

ANNEX II: TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	2
1.1. Partner countries	2
1.2. Contracting authority	2
1.3. Background.....	2
1.4. Current situation in the sector.....	3
1.5. Related programmes and other donors activities	5
2. OBJECTIVES, PURPOSE & EXPECTED RESULTS	7
2.1. Overall objective.....	7
2.2. The aim is to promote the development of an enabling civic space, foster engagement with public administration, strengthen civil society expertise and sustainability in the region, and support the growth and pluralism of an independent media sector.	7
2.3. Expected outputs to be achieved by the contractor.....	8
3. ASSUMPTIONS & RISKS.....	10
3.1. Assumptions underlying the project	10
3.2. Risks	11
4. SCOPE OF THE WORK.....	11
4.1. General.....	11
4.2. Specific work.....	12
4.3. Project management.....	13
5. LOGISTICS AND TIMING	13
5.1. Location.....	13
5.2. Start date & period of implementation	14
6. REQUIREMENTS	14
6.1. Personnel	14
6.2. Office accommodation.....	18
6.3. Facilities to be provided by the contractor.....	18
6.4. Equipment.....	18
6.5. Incidental expenditure	18
6.6. Lump sums	19
7. REPORTS	19
7.1. Reporting requirements	19
7.2. Submission & approval of reports	21
8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION.....	21
8.1. Definition of indicators.....	21
8.2. Special requirements.....	21

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1. Partner countries

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

1.2. Contracting authority

European Commission, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) – Unit B.1 (Western Balkans - Regional Strategy & Investments).

1.3. Background

The enlargement process to the EU demands of a collective effort from the entire society—government alone cannot achieve this goal. Therefore, civil society and media freedom are an indispensable actor of participatory democracy and societal development. Any democracy needs to be based on a strong and vibrant civil society, which helps strengthening decision-making and ensuring that economic, social and political reforms are well-anchored in society.

The European Commission is adamant on the importance of a close and productive relationship with civil society actors¹.

The 2012 communication "*The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations*"² put forward three priorities for EU support: (1) increasing Civil Society Organisations' capacities to perform their roles as independent development actors, (2) promotion of conducive environments for civil society and (3) promotion of structured participation of civil society in domestic policies, in EU programming cycles and internationally. These priorities are also part of the political criteria for accession to the EU, as outlined in the Enlargement Strategy and related reports.

More generally, the importance of civil society is reflected in the 2025 Commission Work Programme, which announced that “this Commission will step up its engagement to support, protect and empower civil society” with a civil society strategy due to be proposed in the third quarter of 2025, together with the European Democracy Shield.³ On 13 June 2025, the European Commission published an open consultations to gather evidence to prepare the Communication on civil society, expected to be endorsed by the College by end 2025.⁴

¹ Civil society is highly heterogeneous and encompasses a wide typology of actors. The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations - Multi Annual Indicative Programme 2021-2027 mentions that civil society include, but is not limited to: non-governmental organisations, organisations representing indigenous peoples, women's and youth organisations, diaspora organisations, migrants' organisations, local traders' associations and citizens' groups, cooperatives, employers' associations and trade unions (social partners), organisations representing economic and social interests, organisations fighting corruption and fraud and promoting good governance, civil rights organisations and organisations combating discrimination, local organisations (including networks) involved in decentralised regional cooperation and integration, consumer organisations, environmental, teaching, cultural, research and scientific organisations, universities, churches and religious associations and communities, philosophical and non-confessional organisations, the not-for-profit media and any non-governmental associations and independent foundations, including independent political foundations. [Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations : Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027 | Capacity4dev](#)

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2012 COM(2012) 492 final.

⁽³⁾ The European Commission's 2025 work programme states that it will develop a strategy to support, protect and empower the civil society. The strategy is scheduled to be finalized by end 2025 and is envisioned to include an external dimension.

⁴ [EU Civil Society Strategy](#)

Currently, the main guiding principles for the EU support to civil society are described in the “*DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region 2021-2027*”⁵. The Guidelines outline the main areas of EU support to civil society, notably:

1. A conducive environment for civil society to carry out its activities.
2. Strengthened cooperation and partnership between CSOs and public institutions.
3. Reinforced CSO capacity and resilience to carry out their activities effectively.

The Guidelines offer a concrete results' framework for support to civil society, containing outcomes to be achieved as well as indicators to monitor progress.

Noteworthy, that **media freedom** is considered a **cornerstone of democracy** in the European Union. The European Commission actively monitors and supports this freedom through legislation, funding, and cooperation with civil society. The interrelationship and interdependency of media freedom and democratic values, and the critical role of media freedom in enabling and sustaining democratic societies.

The enlargement countries have to comply with the EU acquis in this area, including among other the compliance with: the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) that create a common framework to safeguard media independence and pluralism; the updated Audio-visual Media Services Directive of 2018; the Digital Service Act of 2022; the European Media Freedom Act of 2024; the EU anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation) Directive of 2024; the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation; the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

1.4. Current situation in the sector

Civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey is facing mounting challenges, including increasing political pressure, restrictive legislation, and legal intimidation. In Republika Srpska, the government has advanced legislative initiatives targeting NGOs, while cyberattacks and smear campaigns against civil society actors continue to escalate ([BCSDN, 2024](#)). Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are frequently used across the region to silence environmental activists and rights defenders, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro. Nevertheless, judicial and civil society coalitions are beginning to push back—for example, Serbian judges have joined with CSOs to challenge SLAPP practices and defend freedom of association ([Council of Europe, 2025](#)). EU and Council of Europe initiatives are also supporting institutional reforms and protection mechanisms, with targeted training and legal assistance programs in North Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina.

