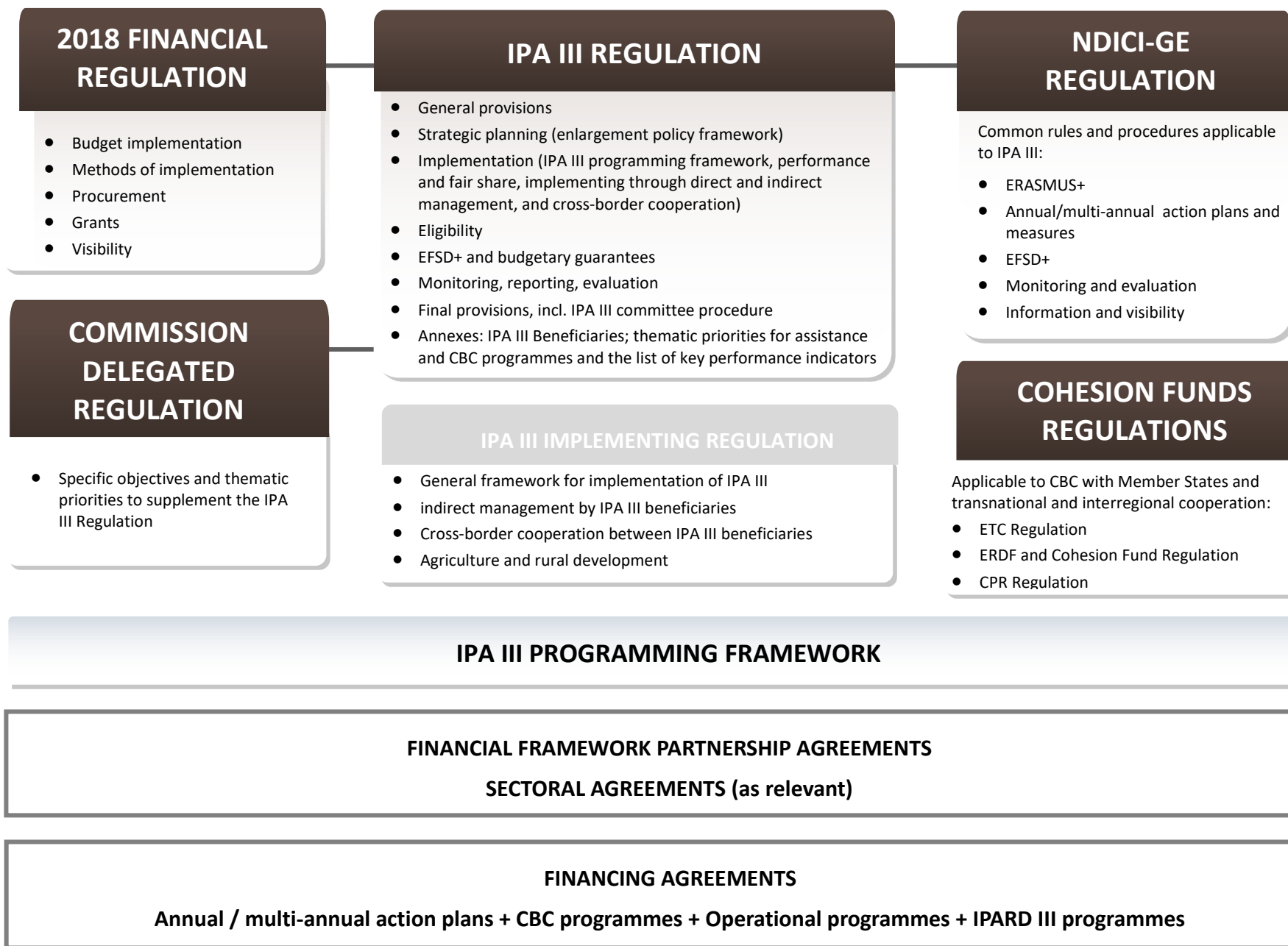
Cross-border cooperation between IPA III beneficiaries and Member States

A financing agreement for a 7-year programme is concluded after the approval of an Interreg cross-border cooperation programme and the adoption of the related Financing Decision. A financing agreement is concluded between the Commission, representing the Union, and each participating IPA III beneficiary represented in accordance with the national legal framework. The Member State hosting the managing authority of the Interreg programme may also sign the financing agreement. Where the Member State hosting the managing authority decides to sign the financing agreement, the financing agreement shall be considered to be a tool to implement the Union budget in accordance with the Financial Regulation and not an international agreement as referred to in Articles 216-219 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

Any financing agreement shall be concluded by 31 December of the year following the year when the first budget commitment was made and shall be considered to be concluded on the date when the last party has signed it.

IPA Rural development (IPARD) programme

A financing agreement for an IPARD III programme is signed after adoption of the Financing Decision and the first global budgetary commitment for the 7-year programme and conclusion of the FPPA and the Sectoral Agreement. The financing agreement sets out the financial commitments in annual instalments, implementation deadlines and the provisions for the entrustment of budget implementation tasks to IPA III beneficiary.



3. KEY IPA III PROGRAMMING DEFINITIONS

Action

An action in the IPA III context is a coherent set of co-ordinated activities undertaken to meet the objectives of the IPA III programming framework, with an estimated total cost to which the EU approves a maximum contribution, as well as implementation schedule and performance parameters. Actions make up an action plan or a measure. In the programming process an action is first outlined in an action fiche and eventually detailed in an action document.

Action fiche

An action fiche is a document developed during the identification stage of the annual programming process of bilateral and multi-country actions according to a template provided by the Commission (See Section 13).

Action document

An action document is a document developed during the formulation stage of the annual programming process of bilateral and multi-country actions according to a template provided by the Commission. An action document is based on an action fiche or action fiches considered relevant by the Commission during the policy relevance assessment stage. The IPA III action document template includes detailed instructions for filling in each section together with links to relevant thematic and methodological guidance that should be followed during the drafting process.¹ Each action document is consulted internally within the Commission among relevant services and validated by Member States in the IPA III Committee. An action document is an integral part of a Commission financing decision (an annex to the Commission Implementing Decision). Action documents are attached to the corresponding Financing Agreement. (See Section 13)

Action plan

An annual or multi-annual action plan translates the thematic priorities and objectives identified in the IPA III Programming Framework into a set of measures to be implemented via specific actions (action documents). The NDICI-GE Regulation foresees that an action plan should specify for each action the objectives pursued, the expected results and main activities, the methods of implementation, monitoring and evaluation as well as the budget and any associated support expenditures. An action plan can be specific to an IPA III beneficiary or cover several IPA III beneficiaries (a multi-country action plan). Action plans should be prepared in an inclusive, transparent and timely manner. Action plans consist usually of several actions and they are subject to a Commission Decision, after a positive opinion provided by the IPA III Committee.

¹ The action document template includes methodological and thematic guidance as well as links to key guiding documents, for example the [IPA III Results Framework](#) that should be used in defining the indicators; the [Budget Support guidelines](#) that should be used in developing actions implemented through budget support modality; the [Guidelines on integrating the environment and climate change into EU International cooperation](#) that should be used to integrate or mainstream environmental and climate change considerations in the actions, etc.

Activity

Activity is a component of an action or measure, and it can be clearly identified by its costs and EU contribution, as well as type of financing, such as procurement or grant. During the programming process the types of activities, such as capacity-building, consultancy, studies, support to infrastructure, supply of equipment, are determined by the identified needs and, as a consequence, the expected outputs. They represent a key element of the Intervention Logic. The choice of activities is also determined by the types of financing (e.g. procurement, grant, etc.) and it may be implemented via one single or several types of financing.

Intervention

An intervention is a coherent set of activities and results constituting an effective level for the operational follow-up by the Commission of its operations on the ground. It can be a project, a complex programme (articulated around a set of projects), a budget support operation or a mix of budget support and other typologies of contracts, an action plan, etc. (N.B. the action document template provides further clarifications on related terms of intervention logic, overall objective/impact, specific objective/outcome and outputs).

Measure

A measure can take a form of an individual measure, special measure, support measure or exceptional assistance measure. Similarly to an action plan, a measure has to take into account the specific context and specify for each action the objectives pursued, the expected results and main activities, the methods of implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation as well as the budget and any associated support expenditures. A measure may consist of several actions or an individual action.

Programme

A programme is an annual or multiannual action plan or measure as referred to in Article 9 of the IPA III Regulation and Chapter III of Title II of the NDICI-GE Regulation.

Programming

Under IPA III programming is a process through which the strategic and thematic priorities of the IPA III Programming Framework are translated into implementable actions and activities on the ground. Programming entails both identification and formulation of actions presented in annual and/or multiannual action plans/programmes or measures. The programming phase also includes the formal processing of the selected actions by the Commission through inter-service consultation, consultation of Member States in the IPA III Committee and adoption of the Commission financing decision.²

Identification stage

The identification stage is the first phase of the programming process during which potential actions are discussed with internal and external stakeholders and experts, and elaborated as proposals (action fiches) and assessed in terms of their policy relevance. The identification stage depends on the complexity of the action and whether preparatory studies are needed (e.g. operational

² Under the NDICI-Global Europe instrument programming is perceived as the phase during which the medium and long-term international cooperation priorities are defined and eventually presented in the multi-annual indicative programmes, while under the IPA III instrument (as under previous IPA instruments), the development of the multi-annual strategy document, i.e. the IPA III programming framework, is perceived rather as strategic planning.

programmes). Under the IPA III, the identification stage of bilateral actions officially starts after the launch of the new programming cycle by DG NEAR, although in practice the programming should be seen as a continuous process. The identification stage includes identification of relevant actions by National IPA Coordinators (NIPAC) and EU Delegations in close coordination with DG NEAR geographical, thematic and horizontal teams and other Commission services, where relevant; NIPACs' submission of the updated strategic response and action fiches to the Commission; the policy relevance assessment, including qualitative opinion on action fiches by the Commission; and DG NEAR communication to NIPACs on the results of the policy relevance assessment and invitation to prepare fully-fledged action documents on those actions that are considered to be relevant.

The identification stage for multi-country actions follows the same synchronised approach with the difference that programming of actions is done by DG NEAR (or line-DGs) in close coordination with national authorities. Proposals for multi-country actions can be also submitted by the IPA III beneficiaries, provided that the nature of the action is of genuine regional scope and it is endorsed by several IPA III beneficiaries.

Formulation stage

The formulation stage is the second phase of the programming process during which actions are formulated into action documents with a clear intervention logic and indicator framework, which provides the basis for monitoring, reporting and evaluation. This stage requires that national authorities work closely with the Commission, to ensure both a good design and maturity of the proposed action. This stage also typically includes the quality assessment and an approval process of a financing decision. Under the IPA III annual programming process, the formulation stage includes formulation of actions by NIPACs in close coordination with EU Delegations and DG NEAR; submission of draft action documents and supporting documents to DG NEAR; Commission maturity assessment that integrates the internal quality review of action documents; DG NEAR communication to NIPACs on the results of the maturity assessment and invitation to finalise action documents. To note that the formulation stage is followed by the last stage in the programming process in which DG NEAR prepares the commitment file for a financing decision, inter-service consultation with relevant Commission services and consultation of Member States in the IPA III Committee, followed by preparation of the Commission financing decision, and submission of the Financing Agreements for signature and ratification by IPA III beneficiaries.

For multi-country actions, the action documents are prepared by the Commission services in consultation with IPA III beneficiaries and other key stakeholders. The decision making procedure, including inter-service consultation, comitology and adoption by the Commission, is the same as for the bilateral actions plan. No Financing Agreements are concluded for multi-country action plans.

Strategic response

A strategic response is a strategic document prepared by an IPA III beneficiary, in line with a template provided by the Commission, to respond to the IPA III programming framework. A strategic response aims to both demonstrate how the IPA III beneficiary's overall policies and adopted sectoral and horizontal strategies address the thematic objectives and priorities of the IPA III programming framework (Part 1 of the document) and what IPA III funding is needed to meet the objectives of the IPA III Programming Framework (Part 2 of the document). The document is structured so that Part 1 and Part 2 are prepared per each IPA III Programming Framework Window. For each Window, Part 1 is submitted for the whole duration of the multi-annual financial framework (2021-2027), and subject to updates on a yearly basis only if and when deemed necessary. For each Window, Part 2 contains a list of actions planned over three programming years, with action fiches provided for the first year. Part 2 is therefore a 'rolling' document, which is revised and re-submitted by National IPA III Coordinators every year, according to the annual programming timetable by the Commission.

Policy relevance assessment

The policy relevance assessment of the strategic response is a part of the identification stage in the annual IPA III programming process. As Part 1 of the strategic response has been assessed separately, and it is not subject to continuous changes, the annual policy relevance assessment focuses on Part 2 of the strategic response, more specifically the submitted action fiches. The policy relevance assessment is based on the specific policy relevance criteria. The policy relevance assessment is performed by expert panels per Window, consisting of DG NEAR representatives and representatives of line-DGs, when relevant. Following the qualitative expert opinion of the panels, a management decision will be made on those action fiches that will be prepared further. The multi-country action fiches prepared by DG NEAR or line-DGs are subject to the same policy relevance assessment, to ensure complementarity of proposed actions.

Maturity assessment

Maturity assessment is part of the formulation stage of the IPA III annual programming process, whereby the Commission makes an assessment of the draft action documents submitted by the IPA III beneficiaries (bilateral actions) and DG NEAR or line-DGs (multi-country actions). The maturity assessment is based both on the institutional and technical readiness criteria communicated by the Commission to IPA III beneficiaries at the time of providing the strategic response template.

4. MAIN ACTORS IN IPA III PROGRAMMING

DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR)

DG NEAR has the overall responsibility to lead on the EU financial assistance, including the policy, budgetary and legal framework related to the multi-annual financial framework under its responsibility, and coordinate the programming of the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) III and the neighbourhood chapter of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe. DG NEAR is responsible for the preparation and monitoring of implementation of the relevant IPA III legal framework and the multi-annual programming document, the IPA III programming framework.

DG NEAR issues programming guidance and templates on IPA III funded programmes under its responsibility, including IPA III bilateral and multi-country programmes, IPA III operational programmes and cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries. DG NEAR launches the programming process with IPA III beneficiaries and ensures thematic, geographical and horizontal support during the identification and formulation phases of the process, and conducts the policy relevance assessment and technical maturity assessment annually. DG NEAR is also in the lead for the IPA III multi-country programming and implementation of actions, in coordination with other Commission services, as relevant, and in consultation with the IPA III beneficiaries. DG NEAR also ensures the inter-service consultation, consultation of the Member States in the IPA III Committee, prepares the Commission financing decisions on all IPA III funded programmes under its responsibility and concludes the respective financing agreements with IPA III beneficiaries on behalf of the Commission.

EU Delegations

EU Delegations are the first and the main contact point for national authorities on behalf of the Commission on programming of IPA III assistance. National authorities are expected to integrally involve EU Delegations in programming both during identification and formulation stages. EU Delegations provide in-house support during the programming process. They can also mobilise DG NEAR thematic expertise and/or engage external expertise, where relevant, to support national authorities with programming.

While EU Delegations are not formally part of the expert panels conducting policy relevance assessment, they contribute to the policy relevance assessment as well. EU Delegations play the key role in the maturity assessment stage, as they provide a comprehensive assessment based on the established maturity criteria, including both on institutional and technical readiness.

DG Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI)

DG AGRI is responsible for supporting eligible IPA III beneficiaries on all stages of programming and implementation of IPA rural development (IPARD) assistance over the period 2021-27. DG AGRI is the primary contact point for IPA III beneficiaries and provides all relevant guidance on preparation of IPARD III programmes, ensures inter-service consultation, presents programmes to the opinion of EU Member States in the IPA III Committee, prepares the Commission financing decisions, concludes the financing agreements on behalf of the Commission and ensures regular monitoring and guidance during implementation.

DG Regional and Urban Policy (REGIO)

DG REGIO is responsible for supporting eligible IPA III beneficiaries on all stages of programming and implementation of cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries and EU Member States (Interreg VI-A) and participation of IPA III beneficiaries, as relevant, in transnational

and interregional cooperation programmes (Interreg VI-B and VI-C). The managing authorities are the primary contact point for IPA III beneficiaries. Where necessary, DG REGIO may provide specific guidance on preparation and/or participation in the above programmes and ensures inter-service consultation and presentation of the Interreg VI-A programmes to the opinion of the Member States in the IPA III Committee. DG REGIO is also responsible for preparing the relevant Commission financing decisions and concluding the financing agreements on behalf of the Commission and supporting the managing authorities in setting up/improving monitoring during implementation.

National IPA Coordinator

The National IPA Coordinator (NIPAC) is a high-ranking representative of the government or the central administration of the IPA III beneficiary, supported by a NIPAC office, and the Commission's main interlocutor for the overall process of coordination of programming, monitoring of implementation, evaluation and reporting of IPA III assistance. The NIPAC's role is defined in the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement. The NIPAC is expected to (a) ensure a close link between the use of IPA assistance and the general accession process; (b) ensure the overall coordination of programming, in line with the objectives and thematic priorities of the IPA III programming framework, monitoring of implementation, evaluation and reporting of IPA assistance, including the coordination within the IPA III beneficiary's administration and with other donors; (c) coordinate the participation of IPA III beneficiaries in the relevant cross-border cooperation programmes, and where appropriate transnational and interregional cooperation programmes (unless the function is delegated to a territorial cooperation coordinator or a structure established for the management of cross-border cooperation); (d) endeavour that the IPA III beneficiary's administration takes all necessary steps to facilitate the implementation of the related programmes.

