

Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III

STRATEGIC RESPONSE 2025-2027

Republic of North Macedonia

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PART 1- ALIGNMENT OF THE 2025-2027 PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES WITH IPA PROGRAMMING FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF THE EU

WINDOW 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy

- 1. The response of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities to the IPA III Programming Framework, EU enlargement policy priorities and the Commission 2025-2027 recommendations*

IPA III Programming Framework Window 1 focuses on the consolidation of democratic structures, respect for the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights, which are at the heart of the accession process. Particular attention is paid to the establishment of strong and independent institutions, which are essential to prevent and effectively combat corruption and to conduct more effective investigations and prosecutions, leading to final judgments that are enforced and carry dissuasive sanctions. The Window 1 also emphasises the ability of law enforcement agencies to proactively prevent and combat organised crime involved in money laundering and drug trafficking. Finally, the document declares that respect for fundamental rights is an essential element of the accession process, with the protection and promotion of the rights of the child at its core.

In this respect, the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities in the field of rule of law have integrated the above priorities in their interventions. Interventions under the 2025-2027 programming priorities will contribute to Thematic Priority 1: Judiciary and its objective to improve the independence, efficiency and effectiveness of the entire justice system by focusing on professionalization of judges and of the justice system, building their skills and capacities in the administration of justice as well as support to independent bodies and fulfilment of the specific requirements of chapter 23. The 2025-2027 programming priorities are contributing to the Thematic Priority 2: Fight against corruption by strengthening capacities of the entire criminal justice system in fighting high level corruption, from investigation to conviction, asset recovery and confiscated assets management. In addition, the programming priorities will invest in strengthening capacities of institutions in charge of preventing and combating corruption, and their efforts to eradicate corruption. The 2025-2027 programming priorities will also focus on Thematic Priority 3: Fight against organised crime/security. The programming priorities will bring about systemic changes by strengthening capacities and promoting law enforcement and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, further enhancing the efficiency, effectiveness and independence of the judiciary, providing access to a fair justice system for every child at risk and improving the system for preventing and combating corruption. To combat organised crime and high-level corruption, cooperation will be strengthened throughout the criminal justice chain, including the institutions responsible for the confiscation and management of assets. The interventions under the programming priorities will enable law enforcement agencies to acquire new techniques and tools in their investigative capabilities and improve their digital forensic capacity to combat money laundering and drug trafficking, which are the main sources of organised crime funding. The interventions under the programming priorities will contribute to Thematic Priority 5: Fundamental rights by facilitating justice for children as one of the most important fundamental rights. Finally, the realisation of programming priorities will accelerate the country's progress towards EU membership and support its progress in chapters 23 and 24 by investing in the harmonisation of legislation and improving the development and implementation of its strategic and institutional framework in the area of the rule of law. Collectively, the 2025-2027 priorities in the area of rule of law will contribute to the specific objective of the IPA III Programming

Framework Window 1 of strengthening the rule of law, democracy, the respect of human rights, and ensuring security.

The programming priorities are part of the Commission Communication "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" and its initiative to strengthen the rule of law. Equally, the programming priorities are linked to the requisitions of the 2020 Commission's Communication "Enhancing the enlargement process- A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" defining fundamental democratic, rule of law and economic reforms as the core objective of the accession process. The programme priorities for 2025-2027 will help North Macedonia to implement reforms in the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, which in turn will promote economic growth and social convergence, as required by the Commission Communication. By investing in independent, efficient and effective justice system in the fight against organised crime and high-level corruption, and justice for children, the programming priorities will enhance the country's focus on the fundamental reforms essential for success on the EU path.

The 2025-2027 programming priorities will directly contribute to the country's progress under chapter 23 and address the recommendations of the 2023 North Macedonia Report by supporting an independent, high quality and efficient judiciary and an effective fight against corruption, together with respect for fundamental rights. The programming priorities will also complement the requirements of chapter 24 and the related recommendations of the North Macedonia 2023 Report by proactively investing in the structures responsible for the fight against organised crime, with a focus on increasing their operational capacity and cooperation.

Democracy and the rule of law are critical components in ensuring the enforcement of existing laws, strengthening the position and security of businesses, and empowering community approaches that are essential for the implementation of Green Deal and corresponding Western Balkans Green Agenda. Therefore, the interventions will deal with improvements of the rule of law and the fight against corruption in order to avoid unnecessary obstacles to the implementation of the Green Agenda.

The EC outline note with proposed priorities for programming 2025-2027 recognised the challenges to the rule of law in North Macedonia, and the North Macedonia's programming priorities for 2025-2027 have been designed to address them by strengthening the fight against organised crime and corruption, improving the asset recovery and confiscation process, enhancing the fight against drugs and improving the integrity and independence of the judiciary. Interventions under the programming priorities will help to improve coordination between actors involved in the fight against organised crime, strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to investigate organised and serious crime, financial crime and money laundering, regularly apply the seizure and freezing of assets to ensure future confiscation and improve the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, as defined in the EC outline.

2. Complementarity of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with the Reform Agenda, EU and other donors and the multi-country programme

The North Macedonia programming priorities in the area of rule of law will build on the results of the Commission's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans 2024-2027 and the accompanying Reform Agenda 2024-2027 submitted by North Macedonia. The Growth Plan is promoting economic convergence as a means of bringing the Western Balkans countries closer to the EU. The functioning rule of law is the key element of this endeavour. The interventions under the 2025-2027 programming priorities and the timing of their implementation were designed to complement the activities outlined in the Reform Agenda (RA) to be implemented between 2024 and 2027. The rationale was that the interventions under the programming priorities

should use the results of the RA as a basis for further improvements of the system, target the remaining gaps, and were planned to maintain the results of the RA or improve them due to external changes and the materialisation of certain risks. In that respect, the programming priorities will support maintaining and follow up the results achieved under the objective related to the fundamentals and rule of law and the respective reforms identified by the Reform Agenda: *Independence, quality and integrity of the judiciary, efficiency of the judiciary, fight against corruption and organised crime and asset recovery issues.*

The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities are complementary to the IPA III multi-country priorities proposed for 2025-2027 Priority area 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy and Priority area 2: Security, including cybersecurity that are focused on contributing to regional cooperation and integration. This programming priorities will complement those efforts by focusing on challenges specific to North Macedonia, thus building its capacities to move forward on the issues of rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights and fight against corruption and organised crime.

The programming priorities are complementary to a number of donor projects implemented in the area of rule of law, such as Germany, US, Netherlands, UK, Council of Europe, etc. One of the key actions currently under implementation- EU's IPA 2020 EU for Rule of Law project is targeting the efficiency of judiciary, fight against corruption and organised crime, and promotion of fundamental rights. The programming priorities will complement the results to be achieved by the project by 2028 and will further invest in strengthening the criminal justice system by boosting its operational capacities, cooperation and coordination, support continuous reforms in judiciary, implement systemic changes in combating and preventing corruption and strengthen state response in fight against organised crime, money laundering and drug trafficking.

3. Alignment of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with national strategies

The programming priorities are contributing to the Development Sector Strategy for the Judiciary 2024-2028's vision of independent, accountable, transparent and accessible judiciary, that is resilient to internal and external influences, protects human rights, and efficiently safeguards the rule of law. This comprehensive strategy, consisting of 130 measures aims to address normative and institutional shortcomings¹ and has an Action Plan for the implementation period with specific indicators necessary to monitor its implementation. The programming priorities will specifically focus on the Priority area 1: Judiciary and public prosecution in line with EU standards by increasing the level of preparedness of the country for the enforcement of EU law and standards in the area of judiciary and public prosecution. The programming priorities will also contribute to the implementation the Priority area 2: Strengthening the Capacities, Effectiveness and Efficiency of Judicial Institutions by further improving the ability of key institutions in the justice system to administer justice in a transparent and accountable manner.