Media freedom across the region is deteriorating due to growing state interference, legal harassment, and digital repression. Press freedom rankings have fallen sharply: Kosovo dropped to 99th place globally, Serbia ranks 96th, and Bosnia & Herzegovina 86th, reflecting increased censorship, political pressure, and attacks on journalists ([RSF via BIRN, May 2025](#)). In Serbia, journalists covering protests have faced physical violence, public defamation, and obstruction, prompting concern from international observers ([The Guardian, Mar 2025](#)). Meanwhile, surveillance and digital censorship are intensifying across the region, with spyware use, social media monitoring, and disinformation laws stifling dissent ([BIRN, Apr 2025](#)). Despite these threats, there are positive developments: EU-supported cooperation among public broadcasters and capacity-building for law enforcement and judiciary aim to improve protections for journalists and strengthen independent media ([EEAS, 2024](#)).

Against this backdrop, the sector main challenges are:

- Difficulties in ensuring an inclusive democratic process

⁵ [DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region 2021-2027 \(europa.eu\)](#)

- Fragmentation of the dialogue with the EU, Governments and in general the public administration
- Limited results on advancing on a conducive environment, engagement with the public sectors and capacity building, sustainability of the sector⁶
- The modalities of engagement with the sector are diverse and without a systemic follow-up on consultations, recommendations.
- Consultations on legislation, policy and in particular the enlargement process by the governments of the region are mostly ad-hoc and recommendations are not followed up.
- Policy inputs are not used in a systematic and functional way.
- The selection of civil society and media actors participating in the different modalities of engagements, including dialogues, is often not based on clear criteria, due to the absence of a legitimate/broadly recognised representative body/networks of civil society and media.
- Limited impact of the Civil Society Facility and media programme on the sector, as detailed in the three annual reports on the implementation of the Guidelines for EU support to civil society and reporting in different fora related to media independence and pluralism.
- Limited thematic expertise of civil society organisations in priority areas covered by the enlargement process and different clusters and chapters, Growth Plan.
- Limited outreach of support.
- Limited sustainability of the organisations operating in the sector and high dependence on grants.

Opportunities are represented by:

- The acceleration of the enlargement process, the adoption of the Growth Plan and the related reform agendas have created a new momentum and the need for stepping-up and support more effectively the civil society and media engagement with the EU and the governments in the region.
- Awareness of the deterioration of the civic space in the region and the need to support more effectively civil society and media to mitigate the risk of escalation of non-democratic process hampering the enlargement
- The Civil Society Facility and Media Programme offer support to the civil society and media sector in the region and individual economies. They can be instrumental and effective to ensure an active participation of the sector to the enlargement process and Growth Plan (Reform Agendas and the Reform and Growth Facility)
- The increasing awareness and analysis on the advantages for the democratic process of the countries to engage with the civil society and media.

Against this backdrop, the Contractor will provide assistance and support to the European Commission's DG NEAR, and, where necessary, to the EU Delegations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. The aim is to promote the development of an enabling civic space, foster engagement with public administration, strengthen civil society expertise and sustainability in the region, and support the growth of an independent media sector.

This support will help ensure that civil society can engage more effectively in the EU enlargement process. It will involve advancing the implementation of the Guidelines for Support to Civil

⁶ As reporting in the 2025 regional report on the implementation of the Guidelines for EU support to civil society in the Western Balkans and Türkiye: [3rd Regional Assessment Report - Tacso](#)

Society and aligning with key regulations and legal frameworks relevant to the media sector. The Civil Society Facility and Media Programme will play a key role in supporting these efforts.

The Contractor will build on the main achievements of the TACSO programme.

1.5. Related programmes and other donors activities

1.5.1 related EU programmes

The EU support to civil society and independent media is mainly channelled through the Civil Society Facility and Media Programme, composed of one regional (managed by HQ) and seven bilateral envelopes (WB6+TK, managed by EUDs). The programme covers both the Western Balkans and Türkiye.

The assistance provided through IPA III is complemented by other policy and financial instrument such as the NDICI-Global Europe Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy.

In terms of financial figures, the support has increased from the IPA II (2014-2020) to the IPA III (2021-2027) period, substantially for Türkiye.

IPA II period (2014-2020)

Total allocation for WBT: EUR 337.75 million

IPA III period (2021-2027)

Total allocation for WBT: EUR 471.8 million

Description of the Civil Society Facility and media programme can be found in:

- 2021-2023 [CID CSF 2021-2023.pdf](#)
- 2024 -2025 Action document 2024-2025 [8c819ddb-dcb4-452f-8faa-edbae1f6b0be_en](#), that includes the Technical Assistance Supporting the EU on civil society and media.
- 2026-2027 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-implementing-decision-c2025-4066-final-2462025-financing-multi-country-and-civil-society_en

The support is provided through different implementation modalities:

- Action grants with civil society networks on various policy areas at regional and national level.
- Operating grants/core support to selected civil society partners at national level.
- Technical assistance to civil society and governments.
- Key initiatives with strategic international partners.

The Civil Society Facility and Media programmes provide civil society and media actors with opportunities to implement projects in various areas with diverse objectives, including:

- provide the EU and the Governments with relevant **policy inputs**, perspectives of their **constituencies and communities** of origin, ensuring that the **voice of the most vulnerable** is heard.
- provide the EU and beneficiaries' policy-maker with **independent monitoring and critical scrutiny** of key governmental reforms in specific sectors, such as the ones targeted by the Growth Plan and the Reform and Growth Facility.
- act as technical partners to the EU and the Governments, with specific **technical support and sectorial expertise**.
- contribute to the alignment towards EU acquis and standards with **tailored and complementary interventions** producing positive change in the targeted communities as well contribute to the **better understanding of the enlargement process** by citizens.