NIPACs play a key role in coordinating the annual programming exercise within the administration. They have to ensure the close consultation and coordination with the Commission, especially EU Delegations. Article 16 of the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement formalises the consultation requirement with the Commission both during the identification phase (preparation of revised strategic responses and action fiches) and the formulation phase (preparation of action documents).

NIPACs need to ensure that the programming guidance provided by the Commission, including the budgetary ceilings, are respected. NIPACs need to uphold the overall strategic focus in programming and act as a broker among institutions and stakeholders, and limit, where necessary, the action proposals to the most relevant ones. NIPACs also need to ensure that the methodological and thematic guidance provided in the action documents is followed during the drafting process and perform an overall quality control function of action fiches and action documents that are submitted to the Commission.

NIPACs also have to oversee the implementation of the enhanced sector approach, i.e. that IPA assistance contributes to ensuring that sectors are not 'islands' but bound by the same horizontal rules on policy planning coordination, monitoring, financial management, etc. This will therefore require that NIPACs also regularly coordinate with institutions in charge of public administration reform.

Finally, NIPACs need to motivate line institutions to perceive the IPA III programming as a continuous exercise. They need to oversee that strategic responses are continuously updated and those actions that the Commission has assessed as relevant but not yet mature, are being developed into mature ones for the next programming round.

IPARD Managing Authority

The IPARD Managing Authority is a public body acting at central level, in charge of preparing and implementing the IPARD III programme, including selection of measures and their publicity, the coordination, evaluation, monitoring and reporting of the action concerned. The IPARD Managing Authority is managed by a senior official with exclusive responsibilities.

Cross-border cooperation structures (CBC between IPA III beneficiaries)

Cross-border cooperation structures within the administration of each participating IPA III beneficiary are responsible for preparing, implementing and managing the cross-border cooperation programmes. The same cross-border cooperation structure may be used for more than one cross-border cooperation programme.

Managing Authority (INTERREG programmes)

Member States and IPA III beneficiary/beneficiaries participating in an Interreg programme shall identify, for the purposes of Article 71 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, a single managing authority and a single audit authority, to be located in the same Member State. The managing authority of an Interreg programme shall carry out the functions laid down in Articles 72, 74 and 75 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, with the exception of the task of selecting operations. The managing authority, after consultation with the Member States and the IPA III beneficiary(ies) participating in the Interreg programme, shall set up a joint secretariat, with staff taking into account the programme partnership. The joint secretariat shall assist the managing authority and the monitoring committee in carrying out their respective functions. The joint secretariat shall also provide information to potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under Interreg programmes and shall assist beneficiaries and partners in the implementation of operations. For Interreg IPA programmes, one or more branch offices of the joint secretariat may be set up in one or more IPA III beneficiaries in order to carry out its tasks closer to potential beneficiaries and partners from the IPA III beneficiaries, respectively.

IPA III Committee (EU Member States)

The IPA III Committee, which consists of representatives of all EU Member States and is chaired by a high-ranking official of the European Commission, assists the Commission in the implementation of the IPA III instrument by providing an opinion on implementing acts that the Commission intends to adopt. The Committee has its own Rules of Procedure.

The IPA III Committee is an examination Committee, whereby the Commission cannot adopt implementing decisions if they are not in accordance with the opinion of the Committee, except in very exceptional circumstances, where they may apply for a limited period of time. The Committee can deliver an opinion either by consensus (i.e. all represented Member States have a positive opinion on the draft decision submitted by the Commission) or through a vote. In both cases the qualified majority is necessary, i.e. at least 55% of the Member States (at least 15 Member States) representing at least 65% of the population of the Union and the Member States are represented. However, the chair may decide to establish that there is no opinion in case there are not enough Member States in the room to achieve qualified majority. A Committee's opinion can be obtained orally in the Committee meeting or through a written procedure.

The examination procedure applies to all action plans (programmes), individual measures, support measures, special measures and action plans adopted in order to implement rapid response actions, as well as to exceptional assistance measures. Only IPA III contribution to Erasmus+ and Interreg transnational and interregional programmes are not subject to the opinion of the IPA III Committee.

Action plans, programmes and measures that are below defined thresholds do not need to be submitted for the IPA III Committee for opinion, but they have to be communicated to the European Parliament and to the Member States within one month of their adoption.

As a novelty under IPA III, the Commission presents an annual assessment on the implementation of the IPA programming framework to the IPA III Committee. The assessment is based on the indicators included in the IPA III Programming Framework and shall also include the state of play of the allocations committed and planned and state of play of implementation of the performance-based approach and the fair share principle. The Commission has presented the first such assessment in November 2022 and intends to provide the annual assessment at the end of each programming year.

European Parliament

In line with the European Parliament's role to perform political control (Article 14 of the Treaty on the European Union), the European Parliament and the Commission have agreed to conduct a high-level geopolitical dialogue between the Commission and the European Parliament on the implementation of the IPA III Regulation twice a year. This dialogue allows to exchange views with the European Parliament, whose positions on the implementation of the IPA III are taken into consideration, in full respect of the Commission's ability to implement the IPA III instrument.

The high-level geopolitical dialogue focuses on general orientations on the implementation of the IPA III, including on programming before the adoption of the IPA III programming framework, and programming documents, and on specific subjects such as the suspension of assistance to a beneficiary when it persistently fails to observe the principles of democracy, the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The geopolitical dialogue is conducted both as a high-level dialogue between the Commissioner in charge of Neighbourhood and Enlargement, on behalf of the Commission, and the European Parliament, and a permanent dialogue at senior officials' level with European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) working groups to ensure an adequate preparation and follow up to the high-level dialogue.

5. IPA III PROGRAMMING: MAIN CHANGES AND NOVELTIES

The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III presents a fundamental shift on how the EU provides pre-accession financial assistance to EU candidate countries and potential candidates. Unlike under IPA (2007-13) and IPA II (2014-20), programming of IPA III assistance is based on EU thematic priorities rather than pre-defined country envelopes or country strategies. The only strategic planning framework is the IPA III Programming Framework for the period 2021-27.

The main differences and novelties between IPA III and the previous IPA II instrument, linked to programming of financial assistance, can be summarised as follows:

IPA III	IPA II
One thematic strategy document 2021-27, the IPA III programming framework, with a possibility for a mid-term review; seven IPA III beneficiary strategic responses (for annual programming)	Eight strategy documents 2014-20 (one for each IPA II beneficiary and a multi-country strategy paper) with a mid-term review
Five thematic Windows encompassing IPA II sectors; a requirement for mainstreaming of horizontal priorities across all thematic Windows and alignment with the 'do no harm' principle	Eight sectors + territorial cooperation
The 2021-27 indicative financial envelope divided between five thematic Windows	The 2014-20 indicative financial envelope divided between each IPA III beneficiary and multi-country strategy
Policy-based approach building on an enhanced sector approach	Sector approach
Performance assessment embedded in the annual programming process	Performance assessment linked to one-time performance reward
Predictability/fair share decided annually as part of the annual programming process of bilateral actions	Predictability/fair share fixed in the country and multi-country strategy documents
Modulation of assistance linked to Fundamentals of the enlargement process	-
CBC programme between IPA III beneficiaries for 7 years, with one financing agreement. Specific yearly allocations committed through exchange of letters. Technical Assistance included in the CBC programmes.	CBC programme between IPA II beneficiaries for 7 years, with annual financing agreements. 3 annual action programmes/financing decisions allocating the funds in year 1 (together with the 7-year programme), years 2-4, and years 5-7. Technical Assistance not included in the CBC programme (with one exception).
Multi-annual operational programmes, with transition to ex-post controls	Multi-annual sector operational programmes with ex-ante controls
Financial Framework Partnership Agreements	Framework Agreements
Commitment to specific spending targets, notably to climate change	-
Commission annual assessment on implementation of the IPA III programming framework for the IPA III Committee	-
Biannual high-level geopolitical dialogue on IPA III with the European Parliament	Strategic dialogue with the European Parliament in preparing the mid-term review and before any substantial revision of IPA II programming documents

Strategic planning framework for IPA III assistance

Under IPA II the strategic planning framework for EU assistance was provided by the IPA II country strategy papers, prepared by the Commission in close consultation with the national authorities for seven years, together with a multi-country strategy paper, all subject to one mid-term revision. These strategy documents also defined the indicative financial envelope for each beneficiary and multi-country programmes for a seven year period, including indicative annual allocations.

Under IPA III the strategic planning and financial framework is provided by the **IPA III programming framework** organised according to the five thematic Windows for the period 2021-27:

- Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy
- Window 2: Good governance, EU *acquis*, 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

In addition, horizontal priorities such as climate change, environment, gender, and rights-based approach are to be mainstreamed across all Windows, and actions have to be in line with the “do no harm” principle, which requires that no EU funding should be provided to actions that risk undermining EU environmental objectives.

In the annual programming process, equally important part of the strategic planning framework is the **strategic response** prepared by each IPA III beneficiary as a response to the IPA III programming framework. In the strategic responses the IPA III beneficiaries set out how they intend to use IPA to achieve the objectives set out in the IPA III programming framework. The strategic response provides the rationale and policy underpinning the proposals for IPA funded actions. IPA strategic responses are national strategic documents which guide the prioritisation of IPA assistance at the level of the IPA beneficiary. They are prepared by national authorities, under the responsibility of the National IPA Coordinator, in close consultation with the Commission, for a period of at least three years and are revised during the annual programming process. The proposals for individual actions included in the strategic responses (revised annually) will need to be in line with the relevant policy and sector context as set out in the strategic response.

‘Policy first’ programming approach

The thematic programming approach shows a logical progression on how the EU provides pre-accession financial assistance. The approach has evolved from a ‘project approach’ under IPA to ‘sector approach’ under IPA II and to ‘policy first’ approach under IPA III.

Under IPA II the starting point of annual programming was to assess to what extent the foreseen actions in IPA beneficiaries’ (sector) strategies were relevant and could be supported with EU funds, to further advance on the enlargement agenda. Under IPA III the beneficiaries rather have to demonstrate that their strategies are relevant in line with the thematic and strategic EU priorities, such as the green and digital agenda, and the priorities of the IPA III Regulation and the IPA III Programming Framework, and hence can be considered eligible (policy relevant) for IPA III funding.

The new IPA III programming approach is more demanding for IPA III beneficiaries, because there are no more bilateral geographical envelopes, which would clearly frame internal prioritisation. NIPACs especially need to follow closely the Commission programming guidance and ensure a strong internal coordination role. This will require regular consultation with the EU Delegation and good internal capacity and coordination mechanisms between NIPAC and line-institutions and other stakeholders, to allow to focus efforts on the most relevant actions only.

Sector approach under IPA III

The main novelty under IPA II was the progressive introduction of the sector approach. The sector approach was perceived both as a strategic target for programming and a key cross-cutting principle of IPA II. The rationale behind was that the sector approach would allow to have less stand-alone projects and fewer contracts as was the case under the first IPA instrument, and, conditions allowing, sector budget support through sector reform performance contracts (SRPC) or depending on the context, a state and resilience building contract (SRBC), to further reduce the administrative burden and enhance the impact of IPA II support.

The IPA III Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA), Article 5(2)(f), states that ...*“IPA III assistance shall ensure continuity with the sector approach, which has aimed to increase coherence between national strategies, sector policies, resource allocation and spending practices. Under IPA III, there will be continued focus on ensuring coherence between sectoral reforms and horizontal national policy planning, monitoring, reporting and public financial management frameworks.”*

The sector approach therefore continues to be a key cross-cutting principle under IPA III, but in a more enhanced format, reflecting the evolution of the enlargement agenda and the increased focus on public administration reform as part of the Fundamentals of the enlargement process, together with rule of law and economic development and competitiveness.

The key difference between sector approach under IPA II and IPA III is that it is not anymore sufficient to focus separately on each sector but to ensure that same horizontal standards on policy planning, monitoring (indicators), reporting, budgeting, etc. are consistently applied in each sector, in line with the rules and standards issued by ministries and central services in charge of finance, public administration, strategic planning, etc. The public administration reform requirements of the enlargement process therefore should also be reflected in the planning and programming of IPA III assistance. The clearest example of this enhanced sector approach is that IPA III beneficiaries are not anymore requested to produce specific sector planning documents, but strategic responses, which should encompass this more holistic approach addressing the horizontal common standards. Similarly, horizontal priorities such as climate change, environment, gender, and rights-based approach cannot be perceived falling under specific sectors but have to be effectively mainstreamed across all sectors.

Performance, fair share, suspension and modulation of assistance under IPA III

Performance

The IPA III Regulation foresees that IPA III assistance is differentiated in scope and intensity according to performance of IPA III beneficiaries, in particular as regards their commitment to and progress in implementing reforms, as well as according to their needs. The performance assessment and decisions on assistance has to pay particular attention to the efforts made in the fields of rule of law and fundamental rights, democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness.

Performance is assessed as part of the annual programming process. The assessment should take into account the findings of enlargement reports (assessment of sector reforms, fundamentals), external expert assessments, track record in implementing Commission recommendations (e.g. enlargement reports, Economic Reform Programmes, sub-committee conclusions, etc.), track record in implementing ongoing EU and other donor funded actions, as well as other political considerations. IPA III beneficiaries are incentivised to continue in their reform path by rewarding those that perform better, accelerating and intensifying support, adjusting the scope of the support and holding back some forms of support to push for reforms. This is in line with Communication on

enlargement methodology which foresees that if countries progress on their reform priorities agreed in the negotiations, this should also lead to increased funding and investments. As the performance assessment is integrated in the annual programming process, there is no more one-time performance reward as under IPA II.

Fair share

The fair share principle is integrally linked to performance, and both need to be assessed in parallel during the annual programming process. While performance focuses on the commitment of IPA III beneficiaries to necessary reforms in line with the objectives of the IPA III Regulation and the IPA III Programming Framework, the fair share principle focuses on the respective needs and capacities of IPA III beneficiaries.

IPA III assistance aims to ensure progress with respect to all IPA III beneficiaries, regardless of where they stand on the accession process. Fair share means that no IPA III beneficiary who is committed to IPA III objectives should receive a disproportionately low level of assistance compared to other beneficiaries. Therefore, if all IPA III beneficiaries are equally committed to reforms, they would be roughly expected receive the similar funding as under IPA II. However, if some IPA III beneficiaries show a clearly increased level of commitment to reforms in the area of Fundamentals, this should equally be rewarded, hence having some impact on the levels of funding for other IPA III beneficiaries.

Suspension and modulation of assistance

The IPA II Regulation did not contain explicit reference to the possibility of suspending or adjusting assistance in cases where a beneficiary would not observe the principles of the IPA II instrument, notably the principles of democracy, rule of law and the respect for human rights. However, the 2018 Financial Regulation refers to the respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law as essential for sound financial management and effective Union funding, hence providing the possibility to adjust assistance as necessary. The Commission also has the power to suspend financing agreements if partners breach obligations, including those related to respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law and in serious cases of corruption or if the IPA beneficiary is guilty of grave professional misconduct proven by any justified means. This is also the case when financing agreements concern budget support, in which case agreed disbursements could be interrupted or suspended.

The IPA III Regulation explicitly outlines the parameters to modulate (adjust) IPA III assistance under Article 8(5). Modulation of assistance refers to the possibility of the Commission to adjust the scope and intensity of IPA III assistance in the case of a significant or persistent lack of progress in the fields of the rule of law and fundamental rights, democratic institutions and public administration reform, economic development and competitiveness. A decision on modulation has to be substantiated by the indicators of the IPA III Programming Framework related to above areas, as reported in the annual enlargement reports. The indicators are the following:

- Degree of readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates on political criteria (source: European Commission)
- Functioning of judiciary (source: European Commission)
- Fight against corruption (source: European Commission)
- Fight against organised crime (source: European Commission)
- Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (source: World Bank)
- Freedom of expression (source: European Commission)
- Public Administration Reform (source: European Commission)
- Degree of readiness of candidate countries and potential candidates on economic criteria (source: European Commission)

In practice, modulation of IPA III assistance would imply a more limited level of assistance while parallel seeking ways to continue to support fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law, including civil society, people-to-people contacts and, where appropriate, cooperation with local authorities.

The IPA III Regulation further foresees that where progress has resumed, assistance should be modulated accordingly. This decision would need to be substantiated by the annual assessment of the IPA III Programming Framework by the Commission.