The programming priorities will contribute to the North Macedonia's commitment to consolidate its system for systematic implementation of parallel criminal and financial investigations, followed by seizure and confiscation of criminal assets, and the cooperation and coordination of relevant institutions and agencies across the entire chain. The new Strategy for strengthening the capacities for conducting financial investigations and confiscation of property for the period 2024-2028 is in the final stage of development. The interventions under

¹ Annual Report on the implementation of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, February 2024

the programming priorities will support the enforcement of relevant legislation in that respect and will contribute to the implementation of the policy document.

The 2025-2027 programming priorities' underlying intention is to horizontally strengthen the ability of national institutions and agencies to enforce the objectives postulated in the National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interests 2021-2025: Increasing the level of political accountability and demonstrated willingness to fight corruption, Strengthening the supervisory and control mechanisms strengthening the capacity and commitment of the law enforcement bodies, the prosecution and the judiciary in the detection and sanctioning of corruption and strengthening the resilience to corruption in their ranks, as well as Raising public awareness and conducting anti-corruption education.

The 2025-2027 programming priorities are contributing to the objectives set in the National Strategy for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism 2021-2024 and increased coordination for efficient enforcement of the corresponding Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism. The interventions envisaged under the 2025-2027 programming priorities are complementary to the National Drug Strategy (2021-2025) for the country to further align with the relevant EU acquis and international standards and pursue their enforcement. The Strategy for Organised Crime (2025-2028) is being developed with the support of the EU 2020 Rule of Law IPA and should be finalised by the end of 2024, with anticipation that the 2025-2027 programming priorities will support its implementation.

WINDOW 2: Good governance, EU acquis alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication

Thematic Priority 1: Good Governance

- 1. The response of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities to the IPA III Programming Framework, EU enlargement policy priorities and the Commission 2025-2027 recommendations*

The interventions under the North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities in the area of good governance are focusing on modernisation of public administration and are directly contributing to the Thematic Priority 1 under Window 2. The programming priorities reflect the commitments of North Macedonia to strengthen its public administration by improving human resource management systems, strengthening accountability, enhancing digital infrastructure and services, improving transparency, and ensuring better public access to essential services. This is in line with IPA III's policy-based approach that emphasizes good governance as a prerequisite for sustainable development and EU alignment.

One of the key elements of this alignment is the digital transformation of public administration, which is central to the EU's priorities under the Digital Compass framework. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities' focus on enhancing digital skills and improving digital infrastructure reflects the recognition that effective public service delivery requires modern, interoperable systems that are efficient and accessible. This transformation is critical for addressing the ongoing challenges of public administration in North Macedonia, characterized by outdated systems and a lack of digital readiness. The programming priorities contribute to improved access to information and better public accountability, as well as increased transparency in government operations. By building media infrastructure that supports monitoring and service delivery, the interventions under the 2025-2027 priorities will help to combat disinformation and ensure that citizens are better informed, which aligns with EU objectives for promoting democracy and good governance. In addition, the interventions are part of North Macedonia's efforts to align with the EU

acquis, particularly in the areas of public administration reform and digitalisation, both of which are critical for achieving the governance standards necessary for EU membership. By strengthening administrative capacities and improving digital service delivery, the programming priorities will address key governance challenges identified in the IPA III Programming Framework, such as the need for enhanced transparency, and effective governance at all levels.

The programming priorities are part of the Commission Communication "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" and its initiative to strengthen the public administration reform. Equally, the programming priorities linked to the requisitions of the 2020 Commission's Communication "Enhancing the enlargement process- A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" and the need for the Western Balkans countries to deliver more credibly on the reforms in public administration reforms, fighting corruption and functioning of democratic institutions. The programming priorities will directly contribute to the recommendations provided in the 2023 North Macedonia Report by improving public service and human resource management, accountability of administration and service delivery to the citizens and businesses.

The Commission's proposed priority areas and actions for 2025-2027 emphasize the need to ensure proper follow-up to the recommendations of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption on improving public sector recruitment procedures and ensuring a systematic follow-up to the reports of the State Audit Office and to strengthen the capacities of the Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities will address these needs and strengthen its human resource management and ultimately contribute to overall public administration reform. The Commission's outline emphasises the requirement to strengthen the capacities of the newly established Ministry of Digital Transformation to define and effectively implement digital transformation. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 priorities in the area of digitalisation will complement the Commission's outline by improving digital environment for better functioning of public administration through strengthening technical capacities of the Ministry and relevant bodies, coupled with supplying digital infrastructure.

The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities are complementary to the Green Agenda and the corresponding principles of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which require public administrations to lead the transition to climate neutrality taking into account specific regional and local needs and conditions. The interventions under 2025-2027 programming priorities in the area of good governance will contribute to building the capacity of the North Macedonian administration to implement the country's commitments to the Green Deal targets for the benefit of its citizens and economy. The digital transformation promoted through these programming priorities will result in more efficient public services, which is essential for reducing the environmental footprint of administrative processes. By digitizing services and enhancing the use of digital infrastructure, the North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities in this area will help minimize the reliance on paper-based processes, contributing to reduced deforestation, lower carbon emissions associated with paper production and transportation, and overall waste reduction. This supports the circular economy goals of the Green Agenda by promoting the reduction of resource consumption and the generation of less waste in public administration processes. Improved digital infrastructure and enhanced public service delivery mechanisms will allow the government to better monitor environmental issues, including waste management, energy use, and emissions. By leveraging digital platforms for enhanced monitoring, the programming priorities will provide government agencies with the tools they need to collect and analyse data related to environmental challenges. This data can be used to inform more effective

environmental policies and ensure that public services contribute to climate resilience and sustainable development.

2. Complementarity of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with the Reform Agenda, EU and other donors and the multi-country programme

The programming priorities will build on the results of the North Macedonia Reform Agenda 2024-2027. The functioning public administration able to deliver high quality services to its citizens is the key element of promoting economic convergence as a means of bringing the Western Balkans countries closer to the EU. The programming priorities will complement the planned achievements by sustaining the enhanced capacities of national institutions across public administration and addressing the remaining challenges. The programming priorities are relevant to the results achieved under the sub-area Public Administration reform. The Reform Agenda will focus on the reorganization and optimization of the state administration, as well as improvements in the civil service. The programming priorities will continue the efforts by focusing further on human resource management, public administration digitalisation and provision of services, and making the public service more appealing as a workplace.

This programming priorities also align with and continue the work started by the Reform Agenda under Sub-area of Digitalisation, ensuring no duplication but rather complementing and expanding on the initial reforms. Specifically, the Reform Agenda's Reform: Secure Digital Infrastructures Roll-Out emphasizes the establishment of secure governmental infrastructure for addressing cybersecurity threats and enhancing public service delivery. The 2025-2027 programming priorities continue this effort by strengthening digital infrastructure and public service delivery, particularly by introducing secure digital solutions that enhance government network infrastructure, data management systems, and cybersecurity standards. The programmed priorities in the area of digitalisation will partially address the findings of the Feasibility Study on Centralized Government Digital Infrastructure outlined in the Reform Agenda, by further strengthening infrastructure capabilities to ensure resilient and efficient public services and given the fact that IPA 2025-2027 will be implemented after the Reform Agenda interventions. Additionally, Reform Agenda's Digital Public Services, which focus on relocating IT equipment and ensuring interoperability among ministries by 2027, will be continued through the interventions under the programming priorities. The programming priorities' goal to enhance public service delivery through digital solutions and skills enhancement mirrors the Reform's objective to increase digital public services and simplify administrative procedures, contributing to interoperability among government systems.