- notably for media, **translate the content of reforms for the understanding of citizens** and can **shape the public discourse**, thus helping citizens take informed political, economic and social decisions.

However, more can be done to strengthen the role of media and civil actors in the enlargement process.

A pressing need is represented by the shrinking civil society space, notably in some of the Western Balkans economies (i.e. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Türkiye. Finally, to mitigate the effect on the civil society and media actors of increasing destabilising factors, such as the war in Ukraine, the shrinking of support to the region by international donors, the decreasing interest in the EU accession.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance and the Reform and Growth Facility for Western Balkans⁷ represent an opportunity to support the sector in advancing further and support those actors that more effectively can contribute to the enlargement process, including in partnership with other donors active in the region.

The Technical Assistance to Civil Society

One of the key initiatives funded under the Civil Society Facility and Media Programme is the *Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TACSO)*, aiming at providing a comprehensive and integrated support to the civil society sector of the IPA region.

The programme offered services to improve capacities and strengthen the role of CSOs in the region. It has been implemented through three consecutive phases since its creation in 2009.

10.07.2009 – 01.11.2011	TACSO 1	Capacity building of the Civil Society in the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) countries	EUR 6,568,988.45
01.09.2013 – 30.11.2017	TACSO 2	Technical Assistance to the Civil Society Organisation from the IPA beneficiaries	EUR 10,598,000
18.12.2018 – 31.08.2025 (ongoing)	TACSO 3	Technical Assistance to the Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey	EUR 8,000,000

Services provided by TACSO 1 and 2 included: organisation of events; implementation of a variety of training programmes; implementation of the People-to-People programme (P2P); help-desk services; visibility and communication activities information sharing through the TACSO web page; and other similar activities. Local advisory groups (LAGs), consisting of representatives of civil society, donors, governments, media and the private sector, were established in all IPA beneficiaries to provide guidance to TACSO at the national level.

TACSO 3 kept most of the activities of the previous project e.g., organisation of events; implementation of capacity development activities (at regional level); implementation of the People-to-People programme (P2P); revision and annual monitoring of the Guidelines for EU support to civil society in enlargement countries. TACSO 3 also ensured the continued delivery of services at the national level through the set-up and support of national Resource Centres (RC) in all IPA beneficiaries. The RCs replaced TACSO at national and local level including the provision of information, awareness, capacity building and trainings for local and national CSOs. Funds for

⁷ Regulation (EU) 2024/1449 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans

the functioning of the RCs come from the national components of the CSF and are contracted by the EU Delegations.

TACSO 3 was designed to ensure an overall coherent technical assistance programme and focus on direct delivery of activities where a regional approach and regional coherence offered a value added (e.g. partnership and network promotion, sharing of lessons learned and best practices, development and monitoring of guidelines, provision of an information repository, training and Training of trainers (ToT) with a multiplying effect, etc.). It focused on a broad range of topics and themes, including organisational and operational capacity development, communication and visibility, development and monitoring of civil society guidelines as well as P2P. The project engaged with a plethora of existing partners and established mutually supportive relations with relevant regional and national actors.

In 2023, DG ENEST (former DG NEAR) launched a thorough evaluation exercise on the entire TACSO programme, considering its three phases (from its creation in 2009 to December 2022). The purpose of the evaluation was to analyse the impact of the programme on the civil society sector and to identify challenges and priorities.

The main deliverable of TACSO is represented by the regular monitors of the implementation of the "*DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region 2021-2027*". The deliverable offers an in-depth analysis of the needs of the sector in the Western Balkans and Türkiye at regional and each economy level. The 2024 regional report was launched on 26 June 2025 and can be found here: [3rd Regional Assessment Report - Tacso](#). Previous reports regional and country-based can be found here: [TACSO – Online learning platform](#).

To note that the Civil Society Facility and the Media programme fund several projects. The most relevant are:

- ***Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans 3*** (ReLOaD3), implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- 1. ***Support to the promotion of Civil Society regional Actions in the Western Balkans (Phase II)***, implemented by the Western Balkans Fund.
- 2. ***Sustaining Civil Society and Independent Media in Turkey and the Western Balkans***, implemented by the European Endowment for Democracy

Other activities in support of the civil society and media in the region from other donors, including EU member states, will be mapped and analysed by the Contractor.

2. OBJECTIVES, PURPOSE & EXPECTED RESULTS

2.1. Overall objective

The overall objective of the Technical Assistance is to assist and support the European Commission's DG ENEST, and, where necessary, to the EU Delegations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye so that civil society and media can engage more effectively in the EU enlargement process.

2.2. The aim is to promote the development of an enabling civic space, foster engagement with public administration, strengthen civil society expertise and sustainability in the region, and support the growth and pluralism of an independent media sector.