IPA III Regulation
Article 8
Assistance to beneficiaries, performance assessment and fair share principle

- (1) Assistance under this Regulation shall be based both on a performance-based approach and the fair share principle, as set out in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4
- (2) Assistance shall aim to ensure progress with respect to all the beneficiaries listed in Annex I and shall be targeted and adjusted to their specific situations, taking into account any further efforts needed to meet the objectives of this Regulation. The needs and capacities of those beneficiaries shall be taken into account in accordance with the fair share principle in order to avoid a disproportionately low level of assistance as compared to other beneficiaries.
- (3) Assistance shall be differentiated in scope and intensity according to performance of the beneficiaries listed in Annex I, in particular as regards their commitment to and progress in implementing reforms, as well as according to their needs.
- (4) In assessing the performance of the beneficiaries listed in Annex I and deciding on the assistance to be provided, particular attention shall be paid to the efforts made in the fields of the rule of law and fundamental rights, democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness.
- (5) In the case of a significant regression or persistent lack of progress by a beneficiary listed in Annex I in the areas referred to in paragraph 4 of this Article as measured by the indicators referred to in Article 7(5), the scope and intensity of assistance shall be modulated accordingly, in accordance with paragraph 6, including by reducing the funds proportionally and redirecting them in ways that avoid compromising support for improving fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law, including support to civil society and, where appropriate, cooperation with local authorities. Where progress has resumed, the assistance shall also be modulated accordingly in accordance with paragraph 6 to further support those efforts.
- (6) Assistance to the beneficiaries listed in Annex I shall be decided in the framework of measures referred to in Article 9.

Spending targets and mainstreaming of horizontal priorities under IPA III

The IPA III Regulation sets for the first time specific spending targets for EU pre-accession funding. The IPA Regulation sets the spending target of 18% for **climate** finance, increasing to 20% by 2027. This could imply that approximately EUR 2.6 billion of IPA III funding should contribute to climate change action over the period 2021-27. For **biodiversity** the overall ambition is 7.5% in the first four years of multiannual financial framework and 10% in the last two years, applying to the EU budget (not by funding instrument). However, this could imply up to EUR 0.5 billion of IPA III funding, depending on whether the pledge to double biodiversity funding by the President of the European Commission in the September 2021 State of the Union speech³ also applies under IPA III.

³ [soteu 2021 address en 0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

Furthermore, while the IPA III Regulation does not pertain a numeric target on the number of actions focusing on **gender equality**, the IPA III Regulation makes a strong commitment to this effect. The targets included in the [EU Gender Action Plan III](#) for the period 2021-25, being global in their nature and applying to all EU's external action, are also applicable for IPA III actions. By 2025, 85% of new IPA III actions need to be gender-responsive, contributing thus to achieving gender equality (G1 marker), including 5% of these actions having gender equality, women's and girls' rights and their empowerment as a principal objective (G2 marker).⁴ The [joint staff working document](#) sets out the objectives and indicators to frame the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III, including the numerical targets to be reached.

IPA III Spending targets and commitment to gender equality

Spending target on climate
Recital 25 of the IPA III Regulation: “[...] Reflecting the importance of tackling climate change in line with the Union’s commitments to implement the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, IPA III should contribute to mainstreaming climate action in the Union’s policies and to the achievement of an overall target of 30 % of Union budget expenditure supporting climate objectives [...]. Actions under IPA III are expected to contribute 18 % of the overall financial envelope of IPA III to climate objectives, with the objective of increasing this percentage to 20 % by 2027. [...]”

Contribution to the overall Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) target for biodiversity
Recital 25 of the IPA III Regulation: “[...]Reflecting the importance of tackling climate change in line with the Union’s commitments to implement the Paris Agreement adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (7) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, IPA III should contribute to mainstreaming climate action in the Union’s policies and to the achievement of an overall target of 30 % of Union budget expenditure supporting climate objectives and the ambition of 7.5 % of the budget reflecting biodiversity expenditures in 2024 and 10 % in 2026 and 2027, while taking into account the existing overlaps between climate and biodiversity goals.”

Commitment to gender equality
Recital 27 of IPA III Regulation: “The implementation of this Regulation should be guided by the principles of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and should seek to protect and promote women’s and girls’ rights in line with the EU Gender Action Plans and relevant Council conclusions and international conventions, including the Council conclusions on women, peace and security of 10 December 2018. Strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Union external action and increasing efforts to reach the minimum standards of performance indicated by the EU Gender Action Plans should lead to a gender-sensitive and transformative approach in the cooperation between the Union and the beneficiaries listed in Annex I. Gender equality should be reflected and mainstreamed throughout the implementation of this Regulation

In addition, the IPA III Regulation commits to upholding the mainstreaming of horizontal priorities such as gender equality, climate change and environmental degradation across all programmes. It calls for all programmes to be aligned with the “do no harm” principle and, to the extent possible, to the EU’s sustainable finance taxonomy. During the IPA III programming process it is thus necessary to prioritise actions dedicated to addressing climate change and biodiversity challenges. The guiding line for programming is that all programmes that can, should contribute to achieving the climate and biodiversity targets. Parallel, the “do no harm” principle should be respected.

⁴ The GAP III applies the OECD DAC gender equality three-point scoring system, whereby *principal* (marked G2) means that gender equality is the main objective for undertaking the action; *significant* (marked G1) means that gender equality is an important objective, but not the principal reason for undertaking the action; and *not targeted* (marked G0) means that the action has been screened against the gender marker but has not been found to target gender equality.

Relevant DG NEAR thematic units and line-DGs should be involved in the identification of IPA III actions, both to help to identify relevant actions and to support the identification of ways to maximise the contribution of proposed actions and programmes to these spending targets.

IPA III commitment to mainstreaming horizontal priorities

Mainstreaming climate change and environment
Recital 26 of IPA III Regulation: "Actions under IPA III should support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in September 2015 as a universal agenda, to which the Union and its Member States are fully committed and which all beneficiaries listed in Annex I have endorsed. In order to achieve those objectives, in addition to actions in which climate is one of the main objectives, actions under IPA III should, whenever possible, mainstream environmental sustainability and climate change objectives across all sectors, with particular attention to environmental protection and tackling cross-border pollution, and should pursue green growth in national and local strategies, including supporting sustainability criteria in public procurement. Actions under IPA III should be consistent with the principle of 'do no harm' and should comply with Union taxonomy to the extent possible, in particular to ensure the sustainability of investments in the Western Balkans and Turkey."

Mainstreaming horizontal priorities
Article 6 of IPA III Regulation: "Programmes and actions under IPA III in pursuit of the specific objectives referred to in Article 3(2) shall mainstream the horizontal priorities of climate change, environmental protection, human rights and gender equality, in order to promote integrated actions that create co-benefits and meet multiple objectives in a coherent way. Where applicable, programmes and actions shall address interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goals, including the goals of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, as well as of poverty reduction"

Team Europe approach under IPA III

Team Europe, launched as part of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, consists of the European Union, the EU Member States — including their implementing agencies and public development banks — and the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Team Europe is about strengthening coordination, coherence and complementarities of actions to scale up European impact and raise Europe as a partner of reference.

In the enlargement context, the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), a joint initiative of the EU, international financial institutions, bilateral donors and beneficiaries is an example of the Team Europe approach. The WBIF aims at enhancing harmonisation and cooperation in investments for the socio-economic development of the region and contributing to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Similarly in Türkiye, the Turkey Investment Platform⁵ established in 2022 under the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) could be also considered an example of a Team Europe approach.

In programming of IPA III actions, EU Member States are closely involved throughout the identification and formulation stages, thanks to regular consultation by National IPA Coordinators and EU Delegations. EU Member States are also consulted on the proposed IPA III actions through the comitology procedure (See Section 4).

⁵ The platform is called Turkey Investment Platform, since it was established prior to 7 October 2022, when the EU started to officially use the new name of the country.

6. IPA III PROGRAMME TYPES AND METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Types of IPA III funded programmes

Annual Action Plan

An annual action plan in favour of an IPA III beneficiary plan translates the thematic priorities and objectives identified in the IPA III programming framework into a set of measures to be implemented via specific actions. An annual action plan comprises a set of action documents prepared by an IPA III beneficiary in partnership with the Commission. An annual action plan or parts of it can be implemented in direct management by the Commission (EU Delegation) or in indirect management with an entrusted entity or in indirect management with beneficiary country with *ex ante* controls.

Multi-country Action Plan

A multi-country action plan (programme) is an annual or multi-annual action plan that is prepared on the basis of the IPA III programming framework, and in close coordination with bilateral action plans, to ensure complementarity of IPA III assistance. Multi-country actions are prepared by the Commission (DG NEAR, line-DGs), in consultation with IPA III beneficiaries and other key stakeholders in particular when an action addresses well-defined regional objectives fostering regional cooperation; when issues are best tackled regionally because of their cross-border dimension; when an action implements a common methodology such as benchmarking, diagnostic studies or exchange of good practices; when an action enables common approaches through facilities/mechanisms and offers greater efficiency including economies of scale; and finally, when the nature and size of investments warrants them to be implemented under a specific framework such as the Western Balkans Investment Framework. Multi-country action plans can be implemented in direct management by the Commission or in indirect management with an entrusted entity under the responsibility of DG NEAR.

Operational programme

An operational programme is a multi-annual action plan with annual instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI-GE Regulation. It is based on the relevant thematic priorities of the IPA III programming framework. An operational programme is prepared by the IPA III beneficiary, in close consultation with the Commission, according to the DG NEAR guidance "*IPA III Operational Programmes with ex-post control – Guidance for preparation and implementation*"⁶ and a specific operational programme template (See Section 13). The programme is adopted by the Commission, and it is subject to a financing agreement between the Commission and IPA III beneficiary. Each IPA III beneficiary country contributes to the budget of the operational programme through national public funding. The programme is implemented in indirect management by beneficiary country with *ex post* verification of tendering and contracting by the Commission. Over the period 2021-27, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye are eligible for operational programmes. DG NEAR is in charge of the operational programmes.

IPA rural development programme

An IPA III rural development (IPARD) programme is a multi-annual action plan with annual instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI-GE Regulation, covering the entire period of

⁶ The guidance on operational programmes has been provided via the following notes: [ARES\(2022\)1803443](#) of 11 March for Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, and [Ares\(2022\)1899900](#) of 15 March for Türkiye.

the IPA III implementation. An IPARD III programme comprises a pre-defined set of measures based on the relevant priorities of the IPA III programming framework and the agriculture and rural development strategies of the IPA III beneficiary. The programme is prepared by the IPARD Managing Authority in close consultation with the Commission (DG AGRI). The programme is adopted by the Commission, and it is subject to a financing agreement between the Commission and the IPARD III beneficiary. Each beneficiary country contributes to the budget of the programme through national public funding, and the IPA III contribution is co-financing public expenditure actually paid to the recipients. The IPARD programme is implemented under indirect management by beneficiary country with *ex post* verification by the Commission. Over the period 2021-27, IPARD III programmes are implemented by Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. DG AGRI is in charge of IPARD III programmes.

Cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries

A cross-border cooperation programme between two or more IPA III beneficiaries, essentially between Western Balkans beneficiaries with land-borders, is a multi-annual action plan covering the entire period of the IPA III implementation. It is managed by DG NEAR and implemented either in direct management by an EU Delegation or in indirect management by a lead IPA III beneficiary, who hosts the contracting authority. A CBC programme focuses on the thematic priorities defined in Annex III of the IPA III Regulation and under Window 5 (Territorial and cross-border cooperation) of the IPA III programming framework.

Cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries and EU Member States (Interreg VI-A)

A cross-border cooperation programme between one or more IPA III beneficiaries and one or more EU Member States is a multi-annual action plan covering the entire period of the IPA III implementation. It is managed by DG REGIO and implemented in shared management with a single Managing Authority located in one of the Member States participating in the programme according to the rules defined in the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation. It is funded both by the European Regional Development Fund and IPA III funds, which are pooled together without breakdown of funds per country. The programme focuses on the thematic priorities defined in the Interreg Regulation, and it needs to be presented to the opinion of the IPA III Committee.

Transnational and Interregional Cooperation programme (Interreg VI-B and VI-C)

IPA III contributes to the participation of IPA III beneficiaries in European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, which are managed by DG REGIO. The participation of an IPA III beneficiary is decided by the participating Member States, i.e. they may invite the IPA III beneficiaries and/or the beneficiaries covered by the NDICI-GE Regulation to participate in the programme. IPA III funds are pooled together with ERDF Funds, and where relevant, with NDICI-GE funds. These programmes are implemented in shared management under the rules for implementation defined in the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation and they do not need to be presented to the opinion of the IPA III Committee.

Union programmes

The European Union programmes are cooperation programmes that enable participating Member States and eligible third countries to strengthen their cooperation on key EU policies for the duration of a multi-annual financial perspective. Union programmes are financed from the EU general budget, covering key Union policy areas from environmental protection, research and innovation, energy, transport, customs, health, justice, higher education, anti-fraud to the development of entrepreneurship and competitiveness, and others. They represent significant instruments for defining and conducting internal EU policies.

The participation of IPA III beneficiaries in Union programmes has the objective of preparing them for full membership upon accession, ensuring a closer integration with the EU, accelerating integration and “phasing-in” as part of the accession processes. Encompassing most Community policies, these Union programmes are a major pre-accession instrument that helps candidate countries and potential candidates and their citizens familiarising themselves with the European Union policies and working methods. Participation in the Union programmes encourages the active involvement of public and private institutions, civil society institutions and universities to benefit from the EU accession process. IPA III funding may contribute to reimbursing part of the entry tickets and participation fees of IPA III beneficiaries for the Union programmes.

Other types of programmes

Beside annual or multiannual action plans, there may also be other types of programmes:

Individual measures can be implemented in duly justified cases, such as where the action(s) is not based on the IPA III programming framework, either because the programming framework has not yet been adopted or because the action is not covered by the programming framework.

Special measures can be adopted in the event of unforeseen needs or circumstances, and when funding is not possible from more appropriate sources. For instance, these could be measures to ease the transition from emergency aid to long-term development operations or measures to better prepare people to deal with recurring crises.

Support measures can be adopted to cover expenditure for administrative support associated with the preparation, follow-up, monitoring, control, audit and evaluation activities as well as expenditure at Commission headquarters and EU Delegations for the administrative and coordination support needed for a specific programme, and to manage information and communication actions, and corporate information technology systems.

Methods of implementation

Methods of budget implementation (formerly referred to as management mode) is the term used to describe the entity that will ensure the implementation of EU funds, including the legal arrangement (contractual or legislative) through which funds are channelled to recipients. There are three methods of implementation: direct management, indirect management and shared management. The method of implementation of EU funds is an essential element of a financing decision, and must be clearly specified therein.

Direct management

Direct management is the method of implementation used when the Commission (Commission Headquarters, an EU Delegation or an executive agency of the EU) directly implements the EU funds, by contracting with recipients through the following delivery methods: procurement and grant award procedures; prizes; budget support; and payment to an EU Trust Fund.

Indirect management

The Commission can entrust implementation of an action/programme to an entity when an entity falls within one of the categories of Article 62(1)(c) of the Financial Regulation and has successfully passed the entrustment procedure or the pillar assessment, i.e. a procedure verifying that a ‘candidate entity’ demonstrates a level of financial management and protection of the EU financial

interests equivalent to that of the Commission. Under IPA III there are two types of indirect management modes: indirect management by a beneficiary country (IMBC) either with *ex ante* or *ex post* controls by the Commission or indirect management by a pillar-assessed entity.

Shared management

Shared management is a method of implementation in which implementation of EU funds is entrusted to Member States. Member States act through bodies responsible for the management and control of Union funds (managing authorities) and may delegate some of their tasks to other bodies in accordance with sector-specific rules.

Shared management mode is used for management of cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries and Member States (Interreg VI A), and Transnational and Interregional Cooperation programmes (Interreg VI-B), where IPA III beneficiaries may participate upon invitation of participating Member States. For these programmes IPA III funds are pooled together with the European Regional Development Fund, and DG REGIO is in charge of programming them.

More information on methods of implementation is available on the [DG NEAR Manual of Procedures](#) site (EU login required).

TYPES OF IPA III FUNDED PROGRAMMES AND METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION								
BILATERAL/MULTI-COUNTRY			TERRITORIAL COOPERATION			RURAL DEVELOPMENT	OTHER	
Annual Action Plan (bilateral)	Multi-country Action Plan	Operational programme	CBC between IPA III beneficiaries	CBC between IPA III beneficiaries – EU Member States (Interreg VI A)	Transnational and Interregional Cooperation (Interreg VI-B)	IPARD Programme	Horizontal Support Measure/Special or Individual measure/ participation in EU programme	
DG NEAR	DG NEAR	DG NEAR	DG NEAR	DG REGIO	DG REGIO	DG AGRI	DG NEAR DG EAC (Erasmus+)	
FORMS OF IPA III FUNDED PROGRAMMES	ANNUAL Method of implementation	✓ Direct management by Commission or indirect management with entrusted entity or indirect management by beneficiary country with <i>ex ante</i> controls	✓ Direct management by Commission or indirect management with entrusted entity				✓ Direct management by Commission	
	MULTI-ANNUAL (with suspensive clause) Method of implementation	✓ Direct management by Commission or indirect management with entrusted entity	✓ Direct management by Commission or indirect management by beneficiary country with <i>ex ante</i> controls				✓ Direct management by Commission	
	MULTI-ANNUAL (with annual budgetary instalments) Method of implementation		✓ Indirect management by beneficiary country with <i>ex post</i> controls		✓ Shared Management	✓ Shared management	✓ IMBC with ex-post controls	

7. MAIN DELIVERY METHODS UNDER IPA III

The 2018 Financial Regulation sets out delivery methods that can be used under IPA III. The below list identifies the main delivery methods available under IPA III as used for programmes under DG NEAR responsibility, although some of them are not currently relevant for programming of IPA III assistance. More information on delivery methods is available on [DG NEAR Manual of Procedures site](#) (EU login required).