The programming priorities complement ongoing donor funding for public administration reform focusing on different areas of the system. IPA III 2022 EU for Modern Public Administration will address the state's institutional framework by streamlining policymaking, executive and regulatory functions across central government and improving the coherence and fairness of job classification and payment systems. With significant EU support under IPA 2017, new automated services have been provided to the public (citizens and businesses) through the e-government portal. The programming priorities will complement these actions by targeting different segments of the systemic reform in the public administration. The programming priorities are complementary to the IPA III proposed priorities for cooperation in 2025-27 for multi-country and its outcome of enhanced and strengthened capacities, innovative practices and regional co-operation in the area of PAR by investing in North Macedonia's national capacities of public administration to apply principles of public administration and service delivery to its citizens.

3. Alignment of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with national strategies

The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities in the area of good governance directly contribute to the implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy 2023-2030 and its Priority area 1: Policy Development and Co-ordination by investing in strengthening capacities to develop and implement strategic documents relevant for public administration reform for the purpose of creating effective, efficient, transparent, inclusive and evidence-based policy development. The 2025-2027 interventions also focus on the Priority area 2: Public Service and Human Resource Management by improving the public administration HRM system and adoption of automated HR processes to create expert and professional public administration free from political influence. The programming priorities are complementary to the Priority area 3: Responsibility, Accountability and Transparency by investing in strengthening the public administration's capacities to be accountable to its citizens in order to foster responsible, accountable and transparent operation of institutions and strengthen their integrity and transparency.

The programming priorities directly contribute to Priority area 4: Digital Transformation, by focusing on measure 4.1.1: Improvement of electronic communication channels and measure 4.1.2: Introducing a SMART environment in the operation of the administration. Through the implementation of digital solutions for public services and the enhancement of digital skills, the interventions will support the administration's capacity to deliver more efficient, transparent, and citizen-oriented services. Additionally, the interventions align with measure 4.2.1: Digitization of registers for providing services, by enabling the modernization of public services and improving accessibility for citizens, particularly through e-services. The programming priorities are directly aligned with and supports the implementation of national policies and strategies, such as the National Development Strategy (draft), National ICT Strategy 2023 - 20230 (draft), the Strategic Plan of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2024-2028), and the National Operational Broadband Plan (NOBP). Each of these strategic documents highlights priorities and objectives that are critical for advancing the country's digital transformation, improving public service delivery, and strengthening digital infrastructure, complementing the planned interventions under the 2025-2027 programming priorities.

Thematic Priority 2: Administrative capacity and EU acquis alignment

Thematic Priority 4: Strategic communication, monitoring, evaluation and communication activities

1. The response of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities to the IPA III Programming Framework, EU enlargement policy priorities and the Commission 2025-2027 recommendations

The proposed North Macedonia programming priorities 2025-2027 in this area align with the IPA III Window 1 Thematic Priority 2, which aims to enhance the administrative capacity and alignment with the EU policies and the EU acquis of the beneficiaries' policies and legislation. This will facilitate the effective implementation of sector policies and adopted legislation, while strengthening the ability of the beneficiaries to assume the obligations of membership. Furthermore, the programming priorities are contributing to Thematic Priority 4: Strategic communication, monitoring, evaluation and communication activities under the same Window. This will be achieved by raising awareness and informing citizens on the benefits of the accession process, EU membership and the necessary reforms. The programming priorities will also address issues identified during the negotiation process, support all windows and thematic

priorities, with a particular focus on harmonisation of legislation and capacity building for the implementation of aligned legislative frameworks.

The programming priorities form a part of the Commission Communication, "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans", which sets out an initiative to strengthen the rule of law, economic reforms and alignment with core European values. The programming priorities will provide support for needs arising from accession, mitigate risks that might jeopardise the process, and ensure proper utilisation of pre-accession assistance. Equally, the programming priorities are linked to the requisitions of the 2020 Commission's Communication "Enhancing the enlargement process- A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" defining fundamental and economic reforms as the core objective of the accession process. The programming priorities correspond to the North Macedonia Country Report 2023 and its considerations on the country's need to strengthen its capacities for EU accession process.

The Commission's proposed priority areas and actions for IPA III 2025-2027 recognised that the new Government keep up with the necessary EU reforms to further align with the *acquis*. The North Macedonia's programming priorities were designed to help the country in maintaining the accession momentum and the positive environment surrounding EU investments. The proposed interventions will implement the outcomes of *enhanced alignment with the EU acquis and EU/international standards with attention on human and fundamental rights and increased levels of visibility of the EU funding in the country and especially at a local level* by investing in further *acquis* alignment, capacity building and institutional strengthening at all levels.

The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities were established to provide flexible financing for smaller-scale projects that support fundamental reforms outside the regular annual and multi-annual programming. A variety of beneficiaries will be able to submit project concepts to the EU Delegation and the NIPAC office for consideration. The programming priorities will fund interventions focused on strengthening democratic and independent judicial institutions, improving public administration at the central and local level, and supporting other bodies serving the public interest. All funded interventions will have to address specific, clearly defined needs in line with the priorities set out in relevant strategic documents. They will support the achievement of objectives by strengthening management of the EU accession process and the Reform Agenda, increasing alignment of national legislation with the EU *acquis*, and improving the capacity of national institutions to implement aligned legislation and progress on fundamental and structural reforms. The programming priorities will also facilitate greater public awareness of North Macedonia's EU accession process, enhance the impact and visibility of EU-funded initiatives in the country, and reinforce national capabilities for managing EU funds.

The 2025-2027 programming priorities are complementary to the Green Agenda and the corresponding principles of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which require public administrations to lead the transition to climate neutrality and iterates the importance of good governance and efficient institutions as the basis for sustainable economic growth. The green transition and adaptation to climate change require responses specific to regional and local conditions and needs. The programming priorities will contribute to building the capacity of the North Macedonian administration to implement the country's commitments to the Green Deal targets for the benefit of its citizens and economy.

2. *Complementarity of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with the Reform Agenda, EU and other donors and the multi-country programme*

The Government of North Macedonia on 16 July 2024 has submitted the draft Reform Agenda 2024-27 with the following priorities: rule of law, public administration reform and public finance management; digitalisation, energy, green transition; human capital and business environment. Implementation is expected to be completed by the end of 2028 at the latest. The programming priorities will complement the North Macedonia's Reform Agenda by supporting further institutional reforms, capacity building and aligning national legislation with EU standards as well as the RA's implementation system (i.e. guidance and support concerning monitoring and reporting) and provide other support arising from any relevant issues arising post 2027. The programming priorities are complementary to the consecutive actions in the previous programming years that were aiming to bring North Macedonia closer to EU membership by supporting the acquis alignment, institutional and strategic capacity building and helping the country's efforts to start the negotiation process.

The programming priorities are aligned with Priority area 6 of the EC outline for multi-country programmes, namely Administrative Capacity and EU Acquis Alignment. The programming priorities will complement the planned interventions by aligning North Macedonia's national policies and legislation with the EU policies and the EU acquis. The programming priorities will also build administrative capacity to implement sector policies and adopted legislation effectively and fully, thus strengthening the country's ability to meet the obligations of membership. The programming priorities will provide flexible support in the form of technical assistance, preparatory, pilot/bridging or follow-up actions, preparation of relevant studies, networking, visibility, evaluation activities, training, capacity-building activities, as well as skills development and knowledge transfer. These activities will align with the interventions envisaged in the multi-country programme.

