



Brussels, 13.12.2023
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COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING DECISION

of 13.12.2023

on an exceptional assistance measure regarding the Western Balkans

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THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

Having regard to Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012¹, and in particular Article 110 thereof,

Having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009², and in particular Article 23(6) thereof,

Whereas:

- (1) The cybersecurity of Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia has been severely compromised following their alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) policies in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, through attacks that have paralysed the government networks over the latter months of 2022 and the start of 2023, placing critical infrastructure at risk. Continuous threats to Montenegro during the electoral period in 2023 demonstrate how such incidents target State institutions and pose a real risk to democratic processes. Given the weak preparedness of the cybersecurity infrastructure and governance in North Macedonia, concerns are being raised in relation to the risk of cyberattacks during the upcoming elections, expected to take place in May 2024. The Tirana Declaration of 6 December 2022 on the occasion of the EU-Western Balkans Summit underlined EU's determination to step up its support for resilience against cyber-attacks in the Western Balkans and calls for increased cooperation on cybersecurity. The present situation makes it necessary to adopt an exceptional assistance measure regarding the Western Balkans.
- (2) In order to ensure the implementation of the measure, it is necessary to adopt a financing decision. Article 110 of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 ('the Financial Regulation') establishes detailed rules on financing decisions.

¹ OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p. 1.

² OJ L 209, 14.6.2021, p. 1.

- (3) The planned assistance is to comply with the conditions and procedures set out by the restrictive measures³ adopted pursuant to Article 215 TFEU.
- (4) The objective of the measure set out in this Decision is to support partners in the Western Balkans in responding to increased cybersecurity threats in the region in order to remedy exceptional and unforeseen situations as referred to in Article 4(4)(a) of Regulation (EU) 2021/947.
- (5) In accordance with points (d), (f) and (n) of Annex IV, paragraph 1, second paragraph of Regulation (EU) 2021/947, the activities set out in this Decision will support efforts to strengthen cybersecurity amongst the EU's partners in the Western Balkans.
- (6) The effectiveness of the Union response to the situation referred to in recital (1) depends on the rapid and flexible implementation of an exceptional assistance measure of limited duration in accordance with Article 23(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/947.
- (7) The measure provided for in this Decision is complementary to assistance provided under other Union short-term or long-term external assistance instruments. No fully adequate response can be provided under those instruments to the specific needs being addressed. Therefore, an effective response is required to enable early action in accordance with Article 4(4) of Regulation (EU) 2021/947.
- (8) The measure provided for in this Decision is complementary to any support to be provided in the future under the EU Cybersecurity Reserve, as provided for in the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down measures to strengthen solidarity and capacities in the Union to detect, prepare for and respond to cybersecurity threats and incidents.⁴ In particular, the measure provided for in this Decision could be used to support building the resilience and capabilities referred to in Article 17(5) of that proposal.
- (9) The measure provided for in this Decision is consistent with the Union strategic policy framework for the Western Balkans. Synergies and complementarities are expected with other Union interventions, as detailed in point 7 of the Annex.
- (10) In order to implement the action, it is necessary to use indirect management for the implementation of the measure.
- (11) The Commission is to ensure a level of protection of the financial interests of the Union with regard to entities and persons entrusted with the implementation of Union funds by indirect management as provided for in Article 154(3) of the Financial Regulation. To this end, such entities and persons are to be subject to an assessment of their systems and procedures in accordance with Article 154(4) of the Financial Regulation⁵ and, if necessary, to appropriate supervisory measures in accordance with Article 154(5) thereof before a contribution agreement can be signed.
- (12) It is necessary to allow for the payment of interest due for late payment on the basis of Article 116(5) of the Financial Regulation.

³ www.sanctionsmap.eu. Note that the sanctions map is an IT tool for identifying the sanctions regimes. The source of the sanctions stems from legal acts published in the Official Journal (OJ). In case of discrepancy, the OJ prevails.

⁴ COM(2023) 209 final

⁵ Except for the cases set out in Article 154(6) of the Financial Regulation, where the Commission may decide not to require an ex-ante assessment.

- (13) In order to allow for flexibility in the implementation of the measure, it is appropriate to define changes which should not be considered substantial for the purposes of Article 110(5) of the Financial Regulation.
- (14) The European Parliament and the Council have been informed of the exceptional assistance measure to be adopted by this Decision, in accordance with Article 25(3) of Regulation (EU) 2021/947,

HAS DECIDED AS FOLLOWS:

Article 1
The measure

The financing decision for the implementation of the exceptional assistance measure regarding the Western Balkans, for 2023, as set out in the Annex, is adopted.

The measure shall include the following action: Supporting resilience to cybersecurity threats in the Western Balkans, set out in the Annex.

Article 2
Union contribution

The maximum Union contribution for the implementation of the measure for 2023 is set at EUR 1 800 000 and shall be financed from the appropriations entered in the budget line 14 02 03 10 of the general budget of the Union.

The appropriations provided for in the first paragraph may also cover interest due for late payment.

Article 3
Methods of implementation and entrusted entities or persons

The implementation of the actions carried out by way of indirect management, as set out in the Annex, may be entrusted to the entities or persons referred to or selected in accordance with the criteria laid down in point 6 of that Annex.

Article 4
Duration of the measure

The maximum duration of the exceptional assistance measure adopted under this Decision shall be 18 months. The authorising officer responsible may decide to extend this period twice by a further period of up to six months, up to a total maximum duration of 30 months, under the conditions laid down in Article 23(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/947.

If the implementation of this measure or any of its components is suspended owing to ‘force majeure’ or circumstances beyond the control of the contracting authority and its implementing partner(s), the period of suspension shall not be taken into account for the calculation of the duration of the implementation of this measure.

Article 5
Flexibility clause

Increases or decreases of up to EUR 10 million and not exceeding 20% of the contribution set in the first paragraph of Article 2 or cumulated changes⁶ to the allocations of specific actions not exceeding 20% of that contribution, as well as extensions of the implementation period shall not be considered substantial for the purposes of Article 110(5) of the Financial Regulation provided that these changes do not significantly affect the nature and objectives of the actions.

The authorising officer responsible may apply the changes referred to in the first paragraph. Those changes shall be applied in accordance with the principles of sound financial management and proportionality.

Done at Brussels, 13.12.2023

For the Commission
Josep BORRELL FONTELLES
High Representative / Vice-President

⁶ These changes can come from assigned revenue made available after the adoption of the financing decision.