The purpose of this Technical Assistance is to provide services in the following areas:

- 1- Sector knowledge development, including analysis and recommendations
- 2- Enabling environment for civil society and media as a democratic force per se

- 3- Civil society and media' contributions in the context of the EU's and national policy and political agendas
- 4- Strengthen, structure and coordinate the dialogue with civil society
- 5- Communication, visibility and dissemination

2.3. Expected outputs to be achieved by the contractor

1. Output 1: Sector knowledge development, including analysis and recommendations.

The output include:

- Mapping, monitoring and analysis of current support to the civil society and media, stakeholders, beneficiaries, in view to more effectively fulfil to the involvement of civil society and media in the enlargement process through the available fund till the end of the programming period.
- Identification of strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities.
- establish synergies with existing programmes and actions in the Eastern Partnership, notably in the enlargement countries in the East. Derive recommendation and plan of action.
- Establish synergies with actions and models from the EU. Proposed alignment, collaboration, partnerships, joint networks, etc. Derive recommendations and plan of action.
- Impactful engagement with stakeholders supporting the civil society and media in the region.
- Continue reporting on the *DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region 2021-2027*, at regional and country level.
- Continue populating the TAMIS-WBT data base owned by the European Commission with information on beneficiaries and subcontractors. Ensure successful management, regular update and maintenance of the TAMIS-WBT database for civil society grants and sub-grants.
- Ensure regular monitoring of the main trends and developments affecting the civil society sector.
- Provide policy input concerning the civil society sector to the relevant EU services, as requested.
- Analyse engagement of civil society and media in policy and legislative processes in the EU and governments in the region, sustainability, propose alignment/partnership with the major actors in the region.
- Analysis of the legal framework in the Western Balkans and Türkiye concerning CSOs and Media and proposal for changes in the legal framework
- Production of policy papers, briefs, presentations, short and longer reports on the portfolio and support to the EU civil society and media in the region.
- Engagement with civil society and media through seminars, policy lab etc.

2. Output 2: Enabling environment for civil society and media as a democratic force per se

An enabling environment for civil society is a prerequisite for a democratic society and as such is included in the fundamentals cluster of the accession negotiations and in EU policies towards

Eastern neighbourhood countries. It is one of the three pillars of the ‘functioning of democratic institutions’, as part of the Copenhagen political criteria.⁸

Civil society organisations can strengthen participatory democracy by giving a voice to stakeholders in political decision-making processes, and help ensure transparency, legitimacy and accountability.

This role is important as the media sector in several candidate countries and potential candidate remains marked by media concentration and political influence, an increase of the use of strategic lawsuits against journalists and cases of intimidation and violence.

In many candidate countries and potential candidates, civil society continues to face challenges, as confirmed in the 2024 communication on enlargement.

- Identify, challenges and opportunities, not limited to the analysis of the current portfolio 2021-2027 IPA programme
- Models that works and what doesn’t work
- Recommendations and plan of action
- Engagement with civil society and media through seminars, policy lab etc.

3. Output 3: Civil society and media’ contributions in the context of the EU’s and national policy and political agendas

Civil society and media strengthen the inclusiveness of the enlargement process. As per the legal requirements set out in the Western Balkans Reform and Growth Facility, CSOs are consulted on the Reform Agendas. Civil society with more specialised profiles (e.g. climate and environment, judiciary, anti-corruption, etc.) carry out important independent monitoring and reporting. Thus, they play a central role in helping formulate and monitor reforms in the context of the enlargement process and the new Growth Plans. They also play an important role in raising awareness and educating the public about the EU, the benefits of membership and the EU approximation and integration process.

Civil society and media must remain independent and legitimate representatives of societal interests. However, over-reliance of on EU funding can give rise to sustainability. The Technical Assistance will support the European Commission in analysing different business models and on further thinking on how to ensure engagement of civil society and media with the governments in the countries and how to make the civil society and media more sustainable.

The overall purpose of the Technical Assistance will not vary, the focus may shift, depending on the specific focus given by the European Commission on the support of the sector.

- Identify challenges and opportunities, not limited to the analysis of the current portfolio 2021-2027 IPA programme
- Models that works and what doesn’t work
- Recommendations and plan of action
- Engagement with civil society and media through seminars, policy labs, innovative models/methods of engagement linked with the structured dialogue as mentioned below etc
- Establish synergies with the Western Balkan Fund and recommend more effective means of cooperation and involvement of Civil Society and media in each of the economies. In

⁽⁸⁾ Given the lack of EU acquis on civil society, the monitoring of progress is done notably against the European standards developed by the Council of Europe and the OSCE/ODIHR.

particular, cooperation of the WBF with the European Economic and Social Committee or other EU member state institution.

4. Output 4: Strengthen, structure and coordinate the dialogue with civil society

Several platforms and events involving civil society and media in the region are regularly organised limiting the effect of recommendations from the sector and an 'events fatigue'.

An EU event and platform may be envisaged, in coordination with the major stakeholders and with the capacity to established working groups, policy labs, etc.

It is important to partner in this endeavour with the European Economic and Social Committee and where needed with governments in the region and donors.

- Mapping all the events that are currently taking place
- Identify challenges and opportunities
- Set-up a structured dialogue with the civil society and media so that to contribute to the EU's and national policy and political agendas. Engage with the European Economic and Social Committee and other similar organisations and institutions at national or regional level. Propose a governance.

5. Output 5: Communication, visibility and dissemination

Support to outreach the citizens in the region about the Civil Society Facility and Media programme outputs, good practices, engage with them through social media and where effective other forms of dialogue and engagement.

Production of professional communication products to be used on different media.

Link with the knowledge and analyses produced in area 1.

- Annual communication and visibility strategy to be approved by the EC and consulted with the EU Delegation (synergies with existing communication and visibility strategies, plans, projects, programmes –e.g. WeBalkans)
- Design, creation and maintenance of a web site and social media relevant for an effective outreach to citizens
- Carry Commission's visibility campaign to reach citizens
- Production of professional communication products

3. ASSUMPTIONS & RISKS

3.1. Assumptions underlying the project

- Civil society and media are interested in engaging in policy dialogues and EU enlargement related processes.
- An enabling environment for civil society to perform their core mandate and implement their activities is ensured across the IPA III beneficiaries. The democratic process does not deteriorate further.
- Public institutions and relevant EU services are receptive to the constructive inputs of the civil society and are willing to develop and maintain a constructive dialogue/cooperation with civil society and media.