3. Alignment of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with national strategies

In line with the National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis Communautaire, the programming priorities will facilitate the alignment of national legislation with EU standards, ensuring compliance with EU regulations. The programming priorities will address horizontal requirements through the adoption and implementation of legislation and will also provide capacity building for its enforcement. The programming priorities will address the most urgent requirements of North Macedonia institutions as they work towards fulfilling EU membership criteria and are relevant to national legislation in all sectors, given its horizontal purpose and the flexibility it affords in addressing the current challenges facing the North Macedonian administration in the accession process.

WINDOW 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth

Thematic Priority 1: Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health

1. The response of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities to the IPA III Programming Framework, EU enlargement policy priorities and the Commission 2025-2027 recommendations

The European Commission's key policy priorities under IPA III, Window 4, TP 1 Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health focus on improving access to and quality of inclusive education at all levels and promoting lifelong learning. The framework emphasises improving the governance and financing of education systems, promoting cross-sectoral cooperation and addressing the skills gap by aligning education with labour market needs. Special attention is given to improving digital, technological and innovative skills to

prepare a resilient workforce for the future, while supporting low-skilled individuals and marginalised communities. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 priorities in the area of competitiveness and inclusive growth contribute directly to W4 TP1 by supporting ongoing legislative reforms, ensuring that education policies are modern, coherent, and capable of responding to the needs of the sector, particularly in the areas of governance, inclusivity, and monitoring and evaluation. The programmed priorities will empower all education professionals through targeted capacity development, promote inclusive education and address basic literacy for vulnerable groups. In addition, the programmed priorities emphasise capacity building for national and local institutions, in line with the Commission's objective to strengthen governance and strategic planning of education systems, ensure more effective resource allocation and promote the long-term sustainability of education reform efforts. The programming priorities will address the critical gaps in policy, professional development, and inclusivity in North Macedonia's education system, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes, a more skilled workforce, and sustainable socio-economic growth.

The EC 2023 Country Report highlights that progress in reforming education curricula and reducing skills mismatches in North Macedonia is hampered by insufficient funding and human capacity. Despite an increase in the number of people with higher education qualifications, curricula are not well aligned with labour market needs. State financial support for education is insufficient and coordination between the education sector and the business community is weak. In 2022, public expenditure on education and training amounted to 3.7% of GDP, below both the EU average (5%) and the average of the peer countries, which hampers the implementation of the Education Strategy 2018-2025. The 2025-2027 programmed priorities are in line with EC recommendations in the 2023 North Macedonia Report by addressing key gaps in education reform, including strengthening teacher and institutional capacity, better aligning curricula with labour market needs, while addressing the financing and human capacity challenges highlighted in the Report.

The 2025-2027 programmed priorities in the field of education have taken into account the challenges of the education system in North Macedonia, which were recognised in the EC outline note with EC proposed priorities for the 2025-2027 programming. The EC outline note concluded that the education system does not adequately equip young people with key competences - skills and knowledge and identified the key outcome as "a revised national education system that equips youth with skills matching labour market needs". The overarching aim of the North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities in the area of education is to support the development of individuals' capacities to their full potential for prosperous, inclusive, greener, safer and sustainable societies. This is especially important in North Macedonia, where educational outcomes continue to lag behind regional and EU averages, with significant gaps in access and quality for marginalized communities, including Roma children and students with disabilities. North Macedonia programmed priorities for 2025-2027 focus on bringing about systemic changes in the capacity of educational professionals and educational institutions, as well as in the legal and strategic framework for education. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 in the area of education will focus on supporting the development and revision of critical education laws, transitioning the pre-school sector under the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), and aligning national curriculums with international standards. This reform will ensure that education policies are modern, coherent, and capable of responding to the needs of the sector, particularly in the areas of governance, inclusivity, and monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, they will support the development of policies for adult literacy and primary education completion for adults, further promoting lifelong learning. The 2025-2027 programmed priorities focus on continuous professional development of teachers, development of initial teacher education, building professional competences and promoting inclusive

education for marginalised groups, thus igniting the change in the system that would be able to equip the young people with key competences. This will be achieved by supporting continuous professional development (CPD) for educators at all levels, strengthen initial teacher education programs, and enhance mentoring systems for novice teachers. It will also include organizing in-service training for teachers transitioning to adult education and supporting the implementation of adult literacy programs. Furthermore, it will improve the capacities of key institutions, including the National Council for Higher Education, Science, and Research, ensuring they can lead education reforms effectively. The North Macedonia 2025-2027 programming priorities will also focus on developing initial teacher education programs that emphasize blended learning, active learning strategies, and digital integration. It will support subject-specific workshops, ongoing coaching, and the piloting of innovative teaching methods, which will be scaled to improve teacher education. Training modules on inclusive education will also be developed for future teachers, ensuring they are prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students. Finally, the programming priorities will emphasize inclusivity in the education system, particularly for marginalized groups such as Roma children and students with special educational needs (SEN). They will promote the development of inclusive education policies, build the capacity of school staff, and support initiatives aimed at student well-being, including mental health support systems. These interventions will foster a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students.

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans provides the framework for the region's transition towards a more sustainable, green, and digital economy. These strategic initiatives align with the European Green Deal and emphasize decarbonisation, circular economy, biodiversity, and pollution control. For North Macedonia, the interventions directly contributes to these goals by supporting human capital development and legal reforms in education, enhancing the inclusivity of the school environment, and promoting lifelong learning. The interventions under 2025-2027 priorities, such as strengthening policy development in the education sector and improving educational access for vulnerable groups are in line with the Green Agenda's pillars of inclusive growth and human capital development. Additionally, the support for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers plays a crucial role in preparing citizens for a green and sustainable economy. By integrating education reforms with green and digital initiatives, the 2025-2027 programming priorities support North Macedonia's alignment with both the Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan's focus on human capital and sustainable economic growth.

2. Complementarity of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with the Reform Agenda, EU and other donors and the multi-country programme

North Macedonia's Reform Agenda, which focuses on improving vocational education and training, aligning skills with labour market needs, and partnering with the private sector, is a central pillar of the country's development reform. While the Reform Agenda focuses on vocational education and training (VET), the 2025-2027 programme priorities complement these efforts by strengthening the basic aspects of the education system, particularly in early and secondary education, and ensuring the professional development of teachers. By improving the continuous professional development (CPD) of educators and enhancing institutional capacity, the priorities will support the successful implementation of broader VET reforms. In addition, the programmed priorities complement other donor-funded programmes in the education sector, such as those of the World Bank and UNICEF. World Bank-funded programmes have supported the development of a catalogue of accredited teacher training courses, and the interventions developed under the 2025-2027 programmed priorities will build on these efforts by providing additional support for continuous professional development and expanding access to training programmes. Similarly, the focus of the programmed priorities on

inclusive education and student well-being aligns with UNICEF's initiatives to promote inclusive learning environments and address mental health challenges in schools.

The 2025-2027 programmed priorities are complementary to the multi-country programme 2025-2027 and its Priority 10- socio economic inclusion aiming to promote further the integration of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups through education. In North Macedonia, students with disabilities in inclusive schools often receive lower-quality teaching and acquire fewer skills compared to their peers in mainstream schools. A significant number of Roma children remain outside the education system, with high dropout rates and low literacy levels among Roma children. The programmed priorities will emphasize inclusivity in the education system, particularly for marginalized groups such as Roma children and students with special educational needs (SEN). The interventions will promote the development of inclusive education policies, build the capacity of school staff, and support initiatives aimed at student well-being, including mental health support systems. These interventions will foster a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students, resulting in inclusive and accessible schools and promoted student diversity and well-being.