Public procurement

Public procurement/tenders are used to purchase services (e.g. technical assistance and studies), supplies (i.e. equipment and materials) or execution of works (i.e. infrastructure and other engineering works) following one of the procedures defined in the [Practical Guide \(PRAG\)](#). While services and supplies can be procured both under direct and indirect management, DG NEAR has taken a position that execution of infrastructure and engineering works should only be procured under indirect management by beneficiary country or through a blending facility, the Western Balkans Investment Framework (See the specific guidance under Section 12).

Grant

A grant is a financial donation/non-commercial payment by the contracting authority to a grant beneficiary to finance either an action intended to help achieve a Union policy objective (action grant) or the operation (i.e. the running costs) of an entity which pursues an aim of general European interest and supports a European Union policy (operating grant). The beneficiary is normally selected following a competitive call for proposals but can also exceptionally be awarded a grant directly. Under IPA III grants are typically provided to civil society organisations, non-state actors, international organisations and public bodies. The [Practical Guide](#) explains the grant award procedures applying to all EU external actions. A grant can also be provided to an IPA III beneficiary to reimburse a part of the participation fee (entry ticket) for the Union programmes. During the IPA III annual programming an action document can be prepared for this purpose either under annual action plan in favour of Türkiye or under multi-country action plan for the Western Balkans IPA III beneficiaries (See Section 8.6).

The Practical Guide outlines the key differences between public procurement and grants as follows:

Procurement "Buying things"		Grants "Giving money"
Purchase of services, supplies or works	Object	Proposal from an applicant to contribute to the achievement of a policy objective through: - a project (i.e an action grant); or - the functioning costs of the applicant (i.e. an operating grant)
Contracting Authority	Owner of Results	Grant beneficiary
100% of the cost	Financial contribution	The Union finances a part of the costs, which are eligible for Union-financing. The grant beneficiary (or another donor) finance the other part.
Allowed	Profit	Not allowed

Budget support

Budget support is an implementation modality with an aim to advance reforms and achieve sustainable results. It involves policy dialogue, financial transfers to the national treasury account of the partner country, performance assessment and capacity development. The four general eligibility criteria have to be met before and during the programme, and specific conditions and performance indicators, where relevant, need to be fulfilled for payments to be made. The four general eligibility criteria relate to the macro-economic conditions, public financial management, budget transparency and oversight, and the existence and implementation of a relevant and credible national/sector policy. Once the general conditions are met, fixed tranches can be released in accordance with the payment schedule agreed under the Financing Agreement. Payments under the variable tranches are additionally subject to meeting results targets, as specified under the Financing Agreement.

Under IPA I budget support was limited to exceptional cases, while under IPA II sector budget support was introduced as a standard delivery method and the main type of budget support contract implemented. Sector budget support is regarded as an ultimate demonstration of a sector approach, as the EU is co-financing the implementation of the IPA beneficiary's (sector) reform strategy rather than individual projects.

Under IPA III, budget support is expected to be provided in form of **sector reform performance contracts (SRPC)**, which focus on sector policies and reforms. The main potential benefits of the SRPC are:

- An increased impact of EU financial assistance due to an incentive for beneficiaries to implement coherent (sector) reforms rather than isolated projects;
- A strong link between the EU political agenda and enlargement policy and financial assistance, including through policy dialogue in the IPA III Monitoring Committees and Stabilisation and Association Agreement sub-committees.
- A strong coherence between the fundamentals of the enlargement process and the eligibility conditions for budget support, i.e. a (sector) strategy framework, a stable macro-economic framework, a sound public financial management system, and transparency and oversight of the budget; and
- More focused capacity building that accompanies sector budget support; and
- Increased ownership and accountability of the beneficiary through greater government control.

Under IPA III, the **state and resilience building contracts (SRBC)** may continue to be exceptionally adopted to respond to a crisis situation. While eligibility criteria for SRBCs are the same as for SRPCs, the credibility of the public policy supported (and to some limited extent the other three general conditions) are assessed on the basis of a forward-looking approach. A strong policy dialogue – and safeguard measures when necessary – are also key pillars of SRBCs. (See Section 8.2 on programming of budget support during an annual programming process.)

Blending

Blending refers to any operation where EU funds (grants and/or financial instruments) are combined (blended) with funds from other donors, including partner finance institutions as well as private sector funds, such as loans and investments. The objective of blending is to achieve greater leverage and impact by pooling EU resources on a larger scale with other funds, in particular from multi-, bilateral and regional development banks.

A blending facility is a cooperation platform set up by the Commission through which development or other public finance institutions can receive funding. Those partner entities, which have to be pillar-assessed, can combine their funding with commercial finance institutions and investors who aim also at achieving certain Union priority objectives and policies. The [Western Balkans Investment Framework \(WBIF\)](#) is the key blending facility, supported with IPA III funds, to primarily support with implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan.

The **Turkey Investment Platform** was set up in 2022⁷ under the EFSD+ instrument. It aims to serve as a coordination mechanism that identifies, discusses and approves investment initiatives proposed by eligible financial partners in Türkiye, to be financially supported by the Commission through blending and budgetary guarantees operations under EFSD+ (see below under Budgetary guarantee)

Financial instruments

Financial instruments are measures that typically take the form of equity or quasi-equity investments, loans or guarantees, or other risk-sharing instruments. They can also be combined with other forms of financial support (e.g. technical assistance, interest rate subsidies, investment grants). Financial Instruments need to be authorised by means of a basic act. For DG NEAR the use of financial instruments is authorised by Article 27(1)(e) of the NDICI-GE Regulation, which is also applicable to IPA III by virtue of cross-reference in its Article 9(1). Financial Instruments in external actions are typically implemented in indirect management with one of the Commission's pillar-assessed implementing partners, such as an international organisation, a Member State organisation or a third country donor organisation or the EIB group.

Budgetary guarantee

Budgetary guarantees are legal commitments on behalf of the EU's budget for a financial obligation that can be called upon when a specified event materialises. In EU external action, budgetary guarantees are delivered through the [European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus \(EFSD+\)](#) established for the period 2021-2027. It is available for IPA III beneficiaries. A budgetary guarantee is typically used to mitigate investment risk and attract private investment. It is backed by a provisioning fund containing real funds (liquidity cushion). However, the funds provisioned only cover part of the risks incurred (provisioning rate). The remaining risks are accounted for as contingent liabilities for the EU budget. The maximum amount of risks authorised is set out in the basic act. The EFSD+ budgetary guarantees are implemented in indirect management. Budgetary guarantees are only provided to the Commission's pillar-assessed partners, such as international organisations, national agencies and the EIB/EIF. The guarantee can cover a wide range of financial instruments that eligible counterparts may propose to use with the aim of achieving development impact, including loans, guarantees, counter-guarantees, capital market instruments and any other form of funding or credit enhancement, insurance, equity or quasi-equity participations.

Prizes

Prizes are a financial contribution given as a reward following a contest. They should promote the achievement of policy objectives of the Union. The amount of the prize is not linked to costs incurred by the winner and a prize cannot be awarded directly without a contest.

⁷ [C\(2022\) 1895](#) final of 31 March 2022

Choice of a delivery method for institution / administrative capacity building

The selection of a delivery method during the IPA III programming process depends both on the type of action and the beneficiary of the action. In most cases the choice of a delivery method is clear. However, when it comes to institution-building, especially support to administrative capacity building of public sector institutions, including support to legislative development, strategic and institutional process and training and capacity-building, several delivery methods could be selected.

The choice of the delivery method depends on a number of factors, including the state of play of the EU accession process, the complexity of the action, administrative capacity and the absorption capacity of the IPA III beneficiary, the track record of implementing capacity building support in the past, and other ongoing and planned support for the thematic area and institution, etc.

It is therefore important that the IPA III beneficiary reflects with an EU Delegation (and DG NEAR as relevant) on whether an institution-building action or parts of it is best implemented through technical assistance, twinning, support of an entrusted international/national organisation or short-term technical assistance via the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) facility.

Technical assistance (procurement)

Technical assistance is provided by a private sector company or a consortium of companies selected in a competitive tendering procedure. The selected experts (consultants) provide targeted support on the basis of the Terms of Reference, which are adapted to the existing situation during the inception phase. Technical assistance can be both short-term and long-term. Typically in long-term actions a Team Leader ensures a regular presence on the ground, and specific expertise is provided by key medium-or short-term experts together with non-key short-term experts. Technical assistance may be used to provide various forms of support, such as policy and legislative assessments and advice, one-to-one coaching, mentoring, small group facilitation, training, etc. Technical assistance is bound by the expected results of the Terms of Reference, but it can be flexible and adjust to capacity constraints of the IPA III beneficiary.

Twinning⁸

Twinning is a dedicated institution-building modality providing expertise from Member States' administrations to the public institutions of partner countries. Twinning is made of a grant contract signed with Member States public institutions. In the enlargement context twinning specifically aims to provide support for the alignment, implementation and enforcement of the EU *acquis*. It builds up capacities of IPA III beneficiaries' public administrations throughout the accession process by sharing good practices and fostering long-term relationships between Member States' and partner countries' administrations. A twinning project involves a permanent Resident Twinning Advisor and several short-term experts. Twinning requires that the IPA III beneficiary's institutions have sufficient staff and absorption capacity to work with Member State institutions. The IPA III beneficiary has to mobilise its staff, demonstrate enduring commitment and ownership and take on board changes and best practices in a sustainable way. Twinning is a shared commitment between the IPA III beneficiary and the EU Member States with an aim to achieve the mandatory results.

Twinning Light is designed to offer a more flexible support, usually up to six months or exceptionally up to eight months, and without the presence of a Resident Twinning Advisor. It is suitable for well-defined short-term actions and can also serve as a bridging support between larger institution-building actions.

⁸ See [Twinning \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument (TAIEX)⁹

TAIEX is a modality that supports public administrations with approximation, application and enforcement of EU legislation. It also facilitates the sharing of EU best practices. It is largely needs-driven and delivers appropriate tailor-made expertise to address issues at short notice through workshops, expert missions and study visits. It is suitable for short-term assignments addressing well-defined problems.

Indirect management with an entrusted international or Member State organisation

Institution building can also be supported by pillar-assessed entities, especially international organisations or Member State organisations. In many cases, especially with large actions involving institution-building, they are selected due to their capacity to manage large and complex reform programmes, cost-effectiveness of the action, and capacity to do procurement and sub-contracting.

⁹ See [TAIEX \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.eu)

8. PROGRAMMING OF BILATERAL / MULTI-COUNTRY ACTIONS

8.1 MAIN STEPS IN THE ANNUAL PROGRAMMING PROCESS

The IPA III annual programming processes for 2021 and 2022 were exceptional, as the annual programming had to be launched prior to the finalisation of the IPA III legal and programming framework, which were adopted only in the second part of 2021. Consequently, the identification of actions had to be made on the basis of the draft IPA III programming framework and without the finalised strategic responses.

Also the 2023 annual programming in favour of Western Balkans and multi-country programming had to be put on hold after the policy relevance assessment stage, following the Commission decision in October 2022 to take immediate and urgent action in response to the effects of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on energy security in the Western Balkans, resulting in programming of the 2023 Western Balkans Energy Support Package (budget support in the form of state and resilience building contracts). Consequently, the 2024 annual programming is based on the proposals made for the 2023 programming and any new actions originally planned to be proposed during 2024 programming.

The following table provides an overview of the key steps, responsibilities and timelines in the annual programming process of bilateral and multi-country actions during a regular programming year. The timing should be considered indicative only.

Responsibility	Task	Indicative timing (N=year of adopting the annual action plan)
Launch of the annual programming process		
DG NEAR	DG NEAR sends an instruction note to NIPACs on the upcoming annual programming process, including timelines and updated templates (as necessary).	Q4 of N-2/ Q1 of N-1
A. Identification stage		
Identification of actions		
NIPACs; EU Delegations; DG NEAR; Other Commission services	NIPACs and EU Delegations work in close coordination on identification of actions and ensure informal consultation with DG NEAR geographical and thematic units and other Commission services (e.g. DG AGRI), where relevant. This may also include Commission programming missions. <i>In parallel, DG NEAR identifies relevant multi-country actions, in close coordination with NIPACs and EU Delegations.</i>	Q1 of N-1
NIPACs	Submission of the (updated) strategic response, including action fiches	Q2 of N-1
Policy relevance assessment, including qualitative opinion of action fiches		
DG NEAR; Other Commission services	Expert panels per Window, consisting of DG NEAR representatives and representatives from other Commission services (where relevant), assess strategic responses/action fiches. Each panel provides a qualitative opinion on the strategic responses and the relevance of proposed action fiches. <i>Expert panels assess in parallel multi-country actions, to ensure coherence and</i>	Q2 of N-1

	<i>complementarity.</i>	
DG NEAR	After validation by DG NEAR senior management/and information to Commissioner, DG NEAR sends feedback to NIPACs on the strategic response, selected action fiches and instructions for the preparation of draft action documents. <i>NIPACs are in parallel informed on the proposed multi-country actions.</i>	Q3 of N-1
B. Formulation stage		
Formulation of actions		
NIPACs; EU Delegations; DG NEAR;	NIPACs prepare action documents in close coordination with EU Delegations and DG NEAR geographical/regional units, who ensure quality support of thematic units and, where relevant, external experts. <i>In parallel, units in Headquarters in charge of multi-country programmes prepare the multi-country action documents.</i>	Q3 of N-1
NIPACs	Submission of draft action documents and supporting documents	Q4 of N-1
Maturity assessment of draft action documents, including formal quality review		
EU Delegations DG NEAR	EU Delegations and DG NEAR assess maturity of draft action documents, including budget availability	Q4 of N-1/ Q1 of N
DG NEAR; Other Commission services	DG NEAR conducts an internal quality review of action documents, involving thematic and other relevant horizontal units and other Commission services. <i>Quality review of multi-country actions is organised at the same time.</i>	
DG NEAR	Internal consultation of proposed annual action plans and validation by the Cabinet of the Commissioner. <i>Multi-country actions are consulted and validated at the same time.</i>	
DG NEAR	Consultation with NIPACs on multi-country action documents	
Finalisation of action documents		
DG NEAR	Submission of the revised action documents to NIPACs, including comments/revisions provided by geographical, regional thematic and horizontal units and line-DGs	Q1 of N
DG NEAR	Finalisation of multi-country action documents	Q1/Q2 of N
NIPACs	Submission of final action documents and supporting documents	Q1/Q2 of N
C. Consultation and adoption		
Preparation of a commitment file and Inter-service consultation		
EU Delegations DG NEAR	Preparation of the commitment file and internal checks for both annual and multi-country action plans. Launch of the inter-service consultation. Revision of documents based on received comments.	Q2 of N
Consultation of Member States in the IPA III Committee		
DG NEAR	Presentation of annual and multi-country action plans to opinion of Member States in the IPA III Committee (submission of documents at least 20 days in advance to the Committee). Update/revision of documents based on Member States comments.	Q2 of N
Financing Decision		
DG NEAR	Preparation of an adoption file for Commission decision for bilateral and multi-country action plans	Q2 of N
Financing Agreement(s)		
DG NEAR NIPACs	Drafting and submission of Financing Agreement(s) on bilateral annual action plans for signature/ratification by IPA III beneficiary and internal coordination of the signature/ratification procedure	Q2/Q3 of N

Launch of the annual programming process

In a regular programming year DG NEAR launches the annual programming process with a **note to National IPA Coordinators (NIPACs)** at the end of the year N-2 or at the beginning of the year N-1. The note to NIPACs provides the indicative timeline for the key stages of the programming process and includes the updated programming templates, as relevant. The note provides key information on the lessons learnt during the previous programming rounds and gives the specific instructions for the upcoming programming cycle.

The experience so far has been that a regular annual programming process could take up to 18 months from the identification stage to eventual adoption of the Commission financing decision. The Commission will therefore need to formally launch the programming process early, so that the financing decisions for the year N would be adopted in the first part of the year N. This is in line with the Commission's commitment to reduce backlog, accelerate implementation and launch procurement procedures shortly after adoption of the financing decisions.

In parallel DG NEAR, unit in charge of coordinating the **multi-country programming**, informs the relevant units and line-DGs on the launch of the new annual multi-country programming cycle. While multi-country programming is done annually, a multi-country programme can cover both annual and multi-annual actions (e.g. Western Balkans Investment Framework, Civil Society Facility and Media programme, etc.).

Identification stage

The identification stage is the first phase of programming during which potential actions are discussed with internal stakeholders, the Commission (EU Delegation, DG NEAR, other Commission services), external stakeholders (civil society organisations, other donors, etc.) and potentially external experts (e.g. such as experts from the NEAR Greening Facility). The length and complexity of the identification stage depends on the complexity of the action and whether preparatory studies are needed. Under the IPA III annual programming process of bilateral actions, the identification stage also includes the Commission's policy relevance assessment of action fiches submitted by NIPACs (bilateral actions) and DG NEAR geographical units and/or other Commission services (line-DGs) for multi-country actions as well as invitation to prepare fully-fledged action documents on those actions that are considered to be relevant.