- Civil society and media are willing to improve their capacities and work to achieve sustainability, including through innovative business models.

3.2. Risks

- The political environment and institutions may remain volatile and subject to change, preventing effective cooperation with civil society and the further development of a conducive environment.
- Sudden changes in international actors' and donors' agendas may undermine civil society and media financial sustainability and impact.
- Those exercising political power may have little interest in involving civil society in the policy dialogue.

4. SCOPE OF THE WORK

4.1. General

4.1.1. Project description

The project will provide the European Commission, DG ENEST and the EU Delegations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye with an integrated set of services aimed at achieving the objective, purpose and results, as mentioned in section 2 of this Term of Reference.

The project will maintain close links with other EU regional programmes and Civil Society Facility and Media programme funded projects, programmes and initiatives, provide tailored services to the European Commission and, where needed to the EU Delegations.

In doing so, the project is expected to coordinate and establish synergies with other relevant actors and programmes dealing with civil society both at regional and national levels, the National Resource Centres and the national technical assistance initiatives, initiatives supported by other donors.

The project will have a regional office, located in the Western Balkans, which will host the project team composed by 4 key experts (i.e. Team Leader; Civil society and media sector expert; Dialogue and outreach; Communication and Visibility) and other support staff.

The Contractor should also ensure the presence of national associates/country coordinators located in the region, countries can be clustered where possible.

The country coordinators/liaison officers should be well informed and where possible/needed involved in the implementation and coordination of the activities at national level.

To the extent possible, the country coordinators/liaison officers will be physically embedded in the local National Resource Centres or other civil society structures and initiatives. The country coordinators/liaison officers should facilitate the links among the project and other relevant EU-funded actions to ensure coordination and effectiveness.

The project will last 36 months, including an inception phase of 3 months.

4.1.2. Geographical area to be covered

This project will target the Western Balkans (i.e., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and Türkiye.

4.1.3. Target groups

The main target groups are the following:

1. European Commission DG ENEST and EU Delegations.

2. Major donors supporting civil society and media in the region, major institutions (including the European Economic and Social Committee) and international organisations.
3. Public authorities and other non-civil society actors (e.g. international financial institutions, private sector, public administration, local authorities).

4.2. Specific work

Inception Phase

The main activities envisaged in the Inception Phase are the following:

- Preparing an inception report to be submitted at the end of the Inception Phase. This should present a detailed plan for achieving the results as specified on section 2, including timeline and phases and at least the following elements:
 - Management structure of the technical assistance project, governance.
 - Establish a Steering Committee, propose the composition, mission and rules of procedures. The Committee will be chaired by the European Commission DG ENEST.
 - Set-up and composition of the regional project office.
 - Assessing the needs for country Liaison Officer in the different countries and selecting the expert for this role in coordination with the EU Delegations.
 - Website design and implementation plans; communication and visibility strategy for the first year.
 - Management and exploitation of the TAMIS-WBT database.
 - Liaising with identified target groups and stakeholders in all the IPA III beneficiaries.
 - Plans for the assessment of the *"DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region 2021-2027"* to be presented tentatively by June 2026.
 - The Contractor will assess and update the monitoring framework and suggest improvements and simplifications. Assess the need for streamline the current methodology and set of indicators used to assess the implementation of the *"DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the enlargement region 2021-2027"*.
 - Plan for innovative methods to involve and engage civil society and media in the region and in proceed direct involvement of citizens in some of the processes.
 - Propose a list of indicators, deliverables and milestones to measure the success of the project.

The goals and priorities of the project are expected to be re-confirmed during the Inception Phase and will be part of the Inception Report approved by the European Commission DG ENEST.

Implementation phase

In the implementation phase the Contractor will mobilise services to provide technical, administrative, analytical monitoring, reporting, visibility and communication to achieve the project objective and results as described in section 2 and implement the plans as presented and approved by the European Commission DG ENEST and part of the inception report, in the following areas:

- 1- Sector knowledge development, including analysis and recommendations
- 2- Enabling environment for civil society and media as a democratic force per se
- 3- Civil society and media' contributions in the context of the EU's and national policy and political agendas
- 4- Strengthen, structure and coordinate the dialogue with civil society
- 5- Communication, visibility and dissemination

4.3. Project management

4.3.1. Responsible body

European Commission DG ENEST – Unit B.1 (Western Balkans - Regional Strategy & Investments) will act as Contracting Authority and will be responsible for the management and the technical monitoring of the project.

European Commission DG ENEST – Unit R.4 (Contracts and Finance) will be responsible for the financial aspects, such as payments.

4.3.2. Management structure

The appointed Project Manager (European Commission DG ENEST – Unit B.1) is responsible on behalf of DG ENEST for all decisions relating to the project, including approval of reports.

A regional steering group composed of the Project Manager and (potentially) other relevant staff from DG ENEST, the civil society focal point in the EU Delegations in the targeted IPA beneficiaries and representatives from the contractor will be established in the inception phase and will have at least one meeting per year. The responsibilities of the group will include, among others, to define the priorities of work, provide guidance to the project team and contribute to monitoring the contractor's performance. Additional stakeholders might be invited to join the steering group's meetings as observers.

A Project Management Unit (PMU) will manage the project. It will be based in the region and headed by the Team Leader.