3. Alignment of the North Macedonia 2025-27 programming priorities with national strategies

The 2025-2027 programming priorities in North Macedonia focus on addressing critical challenges in the education sector to improve student outcomes, promote inclusiveness and strengthen lifelong learning opportunities. These priorities are aligned with national strategies and support reforms aimed at modernising the education system and ensuring it meets the needs of a rapidly changing social and economic landscape. These 2025-2027 programming priorities contribute to several key strategic objectives and actions outlined in the North Macedonia Education Strategy for 2018-2025. Their focus on the empowerment of teachers and education professionals is in line with Priority IV: Improving Human Resources Capacities, which emphasises the continuous improvement of the competencies and performance of teaching staff at all levels of education. By supporting teacher training, in particular in digital and green skills, the programmed priorities directly address the strategy's objectives of increasing professional competence and ensuring that teachers are equipped to meet modern educational needs. In addition, the work of the programmed priorities to strengthen the mentoring system for new teachers and to enhance institutional capacities is in line with Priority I: Improving and harmonising the legal basis of education and Priority III: Ensuring digital literacy and the widespread use of ICT in education and training. These objectives emphasise the need to establish a solid legal basis for reforms and to promote the integration of new technologies in the classroom, which are crucial for improving the overall quality of education and making it more relevant to the needs of the labour market. In addition, the focus on inclusive education for marginalised groups, including children with disabilities and Roma pupils, supports the strategy's emphasis on inclusive and multicultural education and ensuring full coverage and support for learners with special educational needs.

The programming priorities contribute to the North Macedonia Human Capital Strategy 2024-2030 under the objective of modernising the legal framework and improving governance. By supporting the further policy development of new laws on vocational education and training, adult education and secondary education, the priorities will strengthen governance in the education sector and ensure that the necessary legal and administrative framework is in place to drive forward education reform. They are also in line with the objective of improving the quality of teaching and learning by strengthening the continuous professional development of teachers, in particular in key areas such as digital literacy and mentoring, which directly contributes to building the human capital needed for sustainable economic growth. The

programmed 2025-2027 priorities also support the National Action Plan for Mental Health by promoting the well-being of pupils in schools through inclusive education policies and interventions. By promoting supportive school environments that address both educational and psychosocial needs, the programmed priorities contribute to the broader goal of improving mental health outcomes for students and creating healthier learning environments.

PART 2 – ACTIONS PROPOSED FOR IPA III SUPPORT IN 2025-2027

IPA III Window	Thematic Priority area	Action	Indicative EU funding (EUR)	Year of financing	Justification	Alignment with the priorities presented by the Commission
<p>Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy</p>	<p>Thematic Priority 1: Judiciary</p> <p>Thematic Priority 2: Fight against corruption</p> <p>Thematic Priority 3: Fight against organised crime/security</p> <p>Thematic Priority 5: Fundamental rights</p>	<p>EU for Rule of Law</p> <p>Overall objective:</p> <p>to strengthen the rule of law, democracy, the respect of human rights and international law, and ensure security</p> <p>Specific objectives:</p> <p>1.Improved independence, efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system and the country’s ability to fight against high level corruption and organised crime</p> <p>2. Strengthened state response to organised crime, money laundering and trafficking drugs and psychotropic substances</p> <p>Outputs:</p> <p>1.1. Improved efficiency of the justice system against</p>	<p>15 000 000</p>	<p>2026 2027</p>	<p>In the last country report, the EC noted that corruption remains widespread in many areas and is an issue of concern in North Macedonia. Co-operation between the prosecution and the police is perceived as bureaucratic, although the establishment of four investigation centres has improved efficiency, but further support is needed to optimise their capacity. There is a need to improve the knowledge of investigators and prosecutors and to support a more professional workflow in the judicial chain. North Macedonia shows limited results in the area of asset recovery (seizure and confiscation) and there is limited capacity in the judiciary to deal with complex cases of organised crime and high-level corruption. The action therefore focuses on these issues by supporting enhanced cooperation between the various actors involved in the process, including prosecutors, the judiciary, law enforcement investigators and financial intelligence units, and by improving their operational capabilities. At the same time, only 25% of the citizens of North Macedonia have a positive opinion of the country's justice system, which means that the judiciary needs further support to become more efficient and that support is needed for continued reforms in the judiciary and the implementation of its policy documents. This includes the whole system, from the Judicial Council, the Ministry of Justice as policy maker, to the courts and judges. North Macedonia also needs to continue the practice of regular evaluation of policy documents, support the development and implementation of subsequent strategies, continue the process of harmonisation and revision of legislation to meet EU requirements, and implement the Rule of Law Roadmap.</p>	<p>The action is fully aligned with the proposed priority areas and actions proposed by the Commission at the launch of the 2025-27 programming process. The action’s interventions mirror the following support suggested in the EC outline:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for capacity building to ensure that parallel financial investigations for cases of serious and organised crimes are conducted - Support for capacity building to the National Coordination Centre for the fight against organised crime - Support for building human and financial capacities of the law enforcement agencies investigating organised and serious crimes, financial crimes and money laundering - Support to strengthening the judicial independence and improve the legal framework for fundamental rights protection, including respecting gender perspectives when developing legislation - Support to the efficient implementation of the (new) judicial reform strategy