Identification of actions

While the new programming cycle is formally launched with an annual DG NEAR programming note, the IPA III programming is *de facto* a continuous process, which NIPACs need to continuously steer in close coordination with EU Delegations. There is a rolling three-year planning of potential actions provided in the strategic responses prepared by IPA III beneficiaries. Also, the Commission feedback during the maturity assessment stage indicates those actions that are considered relevant but are not yet mature and could be considered in the next programming cycle. The recommendations provided in the annual Commission enlargement package, in the Economic Reform programme, in sub-committee meetings and during the accession negotiation process provide continuous input for annual programming.

The annual DG NEAR launch note includes key programming guidance for the coming programming year. It is the responsibility of the NIPAC to inform all stakeholders on this guidance, especially on the indicated **budget ceilings** that each IPA III beneficiary is strongly advised to respect when submitting the action proposals. These budget ceilings are estimated annually on the basis of the available

annual budget allocations for the given budgetary year, and they aim for *moderate* over-programming for each IPA III beneficiary. For example, if the Commission note invites beneficiaries to make proposals for the budget of 130% of the budgets of previously adopted programme, it is in the interest of each IPA III beneficiary to respect this guidance. Namely, if several IPA III beneficiaries substantially exceed this ceiling, it risks creating bottlenecks and delays during the policy relevance assessment. If, on the other hand, the proposed package is substantially lower than the indicated ceiling, there is a risk of having an abnormally small annual programme, in case some proposals are not considered relevant during the policy relevance assessment stage. It is also important to keep in mind that the advice on the budget ceiling is provided to safeguard both the fair share principle and to allow an appropriate assessment of performance during the policy relevance assessment stage. These key principles of IPA III need to be assessed at the same time (See Section 5).

Identification of actions is the decisive part of the programming process. NIPACs should ensure that it is done in close coordination with EU Delegations. NIPACs need to use the **action fiche template** provided by DG NEAR for identification of action (See Section 13). While the IPA III programming approach focuses on policy relevance in the first part of the programming process, the action fiches should already provide relevant information on the planned action design, including mainstreaming of horizontal priorities, and ideally also indicate how the action fits with past and ongoing assistance in supporting national policy frameworks and responds to EU policy priorities. It is important for NIPACs to ensure that the action fiches that will be submitted to the Commission include all the necessary information.

It would be important to indicate already at the identification stage whether **technical assistance may be needed** during the formulation phase. This will allow EU delegations, together with DG NEAR geographical and thematic units, to assess the most suitable form of support that could be mobilised.

The **identification of multi-country actions** is a continuous process whereby new proposals can be conceived by thematic or geographical units or other line DGs in line with the evolving EU policy framework, the political, social and economic context in the IPA III beneficiaries and in adherence with the requirement to guarantee complementarity and synergies with national programmes. The coordination of the annual programming exercise is ensured by DG NEAR unit in charge of multi-country programming, which also provides the template to be used for programming to other DG NEAR units and/or other Commission services in charge of programming of multi-country actions. Depending on the number and type of proposals received, an internal **strategic discussion** may be organised with the purpose to provide policy orientations with initial inputs from EU Delegations and geographical units and thematic units. This allows to identify the main areas of intervention before the actual drafting of the action fiches will start.

DG NEAR may also organise a **programming mission**, involving, where relevant, DG NEAR thematic and horizontal units. The mission provides an opportunity to clarify any issues NIPACs and national authorities might have and support in steering the programming process. The programming mission also allows to discuss the planned main areas of intervention under multi-country programme, to ensure coherence and complementarity of proposed bilateral and multi-country actions.

Policy relevance assessment, including qualitative opinion of action fiches

Once NIPACs and units in charge of programming of multi-country actions have submitted their proposals, DG NEAR will conduct a policy relevance assessment of all received proposals at the same time. The relevance assessment of the multi-country action fiches is subject to the same principles, criteria and calendar of the relevance assessment of the bilateral action fiches, to ensure synergies and complementarities in line with the IPA III programming approach.

Expert panels, consisting of nominated DG NEAR representatives from geographical and thematic units and representatives from line-DGs (where relevant), assess strategic responses/action fiches

per Window. In addition, all fiches are screened to assess the extent to which they mainstream horizontal priorities and are aligned with the “do no harm” principle. Each panel provides a qualitative opinion on the relevance of proposed bilateral and multi-country action fiches. EU Delegations contribute to the assessment as well, even though they are not formally part of the panels.

The main policy relevance assessment criteria are listed in the table below. They were communicated to NIPACs at the time of providing the strategic response template in November 2020¹⁰.

Main policy relevance assessment criteria
<p>Alignment of the Action with IPA III Programming Framework Is the Action targeting a thematic priority contained in IPA III Programming Framework?</p>
<p>Coherence of Action with the EU enlargement policy Have the links with the recommendations contained in the specific policy instruments of the enlargement process been properly explained?</p>
<p>Coherence of Action with regional and global strategies Is the action coherent with regional and global strategies?</p>
<p>Coherence of the Action with the sector approach Does the Action support implementation, or alternatively, preparation of beneficiaries cross-cutting and sectoral strategies? Does the Action support the outstanding challenges with implementation of the sector approach?</p>
<p>Complementarity with multi-country/regional programmes Is the action complementary with support provided through the multi-country/regional programmes?</p>

Additionally, expert panels will take other elements into account, including the **proposed design** of the action, suitability of the **proposed implementation modality, complementarity** and **sequencing** with ongoing and already programmed IPA III actions in different Windows and thematic areas, and **budgetary considerations**.

The expert panels assess the action fiches according to three categories and assign them different colour codes:

- a relevant action that can be developed into an action document taking into account minor modifications/recommendations (green);
- a relevant action that can be developed into an action document subject to significant modifications, mainly concerning the purpose, the budget, or the implementation modality (yellow);
- an action that is not relevant in terms of EU policy framework or proposed implementation timeframe (red).

The expert panels need several weeks to conduct the assessment, due to amount of proposals received, the need to seek additional information from EU Delegations in cases where the action fiches do not provide clearly the requested information, and the need to consult other panels, when an action covers more than one Window. This confirms the need to ensure upstream engagement and consultations of EU delegations before submission of the proposals, to avoid unnecessary delays during the policy relevance assessment.

¹⁰ [Ares \(2020\)7153206](#) of 27 November 2020

Once the expert panels have finalised their assessments, DG NEAR senior management will make a holistic assessment of the proposed package of relevant actions (e.g. overall performance, fair share, weight among different Windows and thematic priorities in line with Commission key political priorities, etc.).

After informing the Cabinet of the Commissioner on the results of the relevance assessment, DG NEAR provides feedback to NIPACs on selected action fiches and invites them to prepare the draft action documents by a given deadline. NIPACs are in parallel informed on the proposed multi-country actions. DG NEAR will also clearly communicate to NIPACs that the budgets proposed for each action fiche cannot be considered as final budgets, as the preparation of action documents should continue with moderate over-programming, to cater for possible adjustments during the maturity assessment.

Formulation stage

Formulation of actions

NIPACs should work closely with the EU Delegation in formulating the actions based on the comments received from DG NEAR. Depending on needs and capacities, NIPACs could consider thematic or methodological support. With regard to delivery methods (see section 7), NIPACs should consult with EU Delegations the choice of delivery method for institution-building, not the least because institutional capacity plays an important role during assessment of maturity.

The Commission provides the **action document template**, which NIPACs need to use during formulation of actions (See Section 13). The template includes substantial guidance on drafting of action documents, including thematic and methodological guidance on a good design of actions, definition of indicators on the basis of the [IPA III Results Framework](#)¹¹, mainstreaming of priorities, including climate change, environmental protection, civil society, gender equality, and rights-based approach, etc. It is important to follow the guidance provided in the template, to ensure maturity of actions.

In a regular programming year the formulation stage takes up to three months. For more complex actions, such as investments in indirect management by the beneficiary country or budget support, the formulation of actions should have started already much earlier and include technical assistance and thematic support, as necessary.

Once the drafting process is finalised, NIPACs will submit the draft action documents to DG NEAR for maturity assessment.

During the preparation of the **multi-country action documents**, the DG NEAR unit in charge of coordinating multi-country programmes holds at least one meeting with NIPACs, to receive feedback on the draft action documents and incorporate the comments. A similar consultation is carried out also with EU Delegations and DG NEAR geographical and thematic units. The timeline for preparing multi-country actions is fully aligned with the calendar for preparing the bilateral programmes, so that all action documents are finalised at the same time and maturity assessment can be performed jointly for both bilateral and multi-country programmes.

Maturity assessment

¹¹ Methodological notes for the IPA III Results Framework indicators are being defined by DG NEAR. Once they are finalised, they will be shared with all relevant stakeholders.

In IPA III the term maturity refers to the readiness of the action to be implemented. The expectation is that the majority of funds included in the action are ready to be procured after the Commission Financing Decision is adopted, leading to preferably at least 60-70% of the EU funds being contracted within one year after the signature of the financing agreement (for bilateral IPA III programmes).

The maturity assessment will be based on fully fledged actions documents and related supporting documents submitted by NIPACs and units in charge of preparing multi-country actions. Not all contracts included in an action document should follow strictly the maturity criteria, including actions focusing on evaluation, supervision, communication and visibility, audit, etc.

The maturity assessment is carried out in two stages, first as a comprehensive EU Delegation assessment, followed by a lighter DG NEAR assessment. In case of multi-country actions, the maturity assessment is only done in DG NEAR.

The maturity assessment focuses on two aspects: institutional readiness and technical readiness.

Institutional readiness refers to the capacity and the commitment of the final beneficiary of the proposed action to receive the outputs, participate to the activities and maintain outputs after the end of implementation. EU Delegations have the first-hand experience on this, based on the track record of implementation of previous projects. EU Delegations will first and foremost assess current staff capacity, coordination capacity, capacity to manage in parallel other ongoing and planned actions, commitment to implementation of projects, readiness to use project outputs, readiness to provide national budget for the operation and maintenance after implementation has come to an end, etc.

The **technical readiness** refers to the availability of preparatory documents (terms of reference, technical specifications, draft twinning fiche, feasibility studies including environmental impact assessment, climate change risk assessment, cross-benefit analysis, preliminary designs, etc.) to ensure a smooth start of the procurement and the implementation of the various contracts included in the action document. The criteria for the assessment of the technical readiness are detailed in the following table¹².

Implementation Modality	Technical Readiness Criteria (for maturity assessment of action documents)
<i>Procurement: service contracts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate verified institutional and legal framework in place • Needs assessment or preparatory studies completed, if necessary • Absorption analysis (e.g. staff to manage or follow-up of the sector is sufficient and already in place) • Draft ToR
<i>Procurement: works contracts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate verified institutional and legal framework in place • Studies completed (pre-feasibility, feasibility studies, cost benefit analysis – if applicable - and Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, climate change risk assessment), including technical (final design) ready • Co-financing secured (if applicable) • Complete legal documents (cadastre documents, land allocation documents, expropriation, work permits for construction or refurbishment works), in accordance with local legislation.

¹² In view of the specificities of investment projects implemented through WBIF, EFSD+ and Indirect Management by Beneficiary Country (IMBC), such projects are not included in the table. However, the criteria can serve as orientations, notably for projects implemented under indirect management by beneficiary country.

Implementation Modality	Technical Readiness Criteria (for maturity assessment of action documents)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft ToR for supervision • Sustainability issues properly addressed in the action document.
Procurement: supply contracts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate verified institutional and legal framework in place • Beneficiary’s business plan explaining how these supplies adapt to the overall objectives of the Beneficiary • Completed Technical Specifications prepared for the tender procedure • Market survey carried out (if necessary)
Grants (including twinning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Calls for Proposals, guidelines ready and targeted entities clearly identified • For twinning, the draft twinning fiche ready with draft budget
Direct grant award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed description of action • Entity identified and proper justification provided • Grant draft budget prepared
Direct management through budget support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral strategy in place (approved by Government or parliament following relevant legislation) • Sectoral budget prepared for the period targeted by the proposed programme, including the budget needed to finance the measures and additional costs identified to reach the objectives of the reform • Draft Sector Reform Contract ready • Appendix to budget support with the potentially agreed indicators with baselines and targets
Indirect management (with a Member State organisation, third donor country agency, EU specialised agency, international organisation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Delegation Agreement/Description of Action ready • Draft budget with all the costs ready • In case of actions involving loans, draft agreements with the beneficiary ready (municipalities, intermediary banks etc.) • In case of agreements involving works: preparatory work and technical documentations elaborated
Prize (competitions for design or similar)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed description of the activities, purpose of the prize • Identification of participants targeted • Draft budget ready • Co-financing – if government budget allocated for the implementation

Following the institutional and technical readiness assessment, DG NEAR conducts a **budget analysis** of both bilateral and multi-country actions.

As indicated above, when NIPACs are provided the results of the policy relevance assessment, they are also informed that the proposed budgets are not considered final and that programming should continue with moderate over-budgeting, to ensure that there is sufficient amount of mature actions at the end of the maturity assessment. A budget analysis is carried out once the list of sufficiently mature bilateral and multi-country actions is established. At this stage there are still likely to be changes to the proposed budgets, which in turn may require revision of some of the action documents, to ensure sufficient funding for all eventually agreed actions.

Overall, the maturity assessment can take up one to two months, depending on the involvement of EU Delegations during the formulation stage and the extent which the proposed budgets have to be adjusted.

Internal quality review

A quality review process provides the possibility for DG NEAR and relevant line-DGs to assess that the proposed actions, as presented in the action documents, address the Commission's earlier comments and include the necessary elements for the Commission to proceed for inter-service consultation, consultation of the Member States in the IPA III Committee and eventually conclude the Commission financing decision.

Quality review is organised by relevant units, involving thematic and other relevant horizontal units and line-DGs. Quality review of multi-country actions is organised at the same time. During the quality review relevant units assess the quality of design, relevance, mainstreaming of horizontal priorities, and overall presentation. As units have to be allowed sufficient time to assess the documents, the quality review process can take up to 3-4 weeks, especially since during a regular programming year the IPA III beneficiaries have to follow the same programming process, and hence all action documents are submitted to quality review at the same time.

Finalisation of action documents

After internal consultation and validation of the proposed package, the IPA III authorities are invited to finalise the action documents by addressing the provided comments, including on available budgets, by a given deadline, usually within 2 months. It is important for national authorities to continue to work closely with the EU Delegation at this stage, to ensure the required quality of the final action documents. As the selected actions should meet the maturity criteria, the revision of documents should be fine-tuning rather than any further substantial revision.

In parallel, units in charge of preparing the multi-country programmes are asked to revise the documents on the basis of the comments received during the maturity assessment, the quality review and following the consultation of NIPACs.

Preparation of a commitment file and inter-service consultation

After EU Delegations and DG NEAR geographical units have made the checks of the final documents submitted by NIPACs, they need to provisionally reserve the necessary appropriations in the online accounting system. The units in charge of multi-country programmes will follow the same process.

Then, the complete file is prepared for inter-service consultation comprising the draft Financing Decision, the annexes to the Financing Decision (i.e. the final versions of action documents, the budget impact statement and the summary), in line with the templates provided in the Section D.2.3 of the DG NEAR Manual of Procedures. The file has to go through internal DG NEAR checks and be validated by senior management.

The inter-service consultation is conducted via a Commission internal management tool (Decide). The consultation can take between 2 weeks (for documents under 15 pages in Word count) and 3 weeks (for documents exceeding 15 pages in Word count). Typically, the consultation for the draft Financing Decision and final action documents takes 3 weeks. Should any Commission services provide comments during inter-service consultation, documents need to be, where appropriate, adjusted accordingly, and this can take several working days. Hence, the overall process of preparation of the commitment file, the ISC procedure itself and addressing of comments received will in the best-case scenario take one month, but typically it takes at least two months, due to various internal checks and validations needed.

The procedure for conducting inter-service consultation is explained in detail in Section D.2 of DG NEAR Manual of Procedures and in Commission Intranet site dedicated to inter-service consultation.

Consultation of Member States in the IPA III Committee

Once the inter-service consultation is closed and documents revised (as necessary), the action documents and a summary of the action documents are submitted to the opinion of the Member States in the IPA III Committee.

In line with the Rules of Procedure of the IPA III Committee¹³ the draft implementing act, on which the Committee is asked to give an opinion, needs to be sent to the Committee no later than 20 calendar days before the date of the meeting. This will ensure that Member States have sufficient time to get acquainted with the action documents ahead of the meeting. The Committee members will vote on the proposed implementing act in the meeting. The IPA III Committee delivers its opinion in the examination procedure by qualified majority. If the Committee's opinion is positive, the Commission may proceed to adopting the Financing Decision. If the Committee's opinion is negative, the Commission cannot adopt the Financing Decision. Due to the deadline of submitting of the documents well in advance, the overall procedure of consulting the Member States takes at least one month.

The IPA III comitology procedure is explained in detail in Section D.1.6 of DG NEAR Manual of Procedures and in DG NEAR Intranet site dedicated to comitology procedures.

Financing Decision

After Member States have provided a positive opinion in the IPA III Committee, the responsible geographical unit in DG NEAR prepares a draft Financing Decision (consisting of the body of the Commission Implementing Decision and the annexed action documents). In parallel, the responsible units have to complete the commitment file in the OPSYS system. The draft Financing Decision is submitted to the adoption by the Commission through a Commission internal management tool (Decide).