The presence of country coordinators/liaison officers should be ensured by the Contractor according to the specific needs. To the extent possible, the country coordinators/liaison officers will be physically based in the local NRCs or other civil society structures and initiatives.

4.3.3. Facilities to be provided by the contracting authority and/or other parties

No facilities are expected to be provided.

5. LOGISTICS AND TIMING

5.1. Location

The contract will be implemented:

On the place of performance with the following location(s): The Contractor will establish a project office in one of the capitals of the relevant IPA III beneficiaries, in agreement with the Contracting Authority. The office will serve as a basis for the project team and will be located at a suitable place within the region such as to facilitate close coordination with local actors as well as good internal coordination, commitment and efficiency. The Contractor will identify the office location in its proposal (accompanied by a justification). The Key experts and support staff will be located in this regional office. As specified above, the country coordinators/liaison officers will be based in their respective IPA beneficiary, ideally located in the NRCs' premises or in similar civil society structures.

Home based: Non-key experts may be home based.

Missions of key and non-key experts are allowed, whenever appropriate.

5.2. Start date & period of implementation

The intended start date is 01/01/2026 and the period of implementation of the contract will be 36 months from this date. Please see Articles 19.1 and 19.2 of the special conditions for the actual start date and period of implementation.

6. REQUIREMENTS

6.1. Personnel

Note that civil servants and other staff of the public administration, of the partner country or of international/regional organisations based in the country, shall only be approved to work as experts if well justified. The justification should be submitted with the tender and shall include information on the added value the expert will bring as well as proof that the expert is seconded or on personal leave.

The selection procedures used by the contractor to select the experts must be transparent, must guarantee the absence of professional conflicting interests and the absence of any discrimination based on former or current nationality, gender, place of residence, or any other ground. The findings of the selection panel must be recorded.

The Organisation & Methodology must include a paragraph demonstrating that a gender sensitive experts' selection procedure has been applied⁹.

All experts must be independent and free from conflicts of interest in the responsibilities they take on.

6.1.1. Key experts

Key experts have a crucial role in implementing the contract. These terms of reference contain the minimum requirements for the key experts. Although minimum requirements for the experts are not selection criteria but award criteria meant to evaluate the technical quality of the offer, the compliance with these requirements is assessed on a YES/NO basis. If an expert does not meet the minimum requirements, the expert must be rejected on the basis of non-compliance. This means that the entire tender is rejected and shall not be evaluated further.

During the evaluation, higher scores will be awarded to the "Expert's Profile" that demonstrates, in addition to the minimum requirements, strengths in relation to the objectives, expected outputs, and scope of work. The award criteria may include additional desirable qualifications, skills and professional experience. These additional desirable criteria, will provide guidance on the elements that will be considered a strength and will receive higher score.

The "Key Expert's profile" (Annex IV) shall be submitted by the tenderer for the following key experts:

Key expert 1: Team leader/Head of the project

The Team leader/Head of the project will be the main contact person for the project team and will interface with the European Commission, the EU Delegation, relevant stakeholder. He/She will be responsible for the contract implementation and the coordination of all key experts.

Qualifications and skills

⁹ Note that gender balance refers not only to numerical parity, but also to the level of employment and remuneration, roles and functions.

1. University degree in economics and/or development cooperation or, alternatively, 8 years of professional experience following secondary education Additional training and qualifications in project management and/or civil society, and/or media would be an asset.

General professional experience

2. at least 10-year working experience in multidisciplinary and international project teams' of experts management

Specific professional experience

- 3a. at least five-year experience in project management in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, entailing coordination of international and multidisciplinary teams; experience, and;
- 3.b at least five-year experience linked to policy setting, analysis and projects in the field of civil society and media, including engagement with major stakeholders and actors in the fields; and/or
- 3c. At least five-year experience in development and implementation of strategies and action plans for policy and/or project support in transition economies and enlargement.

The Team leader/Head of Office will have excellent interpersonal skills and a record of successful experience with multi-country and multidisciplinary teams. He/She will be an excellent communicator and facilitator of contacts among different stakeholders.

Key expert 2: Analysis and Strategy Expert

The Analysis and Strategy Expert in the field of civil society and media is responsible for understanding complex socio-political contexts and designing evidence-based strategies that guide advocacy, engagement, and programmatic work. The Key Expert will be responsible for the coordination of the TAMIS WBT data base.

Qualifications and skills

1. University degree or equivalent (i.e. 8 years of professional experience following secondary education)

General professional experience

2. at least 10-year working experience, out of which at least 5-year professional experience in an international setting

Specific professional experience

- 3a. at least seven-year working experience in projects in the sector of civil society and media in the Western Balkans and Türkiye;
- 3b. at least five-year experience in coordinating multidisciplinary teams analysing the civil society and media sector (policy, regulations, recommendations, practices, business models) and in monitoring and evaluation.
- 3c. at least five-year experience in designing strategies to support the development of conducive environments for the civil society and media sector, including monitor and evaluation, and derive recommendations.

Key expert 3: Dialogue and Outreach Expert

The Dialogue and Outreach Expert plays a key role in fostering communication and collaboration between institutions and stakeholders, particularly civil society, communities, and public authorities.

Qualifications and skills

1. University degree or equivalent (i.e. 5 years of professional experience following secondary education)

General professional experience

2. at least 10-year working experience, out of which at least 5-year professional experience in an international setting

Specific professional experience

- 3a. at least five-year experience in projects facilitating participatory dialogues, consultations, and public discussions that promote mutual understanding and trust across diverse groups;
- 3b. at least five-year experience in projects involving stakeholder engagement and cultural sensitivity skills. Ability to navigate politically sensitive environments, ensure representation of different voices—especially in contexts marked by social tension, post-conflict dynamics, or limited civic space.