		<p>organised crime and high-level corruption</p> <p>1.2. Enhanced impartiality, accountability, efficiency and professionalism of the judiciary</p> <p>1.3. Strengthened system for prevention of corruption</p> <p>1.4. Strengthened capacities for enforcing the Law on Justice for Children</p> <p>2.1. Strengthened reforms and capacities of the law enforcement to improve techniques and technologies in digital forensic</p> <p>2.2. Strengthened capacities of the law enforcement to combat and prevent crimes related to money laundering and drug trafficking</p>		<p>In the area of prevention and combating corruption, there is limited cooperation between relevant institutions, along with limited access to databases and official records of public authorities and private entities with public competencies listed in the Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest. North Macedonia still faces significant challenges in the area of political party financing that needs to be improved. It is essential to implement a more structured follow-up process of the political parties financing, to ensure that the findings and recommendations of state audits are effectively addressed by the government and law enforcement agencies. This will help to prevent further irregularities and ensure accountability. Over a third of judges reported experiencing external influence attempts, with a similar situation among prosecutors. The country will need further support to protect the judiciary from undue influence and to implement changes in the system of prevention, detection and punishment of corruption in the judiciary. In addition, North Macedonia will need further support in advancing in the EU negotiating process, preparation of strategic framework and legislation in the areas relevant for prevention of corruption to successfully meet all the requirements posed through the process. North Macedonia passed the Law on Justice for Children to ensure that every child at risk, in contact or in conflict with the law in the country, has equitable access to a fair justice system when their rights are violated, or their entitlements denied. Despite the investment made in the relevant institutions for improving their capacities when dealing with children in conflict or in contact with the law, additional investments are needed to further strengthen the institutional and technical capacities, ensure specialisation of the professionals working in the child justice system, and therefore reinforce implementation of the revised laws. North Macedonia lacks state of the art technologies and knowledge on the latest techniques in digital forensic in criminal investigations and fighting cybercrime. Its law enforcement also lacks capacities to combat and prevent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support to improve oversight mechanisms for political parties financing, asset declaration and conflict of interests and anti-corruption proofing of new and amended legislation - Support the interinstitutional cooperation and anti-corruption mainstreaming across state institutions. - Support to adopt and implement the necessary legislation to regulate the activity of the Asset Recovery Office - Support for capacity building of the SCPC for more effective verification of asset declarations - Support to improve institutional coordination with the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption and law enforcement institutions to follow up on the findings of red flag reports. - Support to ensure the regular update of the list of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances in compliance trends with EU and UN standards and to strengthen the capacities of the National Drugs Observatory (not only in terms of staffing as this is covered in the reform agenda) - Support to advanced alignment with the acquis on National legislation on drugs, psychotropic substances and precursors where it does not comply with the EU acquis or international standards
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					<p>crimes related to money laundering and drug trafficking. Therefore, the country needs support in acquiring capacities, new technologies and updated tools for the state to have the ability to respond to these challenges.</p> <p>The Reform Agenda will invest significant resources in advancing the rule of law in North Macedonia, and this action is intended to complement and reinforce its achievements and fill the remaining gaps. Consequently, the action is programmed for the period 2026 and 2027 considering the high level of support envisaged under the Reform Agenda.</p>	<p>- Support to enhance MK's administrative capacities to implement and maintain the result of the Reforms Foreseen under the Reform Agenda towards this target.</p>
<p>Window 2: Good governance, EU acquis alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication</p>	<p>Thematic Priority 1: Good governance</p>	<p>EU for Good Governance</p> <p>Overall objective:</p> <p>to promote good governance and increase compliance with Union's values</p> <p>Specific objectives:</p> <p>1. Strengthened professionalism, integrity, transparency and accountability across public administration 2. Improved digital environment for better functioning of public administration</p> <p>Outputs:</p> <p>1.1. Improved system for human resource management and promotion of integrity</p>	10 000 000	2026 2027	<p>The 2023 North Macedonia Report, which identified insufficient political support, leadership and oversight of public administration reforms, with the relevant ministry lacking sufficient human resources to drive reforms at the technical level. According to the SIGMA 2021 monitoring report, the civil service and human resource management face persistent shortcomings. There are inconsistencies in the application of recruitment and promotion procedures across the public sector, as well as in the functioning of the salary system. Professional development of civil servants is weak, both in terms of training activities and strategy. In order to recruit high quality civil servants, the country needs to invest in their training and capacity for professional development, e.g. by supporting the Academy for Professional Development and Training of Civil Servants. The existing Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS) keeps personal records of employees, calculates salaries and manages employee appraisals. However, North Macedonia still needs to upgrade its HRMIS and promote the adoption of automated HR processes for recruitment, promotion, mobility and staff appraisal, as well as build administrative capacity to use and promote HRMIS. The country applies an explicit competency framework throughout the civil service, but with a rather unbalanced composition of professional requirements, with a bias towards formal characteristics. In order to have a system that both clarifies</p>	<p>The action is fully aligned with the proposed priority areas and actions proposed by the Commission at the launch of the 2025-27 programming process. The action's interventions mirror the following support suggested in the EC outline:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support to ensure a coherent and consistent application of the manual on managerial accountability - Support to follow-up to the recommendations of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption on improving public sector recruitment procedures - Support to improve the technical, financial and human resources capacities of the Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information to strengthen the efficiency of financial inspections - Support to building capacities of the key institutions, such as the new Ministry of Digital

		<p>in public administration</p> <p>1.2. Strengthened capacities of public administration to apply accountability and transparency</p> <p>2.1. Improved public service delivery</p> <p>2.2. Strengthened digital and media infrastructure for enhanced monitoring and service delivery</p>		<p>the specific knowledge, skills and behaviours required for a given job and ensures the effective performance of employees, North Macedonia needs support in assessing the current professional skills of civil servants, defining specific competency profiles based on the assessment, designing a competency-based performance assessment system for newly developed competencies, and building the capacity of the civil service to use and promote HRMIS.</p> <p>In addition, the proactive publication of information and datasets on the official websites of public institutions remains very low, indicating significant gaps in the implementation of the Law on Free Access to Public Information. The Agency for the Protection of Free Access to Public Information promptly processes complaints and proactively monitors information holders but needs to further strengthen its capacity to perform its tasks in accordance with the Law on Access to Public Information. The State Audit Office continues to report on performance audits throughout the public administration in its annual report. The country needs support to ensure a systematic follow-up of these reports throughout the public administration, thereby increasing its accountability. North Macedonia is currently implementing the PAR Strategy 2023-230, which should be implemented mainly through the national budget and the reform agenda for the period up to 2027, so there will be a need to support the implementation of activities planned up to 2030. There is a need to continue the practice of regular assessment of policy documents, to support the development and implementation of subsequent strategies, and to continue the process of harmonisation and revision of legislation to meet EU requirements.</p> <p>Despite advancements in digitalisation, the country has yet to fully harness the potential of digital solutions to strengthen public service delivery and enhance monitoring and transparency. The existing infrastructure, both in terms of digital systems and skills, remains inadequate, creating</p>	<p>Transformation, to define and effectively implement digital transformation in line with the EU vision for 2030 Digital Compass, through provision of tailor-made and targeted technical assistance to the authorities</p>
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				<p>significant barriers to efficient public administration and service delivery. One of the main challenges is the fragmented and outdated digital infrastructure used by public institutions. Many government agencies lack the necessary tools and platforms to offer comprehensive and user-friendly e-services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. As a result, citizens face significant barriers to accessing essential services, contributing to a lack of trust in public institutions and an inefficient administration. The digital divide is further widened by the lack of digital skills among public sector employees and citizens alike. While the technological infrastructure may exist in certain areas, its effective use is often undermined by insufficient digital literacy and a lack of training. Public servants are frequently ill-equipped to operate the digital systems necessary for modern public service delivery, and citizens, particularly in rural areas, often struggle with the digital skills required to access these services. The lack of a coordinated digital infrastructure across public institutions undermines the effectiveness of service delivery. The current systems are not integrated, which results in bureaucratic delays, inefficiencies, and inconsistent service quality. The lack of sufficient infrastructure for digital and media services hampers the ability to monitor media content effectively and to promote the principles of media pluralism and freedom of expression. Without robust media infrastructure, it is difficult to guarantee the transparency of media ownership, enforce regulations, and foster an environment conducive to fair competition and diversity. Therefore, the modernization of digital infrastructure, combined with comprehensive capacity-building initiatives, will address the structural issues that currently prevent efficient public service delivery. By investing in digital solutions and improving the innovative skills of public sector employees, the government can enhance the accessibility, efficiency, and transparency of its services. Furthermore, strengthening media infrastructure will enable better regulation, monitoring, and support for media pluralism</p>	
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					<p>and freedom of expression, both of which are essential for the democratic and social development of North Macedonia.</p> <p>In view of the investments foreseen in the Reform Agenda and the planned and ongoing projects, the action is foreseen for 2026-2027 to complement these initiatives and to allow the absorption of the significant investments. The digitalisation segment of the action is designed under Window 2 to comprehensively address the issues of public administration reform and its capacity to deliver services to citizens.</p>	
	<p>Thematic Priority 2: Administrative capacity and <i>EU acquis</i> alignment</p> <p>Thematic Priority 4: Strategic communication, monitoring, evaluation and communication activities</p>	<p>EU for Integration Facility</p> <p>Overall objective: To enhance the EU accession process of North Macedonia</p> <p>Specific objectives: 1. Backed up accession process in its entirety (enhanced alignment with the EU acquis and EU/international standards, improved implementation of the legal framework in practice, improved implementation, monitoring and reporting of/on the Reform Agenda, and increased public support for the EU accession process)</p>	30 000 000	2025 2026 2027	<p>The screening process was successfully completed in December 2023. As underlined by the EC, the new government needs to maintain the accession momentum and keep up with the necessary EU reforms to further align with the acquis. The capacity of the institutions to take forward these reforms needs to be further strengthened to enable the country to take on the obligations of EU membership. North Macedonia also needs support to make progress on sound governance principles and an inclusive and evidence-based approach to strategic planning, policy making and legislative processes. The accession negotiations require the country to establish and maintain appropriate negotiating structures and to ensure the capacity to conduct an effective and efficient policy dialogue with the EU. This also implies the need to strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of European Affairs (MEA) as a key pillar of the accession process. Similarly, North Macedonia faces an important task in implementing its Reform Agenda, which requires significant capacity in national institutions to implement, monitor and report on the results. Finally, the promotion of EU policies and the Team Europe approach in North Macedonia requires substantial support. The capacity and tools of the authorities need to be improved in order to make strategic communication on the accession process more targeted and effective. There is a need to improve the visibility and strengthen the communication strategy of the national</p>	<p>The action is fully aligned with the proposed priority areas and actions proposed by the Commission at the launch of the 2025-27 programming process, especially its support to North Macedonia's EU accession process and improvement of visibility of EU financial support in the country. The action's interventions mirror the following support suggested in the EC outline:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support to further advancement of the country's alignment with the acquis. - Support to improving the implementation of the legal framework in practice - Support to increasing the public support for the EU accession process - Support to national authorities in ensuring pro-active, clear and consistent public communication regarding Union values, benefits