The IPA III Financing Decisions are typically adopted in empowerment procedure by the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement on behalf of the Commission, since IPA III actions fall within the framework set out in the IPA III programming framework. However, should in an exceptional case a measure fall outside the IPA III programming framework, the Financing Decision would need to be adopted in a written procedure by the College of Commissioners.

The length of the procedure for reaching the Financing Decision varies, but depending on the time it takes to prepare a commitment file, the procedure can take one month.

The procedure for preparation of Financing Decision is explained in Section D.2 of [DG NEAR Manual of Procedures](#) (EU login required).

¹³ ARES(2021)5903689 of 28 September 2021

Financing Agreement

After adoption of the Commission Financing Decision and the global budgetary commitment, the Financing Agreement can be signed between the Commission, represented by the relevant geographical Director (authorising officer by sub-delegation) and the representative of the IPA III beneficiary. In line with Article 114.2 of the Financial Regulation, all financing agreements must be concluded by 31 December of year n+1 (year n being the year in which the global budgetary commitment was made). No exception to the n+1 rule is possible.

No Financing Agreement is signed in the case of multi-country programmes.

The Financing Agreement details, inter alia, the terms on which the assistance shall be managed, including the applicable methods of implementation, implementation deadlines, and rules on the eligibility of expenditure. On the basis of the financing agreement, the IPA III beneficiary may also become a direct recipient of funds (budget support) or it may be involved in the implementation of the funds (indirect management). Under indirect management by an IPA III beneficiary, the Financing Agreement shall include the required provisions of Article 158 Financial Regulation, laying down the role and responsibility of each party in the implementation of the funds.

Under IPA III, there are three models of Financing Agreements, i.e. for annual action plans, for multi-annual programmes and for cross-border cooperation. The action documents annexed to the Financing Decision becomes Annex I to the Financing Agreement.

The templates for Financing Agreements are further information is available under Section D.3 of the [DG NEAR Manual of Procedures](#) (EU login required).

8.2 BUDGET SUPPORT

The [2017 Budget Support Guidelines](#) provide the detailed guidance on the design of budget support and should always be referred to as the main guidance during the preparation of budget support programmes.

Identification stage

In the IPA III context, the process of reaching a decision on whether to engage in budget support should include the following assessments, conducted in the first instance by EU Delegations in consultation with the IPA III beneficiary and eventually by relevant DG NEAR units (geographical units, thematic teams and the horizontal budget support team):

- An assessment of the IPA III beneficiary's commitment to the reform agenda in line with the country-specific path to accession. The commitment to the Copenhagen political criteria and the Fundamentals of the enlargement process are a key condition for any IPA III budget support.
- An assessment of the eligibility against the four budget support eligibility criteria.
- An internal risk assessment by EU Delegations and DG NEAR
- A capacity assessment of IPA III beneficiary institutions to implement the (sector) reform.
- An assessment of financing needs based on the cost of national (sector) strategies, allocation of national budget resources for the sector reform, effectiveness and added value of budget support in achieving IPA III beneficiary's policy objectives, and track record of implementation and absorption capacity of past budget support disbursements.

Ideally, each of the above criterion should be judged as high, medium or low, allowing an overall structured approach and the flexibility to define an appropriate mix of aid modalities that best fits the IPA III beneficiary context.

Once the IPA III beneficiary, in close coordination with the EU Delegation in the first instance, has reached a decision to propose sector budget support in a specific sector, the IPA III beneficiary will make a sector budget support proposal as part of the strategic response. The IPA III beneficiary needs to fill in the **budget support readiness assessment** in the action fiche template by answering the questions concerning the four eligibility criteria (Public policy/Sector strategy, Stability-oriented macro-economic framework, Public financial management, and Transparency and oversight of the budget) and fill in the **logical framework matrix for budget support**.

Formulation stage

In case the Commission assesses the IPA III beneficiary's sector budget support proposal relevant during the policy relevance assessment, the IPA III beneficiary is invited to develop a fully-fledged sector budget support proposal in an action document template. Due to the complexity of a budget support modality, it is necessary for the IPA III beneficiary to coordinate and seek support from the EU Delegation and, if necessary, DG NEAR in the elaboration of the action document.

The budget support specificities have to be well explained in the relevant budget support sections in the action document template, especially in the following sections:

- Section 2.4 (Additional Areas of Assessment), including 2.4.1 (Pre-condition on Fundamental Values [for a Sustainable Development Goals Contract only], 2.4.2 (Public Policy), 2.4.3 (Macroeconomic Policy), 2.4.4 (Public Financial Management), 2.4.5 (Transparency and Oversight of the Budget)
- Section 3.5 Indicative Logical Framework Matrix for budget support (to be informed by the relevant IPA III beneficiaries' public sector indicators used in the public policies supported as

well as the [IPA III Results Framework](#) to be used for the selection of indicators to the extent possible).

- Section 4.3 (Implementation of the Budget Support Component), including 4.3.1 (Rationale for the Amounts Allocated to Budget Support), Criteria for Disbursement of Budget Support (4.3.2), Budget Support Details (4.3.3)
- Section 4.4 Methods of implementation (applicable also for complementary support to a budget support)

The maturity assessment involves two stages. The EU Delegation will make the first assessment of technical maturity, followed by the assessment of DG NEAR geographical, thematic teams and units in charge of coordinating budget support. As for all actions, both the institutional maturity and technical maturity will be assessed for budget support. When it comes to technical maturity, in principle the following elements will be assessed by EU Delegations and DG NEAR units respectively:

- The relevance and credibility of the sectoral strategy/public policies in place (approved by Government or parliament following relevant legislation)
- Sectoral budget prepared for the period targeted by the proposed programme, including the budget needed to finance the measures and additional costs identified to reach the targets of the reform
- Draft Sector Reform Contract ready
- The draft appendix to budget support with the potentially agreed indicators with baseline and targets

In case the Commission assesses the budget support proposal to be sufficiently technically mature, the action document is scrutinised and eventually adopted as other annual actions. The assessment of the technical criteria is based on a dynamic approach taking into account track record, political commitment and the momentum/opportunity to engage in budget support in any given programming year.

8.3 WESTERN BALKANS INVESTMENT FRAMEWORK

Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) is programmed as multi-country multi-annual programmes, based on Commission strategic policy priorities for the Western Balkans (Economic and Investment Plan, Green Agenda, Digital Transition, etc.) and information provided by the beneficiaries and other WBIF stakeholders, the Strategic Orientations for Blending and EFSD+ operations as adopted by the WBIF and EFSD+ Strategic Boards.

The duration of current WBIF programmes is 3 years ([EU contribution to the Western Balkans Investment Framework \(WBIF\) 2021-2023](#)) and 7 years ([EU contribution to Sustainable Transport Connectivity in the Western Balkans 2021-2027](#)). The programmes define IPA III support to Western Balkans in the priority areas under Windows 3 and 4 of the IPA III programming framework covering transport, energy efficiency, environmental protection, digitalisation, competitiveness of the private sector, innovation, and Green Growth. The programmes also provides funding for the budgetary guarantees (as EFSD+) and technical assistance to implement these programmes.

During the programming process the following elements are decided:

- The **eligible areas** to be supported by the programmes
- The **thematic focus** of the programmes, planned results and the intervention logic. The WBIF Guidelines for applicants (blending), the [EFSD+ Results Measurement Framework \(ReMF\)](#)¹⁴ (budgetary guarantees) and the [IPA III Results Framework](#) are to be used for the definition of the indicators.
- The **indicative type of activities** as grants in infrastructure development in the priority eligible areas, technical assistance, studies, investment grants and financial instruments risk sharing mechanisms.
- The **indicative budget allocation** per year and action and **implementation modalities** (as direct management, indirect management with entrusted entities and specifically **European Western Balkans Joint Fund** (EWBJF) implementing the bulk of the WBIF assistance, or provisioning for budgetary guarantees).

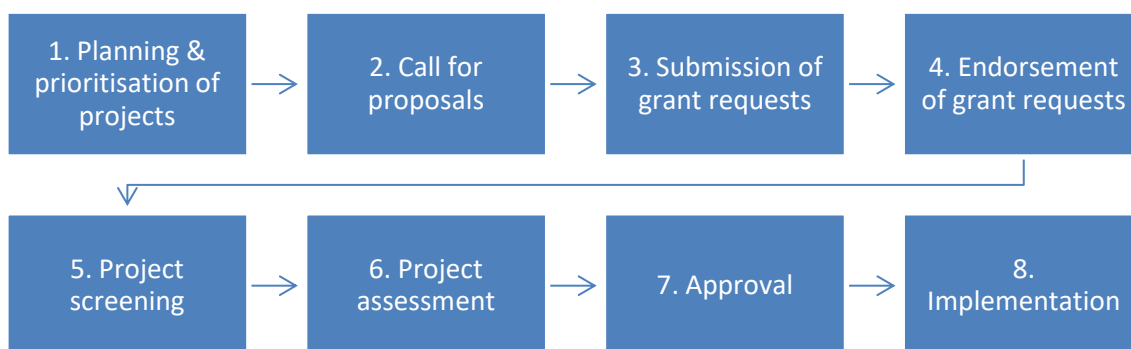
WBIF project selection process

The Operational Board pertaining to blending operations selects the projects/programmes for financing under the WBIF. The Project Financiers' Group (PFG) coordinates the selection process.

WBIF public sector blending

The process for selection of projects/programmes for financing consists of the following key phase:

¹⁴ While the EFSD+ ReMF applies worldwide to both blending and budgetary guarantees, in the case of the WBIF it only applies to budgetary guarantees.

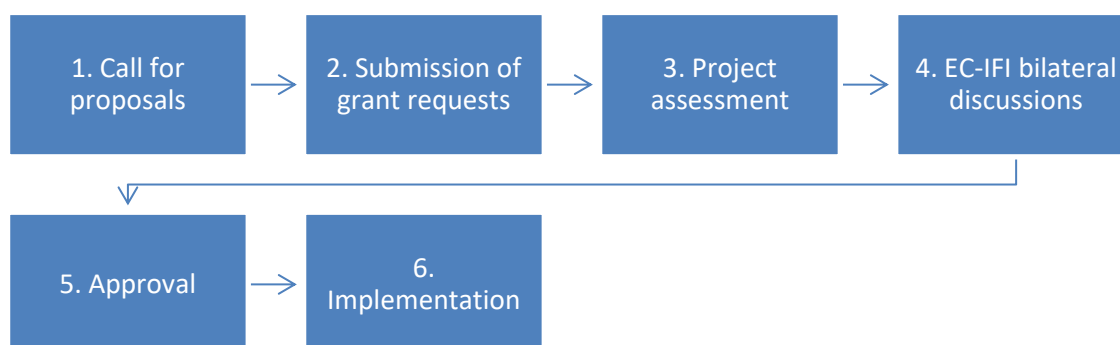


- 1. Planning and prioritisation of projects:** In this phase, projects are identified and discussed jointly by beneficiaries, potential donors and financial organisations, and agreed upon via the National Investment Committee or equivalent national structures for project prioritisation, responsible for compiling and managing the Single (National) Project Pipelines. Upstream discussions on potential projects for WBIF support are initiated by NIPACs in coordination with EU Delegations, WBIF partner financial organisations, interested donors, and implementing institutions and/or investors. This coordination work aims at ensuring that requests for support from the WBIF are consistent with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the WBIF strategic orientations for 2021-2027, areas of intervention and investment priorities, relevant national strategies, investment plans, national budgets and IPA programmes.
- 2. Call for proposals:** The European Commission and bilateral donors decide on a regular basis to call for proposals. As a rule, there are two calls for technical assistance and one call for investment grants a year. The Operational Board endorses the launch of calls for proposals. Eligibility criteria, other specifications and timetables apply to individual calls for proposals. Those are communicated at the launch of the calls and published on the WBIF website.
- 3. Submission of grant requests:** As a result of phase 1, project promoters prepare applications for grant support under the supervision of National IPA Coordinators (NIPACs) and in close cooperation with the Lead Financial Institution (Lead IFI). The NIPACs submit the applications to the PFG by way of a WBIF specific grant application form via the WBIF Management Information System.
- 4. Endorsement of grant requests:** The Lead IFIs review the applications submitted by NIPACs and either endorse or reject the applications they lead under that call for proposals. Endorsement for technical assistance (TA) means that the Lead IFI agrees to be Lead IFI, that the project is within its mandate and that it can provide either an oversight role where the TA grant is funded from IPF or can manage the implementation of the TA following its own policies and procedures where the TA grant is financed from the Joint Fund (EWBJF). Additionally, the Lead IFI may consider a possible loan once the studies are completed. In the case of investment grants, the Lead IFI endorses when it plans to or provides loan financing to a project.
- 5. Project screening:** The grant requests endorsed by Lead IFIs are analysed by the European Commission: DG NEAR, EU Delegations, geographical teams, and line DGs. Specialised entities (NEAR Greening Facility, Energy Community Secretariat, Transport Community Permanent Secretariat) and DG NEAR technical assistance contractors (IFICO, IPFs, CONNECTA) are also consulted. The screening focuses, inter alia, on the eligibility of grant requests and related investment projects.

6. **Project assessment:** Grant requests considered eligible under the WBIF are assessed by the Lead IFIs against technical quality, compliance with environmental and social standards including the promotion of gender equality, procurement requirements, financial and economic sustainability, credit risks and legal aspects. NIPACs and Lead IFIs may improve or amend eligible applications in this phase in accordance with the conclusions of the screening.
7. **Approval:** The PFG reviews the results of the screening and assessment phases, agrees on and submits the eligible grant requests to the Operational Board. The Operational Board selects the Actions eligible for WBIF grant funding and formulates conditions on their selection. After selection by the Operational Board, the EWBIF Assembly of Contributors approves the funding for the eligible Actions.
8. **Implementation:** The implementation of Actions follows the policies, rules and procedures of the relevant funding source:
 - a) In the case of financial allocations made available from the Infrastructure Project Facility (IPF) for technical assistance, the Actions are implemented by contractors managed by the EIB.
 - b) In the case of financial allocations made available from the Joint Fund for technical assistance and investment grants, the funds are managed by the Lead IFI under the terms of the General Conditions of the Fund.

WBIF private sector blending

The process for selection of projects/programmes for financing consists of the following key phase:



1. **Call for proposals:** The European Commission decides on a regular basis to call for proposals; the first call was launched in 2022. The Operational Board endorses the launch of calls for proposals. Eligibility criteria, other specifications and timetables apply to individual calls for proposals. Those are communicated at the launch of the calls and published on the WBIF website.
2. **Submission of grant requests:** Grant requests are submitted by a Lead IFI. The Lead IFIs include the WBIF partner financial organisations (EIB, EIF, EBRD, CEB, KfW/DEG, World Bank, IFC, and AFD) and other pillar-assessed financial institutions. The requests are submitted to the PFG by way of a WBIF specific grant application form via the WBIF Management Information System.
3. **Project assessment:** The European Commission (DG NEAR, EU Delegations, geographical teams, and line DGs) reviews the applications submitted by Lead IFIs. Specialised entities and DG NEAR

technical assistance contractors (e.g. IFICO) are also consulted. The assessment focuses, inter alia, on the eligibility of grant requests and related projects.

4. **EC-IFI bilateral discussions:** Several rounds of discussion may be held with the IFIs on submitted applications prior to the Operational Board. The IFIs may improve or amend the applications in this phase.
5. **Approval:** The PFG reviews the results of the assessment, agrees on and submits the eligible grant requests to the Operational Board. The Operational Board selects the Actions eligible for WBIF grant funding under that call for proposals and formulates conditions on their selection. After selection by the Operational Board, the EWBJF Assembly of Contributors approves the funding for the eligible Actions.
6. **Implementation:** The implementation of Actions follows the policies, rules and procedures of the relevant funding source. The financial allocations for the private sector are also made available from the Joint Fund. The funds are managed by the Lead IFI under the terms of the General Conditions of the Fund.

8.4 CIVIL SOCIETY FACILITY AND MEDIA PROGRAMME

The Civil Society Facility and Media Programme (CSF) is a multi-country multi-annual action plan including both national and multi-beneficiary actions, which are programmed in a coordinated manner to achieve shared outcomes. The CSF has a multiannual strategic horizon, to ensure a more effective use of the Commission's political and financial instruments and greater publicity for that effort. The aim of the CSF is to support the development of a civil society, including media, which is actively providing input in public policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and serves as a watchdog for the protection of democratic values, human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law. A strong component is dedicated to the support of an independent media sector.

The Civil Society Facility is managed directly by DG NEAR and EU Delegations. While the overall objective is common, there is a division of labour between the national and the multi-country actions: national actions tackle more country-specific issues, notably by raising the capacities of local organisations through grants, Framework Partnership Agreements, service contracts and technical assistance. The multi-country programme focuses on support to tackle cross-border and global issues or where the peer-to-peer exchange and network effect has a particular added value to resolving local issues. This is done primarily, but not exclusively, through building long-term coalitions between CSOs from the region and EU counterparts, re-granting schemes and regional technical assistance. Both national and multi-country support is also provided via pillar-assessed entities with thematic expertise (e.g. UN Agencies, EU Member States' organisations).