Key expert 4: Communication and Visibility

The Communication and Visibility Expert working in the fields of civil society and media needs a tailored set of skills that combines strategic communication, content creation, media relations, and understanding of civic and political contexts

Qualifications and skills

1. University degree in communication or equivalent (i.e. 5 years of professional experience following secondary education)

General professional experience

2. at least 10-year working experience, out of which at least 5-year professional experience in an international setting

Specific professional experience

- 3a. at least five-year working experience in the field of strategic communication planning skills, including the ability to develop and implement communication strategies aligned with civil society or media development goals;
- 3b. at least five-year experience in monitoring and evaluation activities in contracts at similar scale of this present contract (e.g. in terms of regional covering of various countries; contract value);
- 3c. at least five-year experience in content creation and media outreach expertise.

Guidance on expert time inputs:

- 1) Working days: performance of the contract (and therefore payment) is based solely on working days. The contractor will only be paid for days actually worked on the basis of the daily fee rate contained in the budget breakdown (Annex V). The time input for experts must be expressed in Full Time Equivalent (FTE). Tenderers must annex the 'Estimated number of working days' worksheet contained in the spread sheet for Annex V to their organisation and methodology (Annex III) to demonstrate the correspondence between the proposed methodology and the expert inputs.
- 2) The annual leave entitlement of the experts employed by a contractor is determined by their employment contract with the contractor and not by the service contract between the contracting authority and the contractor. However, the annual leave entitlement of experts must not exceed 60 calendar days per year. Moreover, the contracting authority can decide when experts take their annual leave since this is subject to approval by the project manager,

who will assess any such request according to the needs of the project while the contract is in progress. A day of annual leave is not considered to be a working day. See Articles 21 and 22 of the general conditions.,

- 3) The fee rates for all experts must include: the remuneration paid to the experts, all the administrative costs of employing the relevant experts, such as equipment, relocation and repatriation expenses (including flights to and from the place of performance upon mobilisation and demobilisation as well as leave), accommodation, expatriation allowances, leave, medical insurance and other employment benefits given to the experts by the contractor. It shall also include any security arrangement except when this is exceptionally included under the incidental expenditure. Furthermore, the fees shall also include the margin, overheads, profit and support facilities.
- 4) The delivery mode of the expert's assignment is either on the place of performance or home based (see PRAG 2.5.5). The delivery mode, and the locations where the expert will undertake missions and the working days needed for each mission are indicated in section 5.1 of the terms of reference.

6.1.2. Non-key experts

The profiles of the non-key experts for this contract are as follows:

Country Coordinators/Liaison Officers

These experts shall have a university degree or equivalent (calculated in the same way as for the key experts) and general professional experience of at least 10 years. In addition, all experts shall have at least 3 years of specific professional experience in working with CSOs from IPA or other similar countries in terms of geographical location, socio-economic development and civil society development. Experts shall also have demonstrated experience in the delivery of training and/or consultancy. The liaison officers are expected to be working continuously during the implementation of the project and coordinate the activities of the project at national level with the local NRCs, the EUDs and other stakeholders. The tenderers will propose in the offer an indicative division of working days per country. This will be then fine-tuned during the inception phase on the basis of the needs assessments and in agreement with the EUDs and the CA.

Other non-key experts

The Contractor must select and hire other non-key experts as required according to the profiles identified in the Organisation and Methodology and these Terms of Reference. They must clearly indicate their profile so that the applicable daily fee rate in the budget breakdown is clear.

Overall, all these experts must also be able to communicate in English. Knowledge of local languages will be considered as an asset. Additional criteria will be defined based upon the needs they may arise during the implementation of this project.

The Contractor may engage such experts on a full-time basis if this is in the interest of the project.

The "Key Expert's profile" (Annex IV) should not be submitted for non-key experts. However, the tenderer will have to demonstrate in their offer that they have access to experts fulfilling the minimum requirements.

The contractor must select and hire other experts as required according to the requirements in the terms of reference and as described in the submitted organisation & methodology. It must clearly indicate the category to which the experts' belong so that the applicable daily fee rate in the budget breakdown is clear. All experts must be independent and free from conflicts of interest in the responsibilities they take on.

The selection procedures used by the contractor to select these other experts must be transparent, and must be based on pre-defined criteria, including professional qualifications, absence of professional conflicting interests, language skills and work experience. The findings of the selection panel must be recorded. The selected experts must be subject to approval by the contracting authority before the start of their implementation of tasks.

6.1.3. Support staff & backstopping

The contractor will provide support facilities to their team of experts, including back-stopping, during the implementation of the contract.

Backstopping and support staff costs must be included in the fee rates.

6.2. Office accommodation

Office accommodation of a reasonable standard and of approximately 10 square metres for each expert working on the contract is to be provided by the contractor:

The costs of the office accommodation are to be covered by the fee rates.

6.3. Facilities to be provided by the contractor

The contractor must ensure that experts are adequately supported and equipped. In particular it must ensure that there is sufficient administrative, secretarial and interpreting provision to enable experts to concentrate on their primary responsibilities. It must also transfer funds as necessary to support their work under the contract and to ensure that its employees are paid regularly and in a timely fashion.

The Contractor must ensure that necessary office equipment is in place for the project through the contractor or the experts, and that there is access to training facilities. Logistic support must be given to organise travel across the region.