		<p>2.Improved effectiveness and visibility of the EU funds invested in the country (sector approach up-scaled, EU funding and policy created a sustainable and visible development change)</p> <p>Outputs:</p> <p>1.1 Strengthened management of the EU accession process and Reform Agenda implementation</p> <p>1.2 Increased level of alignment of the national legislation with the EU <i>acquis</i></p> <p>1.3 Improved capacity of the national institutions to implement the aligned legislation and progress on the fundamental and structural reforms in support of the country's accession</p> <p>1.4 Increased outreach to the citizens of North Macedonia on the country's accession to the EU</p>		<p>authorities on EU assistance and the accession process, thus contributing to increased transparency of the EU process and accountability to citizens on the implementation of EU assistance. In addition to strengthening strategic planning capacities and promoting a results-oriented culture throughout the public administration, North Macedonia needs to improve sectoral financing, budgeting and the country's aid/donor coordination structures. At the same time, there is a need to communicate to citizens the opportunities created by EU funds and the results achieved. The government needs to develop the capacity and tools to make the citizens of North Macedonia aware of the unprecedented EU investment in the region.</p> <p>The action is planned for 2025-2027 since accession is a cumbersome and continuous process, that needs quick flexible interventions addressing the need timely and coherently. The action will also support North Macedonia to implement, monitor and report on the Reform Agenda that should be implemented in the 2024-2027 period.</p>	<p>and obligations of potential Union membership</p>
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		2.1 Strengthened national capacity for management of the EU funds 2.2 Improved awareness of the citizens of North Macedonia on the country's accession to the EU				
Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth	Thematic Priority 1: Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health	EU for Modern Education and Skills Overall objective: to support the development of individuals' capacities to their full potential for prosperous, inclusive, greener, safer and sustainable societies Specific objective: 1. Improved completion of inclusive and equitable quality primary and secondary education and training Outputs: 1.1. Further strengthened policy and legislative framework in the education sector	5 000 000	2025	Progress in drafting and enacting legal documents that contribute to the modernisation of the education sector has been lagging for years. Once these laws are adopted, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), along with other stakeholders, will require substantial support to develop the necessary bylaws and supplementary documents that will define the processes and procedures for implementation. The mechanisms for monitoring its implementation are not clearly defined, and existing targets and indicators are inadequate for a proper evaluation of reform progress. The newly elected government has also committed to developing a new Education Strategy by the end of 2025, which will define key objectives for the modernisation of the education system in North Macedonia, aligned with international standards. In addition, a new Adult Education Strategy is expected to be enacted by parliament in the same year. Given the capacity constraints in the MoES, there will be a significant need for support to effectively monitor, coordinate, and implement these strategic documents. This action will play a critical role in providing the necessary support to the MoES and other stakeholders for the development of a robust legal framework for the education system. It will also assist in monitoring and evaluations of educational policies, while offering capacity-building support to ensure that all actors involved are capable of effectively carrying out these policies.	The action is fully aligned with the proposed priority areas and actions proposed by the Commission at the launch of the 2025-27 programming process. The action's interventions mirror the following support suggested in the EC outline: - Support the development of the new Education strategy, with an action plan and a regular monitoring and reporting system - Support to strengthening capacities of the institutions in charge of education at the central and local level, namely the Ministry of Education and Science, Bureau for Development of Education to perform their tasks more efficiently - Support to inclusive and quality education - Support to general teacher training programs - Support to the development and implementation of new curricula aligning with global best practices and local contextual realities

		<p>1.2. Empowered educational professionals²</p> <p>1.3. Improved initial teachers' education</p> <p>1.4. Ensured inclusive and accessible school environment for student diversity and well-being</p>		<p>Statistical data reveals significant educational challenges in the country: 61% of the registered unemployed are individuals without primary education or with only primary education, and 24.5% of the population over the age of 25 have an unsatisfactory level of education. In penitentiary institutions, 19.3% of inmates lack primary education, and each year, around 364 young people do not complete primary school. These figures demonstrate a pervasive lack of basic education and skills among the population, hindering individuals from participating fully in society or accessing the labour market. As a result, adults who missed out on education in their youth face persistent barriers to improving their skills and accessing employment. The limited availability of adult education and learning opportunities through the development of policies, system and programs as well as through capacity building of institutions that should implement adult literacy programs.</p> <p>One of the permanent issues in the education sector is the insufficient availability of high-quality and accessible professional development opportunities for teachers. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) also faces challenges. While the Law on Higher Education Institutions for Teaching Staff was designed to regulate teacher education, its implementation has been delayed due to a lack of human and financial resources. This has postponed the law's entry into force, hindering the overall quality and standardisation of ITE programmes. Admission to ITE programmes is generally non-competitive, with most students securing places without meeting high entry requirements. alternative pathways into the teaching profession, while available, face bureaucratic and practical barriers. Once teachers enter the profession, they face additional challenges. The one-year traineeship, guided by a mentor selected by the school principal, culminates in an exam,</p>	
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² Under the Educational Professionals are considered: *teachers, professional associates (psychologists, pedagogist), managerial staff and public servants in education on local and national level*

