

Cyber-attacks: Council prolongs framework for sanctions for another year



The Council today decided to prolong the framework for **restrictive measures against cyber-attacks** threatening the EU or its member states for another year, **until 18 May 2022**.

This framework allows the EU to impose **targeted restrictive measures** on persons or entities involved in cyber-attacks which cause a significant impact, and constitute an **external threat** to the EU or its member states. Restrictive measures can also be imposed in response to cyber-attacks against third states or international organisations where such measures are considered necessary to achieve the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Sanctions currently apply to **eight individuals and four entities**, and include an **asset freeze and a travel ban**. Additionally, EU persons and entities are forbidden from making funds available to those listed.

Background

This latest prolongation is part of the EU's scale up of its resilience and its ability to prevent, discourage, deter and respond to cyber threats and malicious cyber activities in order to safeguard European security and interests.

In June 2017, the EU stepped up its response by establishing a Framework for a Joint EU Diplomatic Response to Malicious Cyber Activities (the "**cyber diplomacy toolbox**"). The framework allows the EU and its Member States to use all CFSP measures, including restrictive measures if necessary, to prevent, discourage, deter and respond to malicious cyber activities targeting the integrity and security of the EU and its member states.

The EU remains committed to a global, open, stable, peaceful and secure cyberspace and therefore reiterates the need to strengthen international cooperation in order to promote the rules-based order in this area.

Legal migration: Council presidency

and European Parliament reach provisional agreement on scheme to attract highly qualified workers



The Council presidency and European Parliament representatives reached a provisional agreement on a draft directive establishing the entry and residence conditions for highly qualified non-EU nationals coming to live and work in the EU (the blue card directive). This EU-wide admission system aims to attract and retain highly qualified workers, particularly in sectors facing skills shortages.

The green and digital transformation of our economies will only succeed if we have a workforce with the necessary skills to lead it. Education and lifelong training will play a key part in this, but we must also make sure that we are equipped to compete in the global search for talent. The revised rules for the EU blue card provide an EU-level scheme that allows more flexibility, improved conditions and simplified mobility, placing the EU firmly among the top destinations for highly qualified workers.

Eduardo Cabrita, Minister for Home Affairs of Portugal

The new rules, which will replace the existing ones, further harmonise the conditions of entry and residence for highly qualified workers and increase the attractiveness of the EU blue card, in particular by:

- **establishing more inclusive admission criteria**, including by reducing the salary threshold for admission, allowing for lower salary thresholds for recent graduates or professions in need of workers, reducing the minimum length of the work contract to six months, and extending the scope to include highly skilled workers from the information and communication technology (ICT) sector;
- **facilitating intra-EU mobility**, including by reducing the minimum period of residence in the first member state, simplifying and speeding up the procedure for exercising mobility and allowing for the accumulation of periods of residence under different schemes to acquire long-term resident status;
- **facilitating family reunification** and giving the spouse or partner of the blue card holder unrestricted access to the labour market;
- **simplifying procedures** for recognised employers;
- **granting a very high level of access to the labour market**, in particular by establishing that member states may allow EU blue card holders to engage in self-employed activities or other subsidiary professional activities, as well as offering protection, particularly in the case of unemployment;

- **extending the scope** to include non-EU family members of EU citizens and beneficiaries of international protection.

EU member states will be able to maintain national schemes aimed at highly qualified workers in parallel with the EU blue card scheme. However, the new rules will introduce a number of provisions to ensure a level playing field so that EU blue card holders and their families are not at a disadvantage compared to holders of national permits.

The provisional political agreement is subject to approval by the Council and the European Parliament before going through the formal adoption procedure.

Media advisory – Informal video conference of foreign affairs ministers of 18 May 2021



Indicative programme

+/- 14.00

Beginning of the informal video conference of foreign affairs ministers

- Developments in the Middle East
- Other business

At the end of the meeting (+/- 16.30) press conference in [live streaming](#).

Arrangements for the press conference

Please note that there will be no physical press conference. EU accredited journalists will be able to ask questions remotely using [this link](#).

Journalists who already registered for previous Foreign Affairs Council press conferences do not need to register again.

– Deadline for registration: Tuesday, 18 May 2021, 15.30

Further instructions will be sent to all registered participants approximately half an hour after the deadline.

[Visit the meeting page](#)

European Universities initiative: Council conclusions pave the way for new dimension in European higher education

Today, the Council adopted conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education. The initiative, launched by EU leaders in 2017, will be fully rolled out during the EU's 2021-2027 financing period. Within the European Universities alliances, students, staff and researchers should be able to move seamlessly between partner institutions to train, teach and do research.