IPA III CSF support is programmed in line with the [DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region for the period 2021 – 2027](#). For the period 2021–2027, the overall objective of the CSF is to strengthen participatory democracies and the EU approximation and integration process in the enlargement region through an enhanced contribution of civil society and media. The three dimensions are i) a conducive environment for civil society; ii) cooperation and partnership between civil society and public institutions; and iii) the capacities and resilience of civil society organisations. For each dimension, there is a set of specific objectives (outcomes) and results indicators. [Annex B: Explanatory Note on European and International Standards Underpinning the Guidelines](#) describes the relationship between the outcomes and indicators of the Guidelines and the European and international standards. With a few exceptions, all the outcomes and results indicators cited in the guidelines are drawn from existing European and international standards. The annual measurement of indicators will provide information for the programming of IPA III support. The monitoring exercise will also allow for comparison of results achieved by the different beneficiaries in the development of enabling and stimulating participatory democracy. The [IPA III Results Framework](#) is also to be used for the definition of the indicators.

The previously largely unregulated media sector is subject to a revived interest within the EU in the context of the global crisis of democracy and emerging threats to freedom of expression and media. This has resulted in a number of policy and legal initiatives in the past few years, including the European Democracy Action Plan, the European Media Freedom Act, the Digital Service Act and the EU anti-SLAPP directive, which are bound to determine the media policy priorities in the EU and in the EU's relations with third countries, especially in the enlargement region. They hold the potential of becoming the basis for programming of EU-funded actions in support of media freedom.

The **Western Balkans & Türkiye Civil Society Working Group** plays a key role in programming of CSF actions. It is an informal group, composed of colleagues from DG NEAR and EU Delegations and coordinated by DG NEAR.D5, to regularly discuss programming priorities and organisational arrangements of the CSF.

8.5 OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME

An operational programme under IPA III is a multi-annual programme with annual budgetary instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI-GE Regulation. Under IPA III it is programmed for the period 2024-27. An operational programme provides an overview of the needs of the eligible IPA III beneficiary (currently Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye) within certain sectors (primarily under Windows 3 and 4) and sets out the financial assistance to be provided for specific projects that will be identified and implemented during the lifetime of the programme. When capital investments are included, an operational programme has to include an indicative list of major projects, which are subject to specific subsequent approval procedures.

While under IPA I and II sector operational programmes were implemented through indirect management by the beneficiary country (IMBC) with *ex-ante* controls performed by the Commission, under IPA III operational programmes will be implemented with *ex-post* controls by the Commission. This approach aims at accelerating convergence on the current IPA structures to the management systems used in EU Member States that benefit from European Structural and Investment Funds.

**IPA III Financial Framework Partnership Agreement
Article 16(5) and (6)**

(5) IPA III assistance may be implemented through operational programmes on the basis of relevant thematic priorities set out in the IPA III programming framework, and the Commission guidance. Such programmes shall be adopted by the Commission on the basis of action documents prepared by the IPA III beneficiary, in close consultation with the Commission.

The implementation shall take the form of multi-annual programmes with annual instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI Regulation.

The operational programmes shall contain all the information required by the related Commission instructions, including inter alia:

- (a) an assessment of medium term needs and objectives;*
- (b) an overview of the consultation of the relevant stakeholders;*
- (c) a description of the chosen strategic actions;*
- (d) a sufficiently detailed financial table specifying indicatively for each year the total amount of the Union contribution;*
- (e) the proposed evaluation and monitoring modalities;*
- (f) an indicative list of major projects, if any;*
- (g) where relevant, a description of the IPA III beneficiary structures and authorities for the management and control of the programme, in accordance with Article 10 and Annex A.*

(6) A major project referred to in Article 16(5)(f) shall have a total cost exceeding EUR [].

Major projects shall be submitted by the IPA III beneficiary to the Commission for assessment. Financing of major projects shall be agreed by both parties.

Programming of operational programmes

The DG NEAR guidance document “IPA III Operational Programmes with *ex-post* control – Guidance for preparation and implementation”¹⁵ describes the expected content and the programming process of the IPA III operational programme.

¹⁵ The guidance has been provided to Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia with the note ARES(2022)1803443 of 11 March 2022 and to Türkiye with the note Ares(2022)1899900 of 15 March 2022.

If an IPA III beneficiary meets the necessary conditions for an operational programme, an IPA III beneficiary needs to make a proposal in the IPA III programming cycle either during the 2023 or 2024 annual programming process, depending on whether the operational programme is planned to cover the period 2023-27 or 2024-27.

An IPA III beneficiary needs to submit an operational programme fiche (equivalent to an action fiche) as part of the 2023 or 2024 revised strategic response in line with the template provided by DG NEAR (See section 13). The Operational Programme Fiche should be prepared in close consultation with the EU Delegation. It should include all requested information to allow the Commission to make an assessment of policy relevance.

If the Commission considers an operational programme to be relevant during the strategic relevance assessment stage, the IPA III beneficiary is invited to prepare an operational programme in close coordination with the EU Delegation, in line with an Operational Programme template provided by DG NEAR (See Section 13). A technical assistance support to prepare an operational programme should be used, as relevant.

Once DG NEAR considers that an operational programme is sufficiently well developed, it goes through the same internal Commission verification procedure (inter-service consultation) and consultation of the Member States in the IPA III Committee as other IPA III programmes.

A Financing Agreement is concluded on the operational programme after its adoption by the Commission in conformity with the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement.

8.6 PARTICIPATION OF IPA III BENEFICIARIES IN UNION PROGRAMMES

IPA III beneficiaries may participate in the majority of [Union programmes over the period 2021-27](#) by contributing to the costs of the programmes in which they participate. The size of the contribution is regulated in the Association Agreement, which defines all conditions for the IPA III beneficiary's participation in the specific Union programme.

IPA III funds may contribute to the payment of an IPA III beneficiary's annual fee (entry ticket) for participation in the Union programme. The IPA III beneficiary must provide the funds necessary for the payment of the total entry tickets before receiving the partial reimbursement from IPA III.

The IPA III contribution to participation of Western Balkans beneficiaries is programmed under multi-country action plan, in line with the priorities set out under Window 2 (Good governance, EU *acquis*, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication) of the IPA III programming framework.

The overall approach of how IPA III funds can contribute to the payment of entry tickets was communicated to the Western Balkans IPA III beneficiaries with the note [Ares \(2021\)7828560](#) of 17 December 2021. The note defines the new methodology for financial contributions. The IPA III beneficiaries will decide on how the IPA III contribution to the entry tickets (co-financing rate) is distributed, within the limits of the annual maximum contribution. (See section 12 for more information). The IPA III contribution to participation of Türkiye in Union programmes is programmed under the respective annual action plans in favour of Türkiye.

9. CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION (CBC) PROGRAMME

9.1. CBC PROGRAMMES BETWEEN IPA III BENEFICIARIES

The overall objective of territorial cooperation is to bring citizens closer together, contribute to solving common problems, facilitate the sharing of ideas and assets, and encourage strategic work towards common goals through joint actions. Cross-border cooperation (CBC) is the most common form of territorial cooperation. It aims to promote good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans, foster EU integration and promote socio-economic development in border areas between IPA III beneficiaries through joint local and regional initiatives combining both external aid and economic and social cohesion objectives.

A CBC programme between two or more IPA III beneficiaries is prepared jointly by the participating beneficiaries following the model programme provided by DG NEAR. The duration of the programme is for the whole duration of IPA III (2021-27). A CBC programme defines the cooperation strategy for the specific border region for the 7-year period and includes, among others, the eligible territory and the thematic priorities selected by the IPA III beneficiaries following an analysis of the needs of the programme area and extensive consultation with local stakeholders, including local authorities, and the Commission.

A CBC programme between IPA III beneficiaries can be implemented either in direct management or in indirect management. In the former case the EU Delegation acts as a contracting authority and in the latter case the entrusted structures of the lead beneficiary act as a contracting authority.

Preparation and consultation of the programme

Programming is guided by the thematic priorities defined in Annex III of the IPA III Regulation and Window 5 (Territorial and cross-border cooperation) of the IPA III programming framework. Section VII, Title II of the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA) provides detailed provisions on programming of CBC programmes between IPA III beneficiaries. During the programming process the following elements are decided:

- The **eligible regions** are determined by the IPA beneficiaries together with DG NEAR, taking into account the cross-border nature of the programme.
- The **thematic focus** of the programme is decided by selecting a number of thematic priorities, with a maximum of two thematic clusters in addition to the thematic cluster 'improved capacity of regional and local authorities' that should be included and mainstreamed in each programme. For each selected thematic priority, the participating IPA III beneficiaries have to agree on the specific objectives and expected outputs, their associated indicators (including targets) and the types of activities to be supported, including the identification of the main target groups and types of applicants.
- The **technical assistance** is limited to maximum 10% of the budget. The allocation is devoted to covering costs such as staff cost for joint programme structures, mission costs of programme staff, training of grant beneficiaries, visibility events, awareness raising, etc. It will also cover the costs of monitoring, evaluation, information and control activities during implementation of the programme.
- The **management mode** of the programme can be either direct or indirect mode, depending on whether budget implementation tasks have been entrusted to an IPA III beneficiary. The technical assistance allocation is always implemented in direct management.

- The **implementation modality**. Calls for proposals are the preferred implementation modality under CBC programmes. Strategic projects can be implemented at a maximum of 30-35% of the programme. Strategic projects are subject to prior assessment of their relevance and maturity by the Commission. The technical assistance allocation is implemented through a direct grant.
- The **indicative budget allocation** per year and per thematic priority.

Implementation modalities for CBC programmes between IPA III beneficiaries

Call for proposals

IPA III cross-Border programmes are essentially implemented through calls for proposals (grant schemes) within the thematic priorities selected in the multiannual programme. The programmes finance joint operations which have been selected through a single call for proposals covering the whole eligible area. As under IPA II, the call for proposals should be focused either thematically (e.g. tourism, SMEs, agriculture) or according to target groups (e.g. call for proposals specifically for civil society organisations or for regional authorities). Moreover, there should be a general effort to decrease the number of applications and contracts, by increasing the minimum and maximum thresholds.

Strategic projects

Participating countries may identify larger investments (strategic projects), when they have a clear cross-border value. Strategic projects do not need to be infrastructure projects but they can also be 'soft' projects such as river information systems. Strategic projects can be 1) pre-identified during the programming phase and included in the multi-annual programme or 2) selected in the framework of Call for proposals for strategic projects.

Technical assistance

In each CBC programme 10% of the total programme allocation is allocated for technical assistance, to cover staff cost for joint structures, running costs of Joint Technical Secretariats and antennas, training of grant beneficiaries, visibility events, awareness raising etc. It also covers the costs of monitoring, evaluation, information and control activities related to the implementation of the CBC programme.

Preparation of a bilateral arrangement for programmes implemented in indirect management

To ensure a smooth implementation of the programme, the participating IPA III beneficiaries need to share a common understanding on how the programme should be implemented. For this purpose, and in line with Article 70 of the FPPA, they will have to conclude a bilateral arrangement, which will provide information on the selected management mode and control structures.

The bilateral arrangement shall include:

- description of the main implementation structures and their roles and responsibilities;
- description of the management, financial, control and audit arrangements for the cross-border cooperation programme;
- the main implementation procedures including the process for the selection of operations and the monitoring at the level of operations and overall cross-border cooperation programme;
- provisions to ensure the legality and regularity of the expenditures incurred by the beneficiaries, and to ensure that the verifications referred to in Clause 8 (1)(b) and (c) of Annex A are carried out;
- remedial measures in case of implementation difficulties;
- provisions to guarantee the sound financial management of the funds allocated to the cross-border cooperation programme, and recovery of amounts unduly paid;

- procedures for exemption of taxes referred to in Article 28 of the FPPA;
- details about the financial management of the programme, including payments between IPA III beneficiaries, record keeping, reporting obligations and irregularities.

Consultation of programme for financial decision

The CBC programme needs to be submitted to the Commission for approval by electronic means, by the lead IPA III beneficiary.

The Commission assesses the consistency of cross-border cooperation programmes with the IPA III programming framework and their effective contribution to the selected thematic priorities defined in Annex III of the IPA III Regulation.

The Commission makes observations within three months of the date of submission of the cross-border cooperation programme. The participating IPA III beneficiaries provide to the Commission all necessary additional information and, where appropriate, revise the proposed programme. Before launching the inter-service consultation procedure on the programme, the Commission has to ensure that its observations have been adequately taken into account.

After comments received during the inter-service consultation, the programme is submitted to the opinion of the Member States in the IPA III Committee, following the same process as for all the programmes that are consulted with the Member States in the IPA III Committee.

Financing Decision

After positive opinion of the Member States in the IPA III Committee, the Commission can adopt the financing decision for the period of seven years. For the period 2021-27, the Commission has adopted the financing decisions for the following nine cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries:

IPA CBC Programmes	Implementation mode	Contracting Authority
Albania - Kosovo*	Direct	EU Delegation in Albania
Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro	Direct	EU Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina
Kosovo – North Macedonia	Direct	EU Office in Kosovo
Montenegro - Albania	Indirect (Direct for TA)	Montenegro (EU Delegation in Montenegro)
Montenegro – Kosovo	Indirect (Direct for TA)	Montenegro (EU Delegation in Montenegro)
North Macedonia - Albania	Direct	EU Delegation in North Macedonia
Serbia – Bosnia and Herzegovina	Indirect (Direct for TA)	Serbia (EU Delegation in Serbia)
Serbia - Montenegro	Indirect (Direct for TA)	Serbia (EU Delegation in Serbia)
Serbia – North Macedonia	Indirect (Direct for TA)	Serbia (EU Delegation in Serbia)

Financing Agreement

The adoption of a Commission Decision is followed by the signature of a tri-partite 7-year Financing Agreement between the Commission and the IPA III beneficiaries both in the case of direct and indirect management, where applicable.

* 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.

9.2. CBC PROGRAMMES BETWEEN IPA III BENEFICIARIES AND MEMBER STATES

IPA III supports EU territorial cooperation between adjacent land border regions of at least one Member State and one or more IPA III beneficiaries. The legal basis for Interreg-IPA CBC (Interreg VI-A strand) programmes is provided in the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation. IPA III funding is pooled with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) with a matching + 5% -principle, i.e. each programme has the equal amount of ERDF and IPA III funding + 5% additional IPA III funding. The pooling of funds is covered in the IPA III Regulation through cross-programme provisions with the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation. The programmes are managed in shared management with a single Managing Authority located in one of the Member States participating in the programme according to the rules defined in the Interreg Regulation.

Each Interreg - IPA CBC programme includes three of the five political cohesion policy goals – Policy objectives (PO) – and spends at least 60% of combined ERDF and IPA III resources on them:

- PO1: a Smarter Europe, through innovation, digitisation, economic transformation and support to small and medium-sized businesses
- PO2: a Greener, carbon-free Europe, implementing the Paris Agreement and investing in energy transition, renewables and the fight against climate change (compulsory PO for each programme)
- PO3: a more Connected Europe, with strategic transport and digital networks
- PO4: a more Social Europe, delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights and supporting quality employment, education, skills, social inclusion and equal access to healthcare
- PO5: a Europe closer to citizens, by supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU

In addition, up to 20% of the funding is spent on the two Interreg Specific Objectives (ISO):

- ISO1: Better Interreg governance (institutional capacities for macro-regional and sea-basin strategies)
- ISO2: More security in Europe (in particular via measures in the field of cross-border administration and mobility, migration management and the protection of migrants).

The Commission has adopted the following 10 Interreg – IPA CBC programmes for 2021-27:

Interreg – IPA CBC Programmes	Implementation mode
Romania – Serbia	Shared management; managing authority in Romania
South Adriatic (Italy – Albania – Montenegro)	Shared management; managing authority in Italy
Hungary - Serbia	Shared management; managing authority in Hungary
Croatia – Serbia	Shared management; managing authority in Croatia
Croatia – Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro	Shared management; managing authority in Croatia
Bulgaria – North Macedonia	Shared management; managing authority in Bulgaria
Bulgaria - Serbia	Shared management; managing authority in Bulgaria
Bulgaria - Türkiye	Shared management; managing authority in Bulgaria
Greece – North Macedonia	Shared management; managing authority in Greece
Greece - Albania	Shared management; managing authority in Greece

More information on Interreg VI-A programmes is available in DG REGIO website: [Info-regio - Interreg: European Territorial Co-operation \(europa.eu\)](https://info-regio.europa.eu/interreg)

9.3. TRANSNATIONAL AND INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION PROGRAMMES

IPA III financially supports the participation of IPA III beneficiaries in Interreg VI-B transnational and Interreg VI-C interregional cooperation programmes by pooling together IPA III funding with ERDF funds. The legal basis is provided by the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg) Regulation. The participation of IPA III beneficiaries is decided by the involved Member States who invite the IPA III beneficiaries to participate in a respective programme.

Programming approach Interreg VI-B transnational cooperation programmes

Transnational cooperation allows for cooperation over larger transnational territories or around sea basins. It involves national, regional and local programme partners in Member State and some third countries, with a view to achieving a higher degree of territorial integration. Like all Interreg programmes, it aims at promoting better cooperation across countries within the designated regions to find efficient solutions to common territorial, economic and social challenges, which are too broad to be dealt with efficiently at a national level. Interreg VI-B supports a wide range of project investments related to innovation, the green and digital transition, accessibility, digitalisation, urban development, public sector innovation and interoperability etc.

Interreg VI-B programmes are implemented in shared management by an EU Member State authority, with a counterpart authority in the partner countries. All countries that participate in a specific programme are represented in a joint Monitoring Committee, which monitors the programme implementation and achievement of objectives.