				<p>but the mentorship system is underdeveloped and lacks standardisation.</p> <p>Professional development requirements, though enshrined in the 2019 Law on Teachers and Professional Associates, are not fully met due to budgetary constraints. Teachers must engage in CPD to progress through the career ladder, yet there is a severe shortage of accredited training programmes, and online training and peer-learning opportunities are largely absent. The lack of systemic support for CPD not only undermines the professional competencies of teachers but also affects their ability to meet evolving educational needs, particularly in a system undergoing significant reforms. This action will provide critical support to strengthen both ITE and CPD systems, ensuring that teachers have access to continuous professional development opportunities that align with national standards and are adequately funded. Capacity-building efforts will also target the MoES and other educational institutions to create sustainable mechanisms for teacher development, essential for improving overall educational outcomes in North Macedonia. Additionally, the National Council for Higher Education, Science, and Research, established in 2021, has been tasked with policy development in these areas. However, the Council, consisting of 15 members elected by the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, faces challenges due to its lack of experience and capacity to adequately develop procedures and policies, which hinders the modernization of the higher education system. Improving access and inclusion for vulnerable children in the education system is one of the key priorities. The Law on Primary Education requires primary schools to establish inclusive teams to support students with individual educational plans. However, only 34% of schools have developed such programs for students in need. Several barriers hinder inclusion, including inaccessible infrastructure, unsuitable learning environments, negative attitudes, lack of acceptance, underdeveloped professional competencies, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of teaching assistants and</p>	
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				<p>systematic support. As a result, students with disabilities in inclusive schools often receive lower-quality teaching and acquire fewer skills compared to their peers in mainstream schools. A significant number of Roma children remain outside the education system, with high dropout rates and low literacy levels among Roma children. The most common reasons for this situation include insufficient proficiency in the Macedonian language, the low educational levels of parents, and poor socio-economic conditions. This action aims to promote inclusive education for vulnerable children and students, including Roma and children with special educational needs (SEN). It builds on a successful model that has supported the integration of Roma students into schools, enhancing and expanding it to include a wider range of vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Planned interventions, including capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the skills and motivation of teachers working with vulnerable students and their families, are expected to increase student retention rates, improve academic performance, and reduce dropout rates.</p> <p>The action is foreseen under the 2025 programming year due to the fact that this area has not been covered with the Reform Agenda interventions.</p>	
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ANNEX 1: List of strategies relevant for 2025-2027 North Macedonia programming priorities

WINDOW 1: Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights and Democracy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development Sector Strategy for the Judiciary 2024-2028³ - National Strategy for the Development of the Penitentiary System 2021-2025⁴ - Strategy for Information Communication Technology of Justice Sector 2019-2024⁵ - Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of Civil Society 2022 – 2024⁶ - Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2027⁷ - National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest complemented with an Action Plan for the period 2021-2025⁸ - National Strategy on Illicit Drugs 2021 – 2025⁹ - National Strategy on Prevention and Protection of Children against Violence 2020-2025 - Strategy for Organized Crime (2025-2028)- under preparation - Strategy for Strengthening the Capacities for Conducting Financial Investigations and Confiscation of Property 2024-2028- under preparation - Strategy for Further Development of the Capacities for Criminal Investigation Techniques at regional and Local Level 2020-2025¹⁰
WINDOW 2: Good Governance, <i>Acquis</i> Alignment, Good Neighbourly Relations and Strategic Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public Administration Reform Strategy 2023-2030¹¹ - Programme for Sustainable Local Development and Decentralization 2021 – 2026¹² - Strategy for Regional Development 2021-2031¹³ - Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2027¹⁴ - Strategic Plan of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services¹⁵ - National Operational Broadband Plan (NOBP)¹⁶ - National program for the adoption of the <i>Acquis</i> (NPAA) 2021 – 2025¹⁷ - 2020 – 2024 Operational Program of the Government of North Macedonia¹⁸
WINDOW 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education Strategy for 2018 - 2025¹⁹ and Action Plan - Human Capital Strategy 2024-2030²⁰ - National Youth Mental Health Strategy 2024-2026²¹ - Strategy for Inclusion of Roma 2022-2030²²

³ <https://www.pravda.gov.mk/Upload/Documents/Предлог Развојна Секторска Стратегија за Правосудство 2024 - 2027.pdf>

⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/national-strategy-penitentiary-north-macedonia-eng/1680a4618c>

⁵ <https://www.pravda.gov.mk/Upload/Documents/Strategy-ICT-2019-2024%20.pdf>

⁶ <https://rcgo.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/government-strategy-on-cooperation-2022-2024.pdf>

⁷ https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/strategija_/Стратегија за родова еднаквост 2022 2027.pdf

⁸ https://dksk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NACS-2021_25-and-Action-Plan-EN-final.pdf

⁹ <https://dejure.mk/zakon/nacionalna-strategija-za-drogi-na-republika-severna-makedonija-2021-2025>

¹⁰ [https://mvr.gov.mk/Upload/Editor_Upload/strategija_FINAL_\(1\).pdf](https://mvr.gov.mk/Upload/Editor_Upload/strategija_FINAL_(1).pdf)

¹¹ https://www.mioa.gov.mk/content/Strategija_RJA_MK_03.pdf

¹² https://mls.gov.mk/images/files/programa_2021-2026_EN.pdf

¹³ https://southwestregion.mk/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/strategija_za_regionalen_razvoj_na_rsm_2021-2031.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/strategija_/Стратегија за родова еднаквост 2022 2027.pdf

¹⁵ <https://avmu.mk/en/strategy-for-development-of-the-broadcasting-activity-in-the-republic-of-macedonia/>

¹⁶ https://bco.mdt.gov.mk/?page_id=218&lang=en

¹⁷ [https://www.sep.gov.mk/data/file/NPAA/NPAA_ENG_Final_compressed_\(1\).pdf](https://www.sep.gov.mk/data/file/NPAA/NPAA_ENG_Final_compressed_(1).pdf)

¹⁸ https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/programme_for_work_of_the_government_for_2020-2024.pdf

¹⁹ <http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Strategija-za-obrazovanie-ENG-WEB-1.pdf>

²⁰ <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/117008/MKD-117008.pdf>

²¹ <https://nms.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Национална-стратегија-за-ментално-здравје-за-млади-2024-2026.pdf>

²² https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/Strategy_for_inclusion_of_Roma_2022-2030_final_version.pdf

- National Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2023 – 2030²³
- National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2022-2026²⁴
- Economic Reform programme 2024-2026²⁵
- Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2027²⁶
- National Youth Strategy 2023-2027²⁷
- Strategy on Adult Education 2025 - ²⁸
- Concept for Development of a System on Distance Learning in Primary and Secondary Education (adopted July 2020)²⁹
- Concept on Inclusive Education (adopted July 2020)³⁰
- Concept for the secondary education of adults (adopted December 2022)³¹
- Development concept for the establishment of a Regional Centre for VET in North Macedonia (May 2022)³²
- Adopted Concept for primary education (April 2021)³³
- Concept for state testing in primary education (June 2020)³⁴
- Concept for extracurricular activities in primary education (June 2020)³⁵
- Concept of learning through work in the Republic of North Macedonia (April 2020)³⁶
- Strategy for smart specialization of the Republic of North Macedonia S3 - MK 2024 – 2027³⁷
- Action plan - Strategy for smart specialization of the Republic of North Macedonia S3 2024-2025³⁸

²³ <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/116988/MKD-116988.pdf>

²⁴ https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/strategija_/Национална стратегија а еднаквост и недискриминација_2022-2026.pdf

²⁵ <https://rsjp.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Reform-Programme-2024-2026.pdf>

²⁶ https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2022/strategija_/Стратегија за родова еднаквост_2022_2027.pdf

²⁷ https://api.ams.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/nsm-23-27_draft.pdf

²⁸ The new Strategy for Adult Education is expected to be enacted in 2025

²⁹ https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Koncept_za_dalecinsko_obrazovanie-design-MK-with_logos.pdf

³⁰ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=3277>

³¹ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=5904>

³² <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=5895>

³³ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=3785>

³⁴ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=3251>

³⁵ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=3250>

³⁶ <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=3249>

³⁷ https://mon.gov.mk/download/?f=Mk_%20S3_MK%20%2020.12.2023_1.doc

³⁸ https://mon.gov.mk/download/?f=Mk_S3-AP_20.12.2023_MK_1.DOC