6.4. Equipment

No equipment is to be purchased on behalf of the contracting authority / partner country as part of this service contract or transferred to the contracting authority / partner country at the end of this contract. Any equipment related to this contract that is to be acquired by the partner country must be purchased by means of a separate supply tender procedure.

6.5. Incidental expenditure

The provision for incidental expenditure, including the provision for expenditure verification, covers ancillary and exceptional eligible expenditure incurred under this contract. It cannot be used for costs that should be covered by the contractor as part of its fee rates, as defined above. Its use is governed by the provisions in the general conditions and the notes in Annex V to the contract.

The provision for incidental expenditure, including the provision for expenditure verification, will not be taken into account in the comparison of the financial offers.

All incidental expenditure incurred in the course of the contract as required by the Terms of Reference is to be invoiced at actual cost (per-diems are fixed flat rates and are considered actual costs). The reimbursement of actual costs shall include costs related to the payment of an incidental expenditure, such as bank charges.

The following incidental expenditure should be provided for:

- Travel costs

- Other costs, including the organisation of events, the implementation of studies and surveys, communication and outreach material, maintenance and development of the project website and TAMIS-WBT database
- Expenditure verification.

Travel costs

Missions are foreseen outside the place of performance/the home-based location (see section 5.1). For these missions the incidental expenditure should make provisions for costs linked to travel and subsistence allowances. Travel undertaken by the expert for mobilisation and demobilisation as well as for leave purposes shall not be considered a mission and will not be subject to payment of per diem.

Any air travel must be by economy class while long distance train travel may be by 1st class.

Costs for CO2 offsetting of air travel may be included. CO2 offsetting shall in that case be achieved by supporting CDM/Gold Standard projects (evidence must be included as part of the supporting documents) or through airplane company programmes when available.

Per diem is a maximum fixed flat rate, covering daily subsistence costs for missions provided for in the terms of reference or the budget of the action, and if required approved by the contracting authority. For the conditions on the use of per diems, see 2.5.5 PRAG. Any subsistence allowances to be paid for missions undertaken as part of this contract must not exceed the per diem rates published on the website - https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding/guidelines/managing-project/diem-rates_en - in force at the time of contract signature.

Other costs

The provision for the travel costs and other costs in the incidental expenditure of this contract is EUR 1,600,000. This amount must be included unchanged in the budget breakdown.

Prior authorisation by the contracting authority for the use of the travel costs and other costs in the incidental expenditure is not needed with the exception of P2P activities and costs exceeding EUR 10,000.

Expenditure verification

The provision for expenditure verification covers the fees of the auditor/practitioner in charge of verifying the expenditure of this contract in order for the contracting authority to check that the invoices submitted are due. The provision for expenditure verification for this contract is EUR 50,000. This amount must be included unchanged in the budget breakdown.

This provision cannot be decreased but can be increased during execution of the contract.

6.6. Lump sums

No lump sums are foreseen in this contract.

7. REPORTS

7.1. Reporting requirements

Please see Article 26 of the general conditions. Interim reports must be prepared every six months during the period of implementation of the tasks. The narrative report should be based on the monitoring and evaluation system set up in the contract, using the Logical framework matrix (annex b8g) if included in the contract. In the latter case, a narrative report must inform all the results as measured by the indicators defined in the logical framework. The narrative report must be provided along with the corresponding invoice, the financial report and an expenditure verification report defined in Article 28 of the general conditions. There must be a final report, a final invoice

and the financial report accompanied by an expenditure verification report at the end of the period of implementation of the tasks. The draft final report must be submitted at least one month before the end of the period of implementation of the tasks. Note that these interim and final reports are additional to any required in Section 4.2 of these terms of reference.

Each report must consist of a narrative section and a financial section. The financial section must contain details of the time inputs of the experts, incidental expenditure and expenditure verification.

To summarise, in addition to any documents, reports and deliverable specified under the duties and responsibilities of each key expert above, the contractor shall provide the following reports:

Name of report	Content	Time of submission
Inception report	Analysis of existing situation and work plan for the project	No later than 3 months after the start of implementation
6-month progress report	Short description of progress against the achievement of the results as spelled out in the Logframe (attached to the contract, if any). The progress report (technical and financial) should include problems encountered; planned work for the next 6 months accompanied by an invoice and the expenditure verification report.	No later than 1 month after the end of each 6-month implementation period.
Draft final report	Short description of the achievement of the results as spelled out in the Logframe (attached to the contract, if any). The draft final report should include a description of the problems encountered and recommendations.	No later than 1 month before the end of the implementation period.

Final report	Short description of the achievement of the results as spelled out in the Logframe (attached to the contract, if any). The final report should include a description of the problems encountered and recommendations; a final invoice and the financial report accompanied by the expenditure verification report.	Within 1 month of receiving comments on the draft final report from the project manager identified in the contract.
--------------	--	---

]

7.2. Submission & approval of reports

Digital copies of the reports referred to above must be submitted to the project manager identified in the contract. The reports must be written in English. The project manager is responsible for approving the reports.

8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

8.1. Definition of indicators

Indicators to be used to measure the success of the project will be defined and detailed in the Inception Report.

Below relevant indicators (the list is not exhaustive):

- Outcome of regular surveys following events that engage with civil society and media in the region, citizens.
- Number of consultations with civil society and media on planning of the different results expected, including a qualitative/qualitative assessment of the contributions.
- Number of CSOs responding to the surveys part of the regular assessment on the implementation of the “*DG NEAR Guidelines for EU support to civil society in enlargement region 2021-2027*”
- External perception (measured through surveys) of importance and impact of civil society and media activities in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, notably on involvement in the enlargement process at EU and local level.

8.2. Special requirements

None.

* * *