Where an Interreg VI-B programme supports a macro-regional strategy or a sea-basin strategy, at least 80 % of the ERDF contribution and, where applicable, part of the external financing instruments of the Union allocations under priorities other than for technical assistance shall contribute to the objectives of that strategy.

DG REGIO is in charge of the following 2021-27 Interreg VI-B programmes, where IPA III beneficiaries participate (together with Neighbourhood countries):

Interreg VI-B programmes 2021-27	Member States	IPA III countries (Neighbourhood and third countries)
IPA Adriatic-Ionian	Greece, Croatia, Italy, Slovenia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia (<i>San Marino</i>)
Danube Region	Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia (<i>Moldova, Ukraine</i>)
EURO-MED	Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia	Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mediterranean Sea Basin NEXT MED	Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Portugal	Türkiye <i>(Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine*, Tunisia)</i>
NEXT Black Sea Basin	Bulgaria, Greece, Romania	Türkiye <i>(Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova)</i>

Programming approach Interreg VI-C interregional cooperation programmes

Interregional cooperation works at pan-European level, covering all EU Member States and partner states. It aims at boosting the effectiveness of cohesion policy by promoting exchange of experiences, innovative approaches and capacity building between regions.

From the Interreg VI-C programmes the [Urbact IV programme](#) is available for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The programme focuses on supporting cities in implementing solutions to tackle the green, just and digital transitions in particular, through collaboration, capacity building and expertise. The purpose is to promote integrated sustainable development in cities, improve city's policies and improve the effectiveness of cohesion policy in cities. The programme supports the delivery of key principles of sustainable urban development on the ground, such as good governance, integrated and place-based approaches, all making the link to the urban and territorial dimension of Cohesion policy and to its minimum requirements as per the 2021-2027 regulatory provisions. The URBACT programme covers the entire territory of the participating countries and is open to cities of all sizes.

More information on Interreg VI-B and VI-C programmes is available in DG REGIO website: [Info regio - Interreg: European Territorial Co-operation \(europa.eu\)](#)

* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

10. IPA RURAL DEVELOPMENT (IPARD) PROGRAMME

An IPA Rural Development (IPARD) programme is a multi-annual programme with annual budgetary instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI Regulation. IPARD III programmes are programmed in line with the priorities of the IPA III Programming Framework for the whole duration of the multi-annual financial framework 2021-27.

Through IPARD the EU provides to the eligible IPA III beneficiaries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye) financial and technical support to their farming, food production and rural development structures in a sustainable way, aligning their agricultural and rural development policies with the EU's common agricultural policy, and adapting their agriculture and food sector with the EU food, hygiene and environmental standards as well as in line with the goals of the European Green Deal.

IPARD programmes are implemented through indirect management by the beneficiary country with *ex-post* controls by the Commission.

IPARD III programming process

In the Commission, DG AGRI is in charge of IPARD and provides the programming guidance to eligible IPA III beneficiaries.

In short, an IPARD programme is based on an existing national rural development strategy and appropriate and up-to-date analyses of all relevant sectors. The IPARD Managing Authority prepares a single IPA Rural Development III Programme for 2021-27. The IPARD Managing Authority needs to ensure both relevant consultations of all interested parties and an *ex-ante* evaluation of the well-advanced draft programme, prior submitting it to the approval of the Commission.

In line with the requirements set by DG AGRI, each IPARD III programme should include the following:

- the findings of the *ex-ante* evaluation;
- an analysis of the situation in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (hereinafter "SWOT") and identification of the needs that have to be addressed in the geographical area covered by the programme. The description will draw upon an in-depth analysis of the sectors concerned, involving independent expertise;
- the main results of previous operations undertaken with Union and other bilateral and multilateral assistance, the financial resources deployed and the evaluation results available;
- a description of the strategy for the achievement of the priorities and a selection of measures, including the target setting on the basis of common indicators;
- a description of each of the measures selected, including:
 - the definition of final beneficiaries;
 - the geographical scope,
 - the eligibility criteria,
 - monitoring indicators,
 - quantified target indicators.
- a description of actions taken to ensure the availability of sufficient advisory and technical capacity for the proper implementation of the programme;
- information on the complementarity with measures financed from the national policies, other policy areas of IPA and other donors as appropriate;
- a financing plan, comprising of

- a table setting out the total IPA rural development contribution planned for each year. The planned annual IPA rural development contribution shall be compatible with the relevant provisions of the Country Strategy Paper;
- a table setting out for each measure indicative Union contribution planned and the applicable IPARD contribution as well as the national private and public contributions.
- programme implementing arrangements, including:
 - the designation by the IPA III beneficiary structures for the implementation of the programme, and, a summary description of the management and control system;
 - a description of the monitoring and evaluation procedures, as well as the composition of the Monitoring Committee;
 - the provisions to ensure that the programme is publicised, including through the national rural network.
- the results of consultations and provisions adopted for associating the relevant authorities and bodies as well the appropriate economic, social and environmental partners.

Once DG AGRI considers that the IPARD III programme is well developed, it goes through the same internal verification procedure (inter-service consultation) and consultation of the Member States in the IPA III Committee as other IPA III programmes.

The Commission has adopted five IPARD III programmes for [Albania](#), [Montenegro](#), [North Macedonia](#), [Serbia](#) and [Türkiye](#) for the period 2021-27.

Following the adoption of Commission Financing Decisions on the IPARD III programme and conclusion of the FFPA, Sectoral and Financing Agreements are concluded, granting entrustment for budget implementation tasks per measure of the IPARD III programme.

IPA III Financial Framework Partnership Agreement
Article 16 (7)

The IPA III rural development assistance (IPARD) shall be provided on the basis of relevant priorities set out in the IPA III programming framework, and in the agriculture and rural development strategies of the IPA III beneficiary. The implementation shall take the form of multi-annual programmes with annual instalments in accordance with Article 30(3) of the NDICI Regulation, drawn up at central level and covering the entire period of the IPA III implementation. The IPARD III programme shall comprise a pre-defined set of measures further specified in the sectoral agreement. The programme shall be prepared by the IPARD Managing Authority as specified in Article 10(9), point (a), of this Agreement to be submitted to the Commission after consulting the appropriate interested parties.

IPA III assistance to rural development shall contribute to achieving the following objectives:

- (a) increase the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, progressively aligning it with the EU standards and improving the efficiency and sustainability of on-farm production, which will provide a better response to societal demands for safe, nutritious and sustainable food;*
- (b) facilitate business development, growth and employment in rural areas, improve farmers' position within the value chain and attract young farmers into agriculture;*
- (c) contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, foster sustainable management of natural resources and contribute to the protection of the environment;*
- (d) improve community development and social capital in rural areas and build-up modern public administrations for agriculture and rural development, respecting good governance principles.*

Information on programming of IPARD programmes is available on DG AGRI website: [EU pre-accession assistance for rural development | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/agri/)

12. PROGRAMMING GUIDANCE ON SPECIFIC TOPICS

In addition to the guidance notes on annual programming and operational programmes referred to above, DG NEAR has issued guidance notes on specific topics to National IPA III Coordinators. Also, DG NEAR has issued internal guidance notes to geographical units and EU Delegations, which EU Delegations are expected to follow up with National IPA III Coordinators and other stakeholders during the annual programming process or preparation of operational programmes.

IPA III approach to indirect management by beneficiary country (IMBC)

In June 2020, DG NEAR issued a guidance note for the targeted utilisation of IMBC under IPA III.¹⁶ The note sets a clear thematic scope for IMBC by targeting areas that may be subject to shared management in the future, such as Window 3 (Green agenda and sustainable connectivity), Window 4 (Competitiveness and inclusive growth), and Window 5 (Territorial and cross-border cooperation), as well as certain migration funds. The note anticipates that the final objective for IMBC under IPA III should be to establish multi-annual operational programmes without ex-ante controls, particularly under Windows 3 and 4, once the IPA III beneficiary will have developed a sufficient administrative capacity. The note also outlines that for annual programmes, the use of IMBC with ex-ante controls could still be allowed in specific and duly justified cases and if capacities already exist, or legal considerations argue in favour of indirect management.

IPA III co-financing approach

In December 2021, the Commission issued guidance, via EU Delegations, to National IPA Coordinators on co-financing rules in IPA III programmes as of 2023 programming process.¹⁷ The note highlights four specific cases: 1) Direct management by the Commission (procurement contracts and grant agreements); 2) Indirect management of annual programmes by IPA III beneficiaries (procurement contracts and grant agreements); 3) Indirect management of multi-annual actions/operational programmes by IPA III beneficiaries (procurement contracts and grant agreements); and 4) Direct management and indirect management of cross-border cooperation programmes. The note further outlines that in direct management the use of parallel co-financing is not allowed and that multi-annual actions/operational programmes implemented in indirect management need to be co-financed, as they aim at preparing IPA III beneficiaries for implementation of structural funds.

IPA III contribution to EU programmes in the Western Balkans

In December 2021, DG NEAR issued guidance, via EU Delegations, to Western Balkans National IPA Coordinators on programming of IPA III beneficiaries' participation in EU programmes.¹⁸ The note defines the new methodology for financial contributions. It also explains that programming is done in the multi-country programmes by having a dedicated action document, which provides a budget allocation per IPA III beneficiary in line with the new methodology. The note further explains that implementation of EU support will be done in direct management in all the IPA III beneficiaries and that indirect management by beneficiary country (IMBC) will be discontinued, in line with the IPA III approach of promoting a more focused utilisation of IMBC in the future.

¹⁶ [ARES \(2020\)3423393](#) of 30 June 2020

¹⁷ [Ares \(2021\)7828496](#) of 17 December 2021

¹⁸ [Ares \(2021\)7828560](#) of 17 December 2021

IPA III works contracts financed through bilateral actions

In October 2021, DG NEAR issued guidance to EU Delegations on implementation of works contracts under IPA III.¹⁹ The note highlights that the preferred mode of implementation for works contracts is either indirect management or delegation agreements with international organisations or international financing institutions. In October 2022, DG NEAR issued further guidance to EU Delegations, highlighting the difficulty to justify the implementation infrastructure projects under the direct management modality, hence confirming that infrastructure projects should be implemented either under indirect management or via the Western Balkans Investment Framework.²⁰

IPA III spending targets on climate and biodiversity

In March 2022, DG NEAR issued an internal guidance note explaining the paradigm shift required to achieve climate and biodiversity targets through programming of assistance both under NDICI and IPA III instruments.²¹ The note clarifies the climate targets and provides options on actions that can contribute to climate change and biodiversity and increase the number of dedicated climate or biodiversity programmes. Also in March, DG INTPA, DG NEAR, FPI and European External Action Service issued a common guidance note to geographical units and EU Delegations on all targets applicable to NDICI and IPA III instruments, including their measurement method.²² IPA III beneficiaries need to observe the IPA III relevant spending targets during the annual programming process.

For climate and biodiversity, reaching the targets will require developing specific interventions tackling climate change and biodiversity loss as well as effective mainstreaming of these priorities across all relevant interventions across all sectors of intervention. It will be key to achieve adequate levels of contribution from private sector development, digital, transport infrastructure, urban development or water, as well as migration. Further contributions can be identified in the domains of education (e.g. technical and vocational education and training), science, technology and innovation, governance (natural resources) and public finance management. To facilitate the mainstreaming process and support national authorities in this exercise, the programming templates include specific guidance. Dedicated [guidelines](#) and [quick tips](#) for integrating environment and climate change in IPA III funded actions are available, and webinars / trainings regularly organised.

Commitment to gender equality under IPA III

In January 2021, EEAS and INTPA issued an internal guidance note to all EU Delegations on how to operationalise the EU's commitment to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in its external actions, as reaffirmed in November 2020 in the [EU Gender Action Plan \(GAP\) III](#) and its annexed [Joint Staff Working Document](#), which provides the objectives and indicators to frame implementation of the GAP III.²³ The note highlights that GAP III defines policy objectives and targets around five pillars:

1. Making gender equality and women's empowerment a cross-cutting priority of EU external action in the policy and programming work: by 2025, 85% of new actions will be gender-responsive (G1 marker). 5% of these actions should have gender equality, women's and girls' rights and their empowerment as a principal objective (G2 marker), therefore, each

¹⁹ [Ares \(2021\)6557610](#) of 25 October 2021

²⁰ [Ares \(2022\)6983623](#) of 10 October 2022

²¹ [ARES\(2022\)1769805](#) of 10 March 2022

²² [ARES\(2022\)2165889](#) of 24 March 2022

²³ [Ares\(2021\)754225](#) of 29 January 2021

delegation should have at least one targeted action at country and at regional level. All GO actions also need to be duly justified;

2. Working closely together with EU Member States, notably to define a GAP III country implementation plan (CLIP).
3. Stepping up action in six strategic policy areas: freedom from all forms of gender-based violence; sexual and reproductive health and rights; economic and social rights and the empowerment of girls and women; equal participation and leadership; women, peace and security; gender dimension of green and digital transformations.
4. Calling on the EU to lead by example, to boost gender mainstreaming throughout all policy areas, sectors and all instruments (including blending and guarantees), to deepen dialogues with governments and CSOs on gender equality;
5. Focusing on GAP III results with a simplified reporting system and ensuring transparency and strategic communication at all levels.

Delineation between IPA III funding of capital investments under WBIF and operational programmes

In recognition of the key leading role of the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) for the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and more generally public investments in the Western Balkans, DG NEAR has defined that *a priori* high capital-intensive investments should be funded under the WBIF. In the Guidance note for preparation and implementation of Operational Programmes with ex-post control in the Western Balkans²⁴, DG NEAR has provided a matrix with clear delineation of sectors and specific capital investments that should fall either under the responsibility of WBIF (implemented in accordance with WBIF co-financing rates, blending approach and governance principles) or under multi-annual operational programmes or annual action plans (relevant for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina). The matrix should guide the programming decisions and be used by EU Delegations and DG NEAR during the maturity assessment stage to streamline and maximise the utilisation of funds and the synergies between WBIF and national programmes.

²⁴ [Ares \(2022\)1803443](#) of 11 March 2022

13. MAIN IPA III PROGRAMMING TEMPLATES

The following templates constitute the main IPA III programming templates under the responsibility of DG NEAR. They have been provided to IPA III beneficiaries with relevant programming notes since 2021.

The IPA III action document template and the IPA III Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2021-27 template are published in [DG NEAR Manual of Procedures site](#) under Section D.2 (Financing decision), since they form an integral part of Commission Financing decisions. Each template includes substantial programming guidance and constitutes an integral part of this document.

Should any of the below templates be subject to further revisions in the future, they will be communicated to NIPACs and EU Delegations and DG NEAR units accordingly.

Template	Publication
Strategic response template	The template has been submitted to IPA III beneficiaries on 27 November 2020 with the note Ares(2020)7153206 , including the following annexes: Annex I (Relevance assessment criteria), Annex IIA and Annex IIB (action fiche templates), Annex III (Maturity assessment criteria) and Annex IV (action document template). In the meantime, Annexes IIA and IIB and Annex IV have been replaced with updated templates (see below).
Action fiche template for bilateral actions	The current version of the template has been submitted to the Western Balkans National IPA Coordinators with the note Ares(2022)1803443 on 11 March 2022 and to the National IPA Coordinator of Türkiye with the note Ares(2022)1899900 on 15 March 2022, to be used as of the 2023 annual programming process. The template may be updated for the future programming rounds.
Action fiche template for multi-country actions	The current version of the template mirrors the changes introduced to the action fiche template for bilateral actions and has been used since the 2023 programming process. DG NEAR.D5 coordinates multi-country programming and ensures that all relevant services have the right action fiche template at the start of the annual programming cycle.
Action document template	The IPA III action document template is used both for programming of bilateral and multi-country actions. The template includes substantial programming guidance and is updated regularly, to reflect the instructions received from Commission central services and/or to mirror changes introduced to the NDICI-GE action document template (as relevant). NIPACs and EU Delegations should ensure that all national authorities are using the right template for each annual programming process. The right version of the template is regularly updated in the DG NEAR Manual of Procedures site (Section D.2.3) . The latest version of the template, to be used for 2023 annual programming (Türkiye) and 2024 annual programming (Western Balkans) has been provided to NIPACs in January 2023, when submitting this IPA III 2021-27 programming guidance.
Operational Programme Fiche template	The template has been submitted to Western Balkans IPA III beneficiaries eligible for operational programmes with the note

	<p>Ares(2022)1803443 on 11 March 2022 and to Türkiye with the note Ares(2022)1899900 on 15 March 2022. The template is used for preparation of 2024-27 operational programmes by eligible IPA III beneficiaries.</p>
Operational Programme template	<p>The template has been submitted to Western Balkans IPA III beneficiaries eligible for operational programmes with the note Ares(2022)8845249 on 20 December 2022 and to Türkiye with the note Ares(2022)8754865 on 16 December 2022. The template is used for preparation of 2024-27 operational programmes by eligible IPA III beneficiaries. The template for major project applications and for operational identification sheets, will be updated in due course.</p>
Cross border Cooperation Programme template	<p>The template has been submitted to Western Balkans IPA III beneficiaries with the note Ares(2020)3820411 on 20 July 2020. It has been used for preparation of 2021-27 cross-border cooperation programmes between IPA III beneficiaries.</p>