With their conclusions, ministers encourage member states and the Commission to make sure that the initiative remains central to building a European Education Area by 2025, inspiring the transformation of higher education in the EU and helping to achieve the ambitious vision of an innovative, globally competitive and attractive European Education Area and European Research Area. To that end, the Council invites member states to take advantage of all available funding possibilities, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility (the EU's post-crisis budgetary instrument), to support the development of 'European Universities'.

Ministers also recommend more cooperation between education authorities, higher education institutions and stakeholders to remove obstacles to European level cooperation. In this context, they suggest exploring the need for and feasibility of joint European degrees within the alliance of 'European Universities'. A stepwise approach to joint recruitment schemes for teachers and researchers should be promoted by 'European Universities', aimed at effective "multidirectional" and "balanced" brain circulation across Europe, associated with strengthened responsible research and teaching careers, particularly for young researchers.

In order to allow member states to monitor the development of the European Universities initiative, they asked the Commission to report back, by the end of 2021, on the main outcomes of the mid-term review of the first alliances.



We all must guarantee that 'European Universities' are made operational as 'test beds' for student-centred approaches, addressing societal challenges and skills needs in Europe. They should also act as 'test beds' for responsible research and

teaching and the recruitment of young researchers, including improved tenure track systems, and to strengthen career management and diversification. 'European Universities' should foster the adoption of open science principles, including the guarantee that career development can be associated with research publications freely available on journal websites, or through public repositories, as well as other open science practices, such as open access publishing, knowledge and data sharing, and open collaboration.

Manuel Heitor, Minister of Science and Higher Education of Portugal

Ministers also stressed that the initiative is showing its first results as – according to a recent survey – members of the first 17 'European Universities' perceived that being in an alliance helped them to navigate the COVID-crisis and would allow them to recover faster by pooling resources and strengths.

Background and next steps

In its December 2017 European Council Conclusions, EU leaders called on Member States, the Council and the Commission to strengthen "strategic partnerships across the EU higher education institutions and [encourage] the emergence by 2024 of some twenty 'European Universities'". The European Universities initiative responds to this call.

Higher education needs to provide students, staff and researchers with the skills to find their way in a changing labour market – where a demand for highly skilled people is rising – and to navigate the green and digital transitions. This requires an increased level of cooperation between higher education institutions.

Following two calls in 2019 and 2020, financed by the Erasmus+ programme, 41 European University alliances – involving more than 280 higher education institutions – are being established. 'European Universities' comprise at least three higher education institutions from three EU member states or other Erasmus programme countries.

[Visit the meeting page](#)

EASO Executive Director welcomes Spain's commitment to reform reception

system

During the week of 10-14 May 2021, the Executive Director of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Nina Gregori, held a series of high-level meetings in Lisbon and Madrid to discuss the Agency's new operational support for Spain's reception system, as well as work to enhance EASO's mandate and transform it into the EU Agency for Asylum.

Ms Gregori met with **José Luis Escrivá**, Spain's Minister of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, as well as the Minister of Interior, **Fernando Grande-Marlaska**, in Madrid. She welcomed the clear commitment of the Spanish Government to reform the country's reception system in line with EU standards. The Executive Director highlighted that EASO is mobilising resources and personnel to support this effort, notably by:

- Enhancing the reception capacity in the Canary Islands;
- Supporting the transition towards a new model for reception in Spain;
- Enhancing structural processes in support of the Spanish reception system;
- Providing training, professional development, tools and materials; and
- Supporting the Spanish authorities in the area of resettlement.

During the meetings, Ms. Gregori also highlighted the importance of EU co-legislators finally agreeing on a **mandate for the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA)**, which has been pending since 2016. She underlined that the ability of EASO to meet the increased requests by Member States for operational support under the current outdated mandate is challenging, and expressed hope that an agreement can be reached in Brussels soon.

The Executive Director also discussed the EUAA when meeting with the Portuguese Minister of Internal Administration, **Eduardo Cabrita**, in Lisbon on 10 May, prior to participating in a Ministerial Conference on the Management of Migratory Flows organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ms Gregori thanked the Minister for the Presidency's strong efforts being made to finalise negotiations, stating that it is clear that the Portuguese authorities understand how important the EUAA is for a functional EU asylum system.

During a meeting in Madrid with the Spanish State Secretary for Migration, **Jesús Javier Perea Cortijo**, Ms Gregori outlined the practical plans by which EASO intends to increase its support for Spain, including through the deployment of highly-specialised personnel. These include experts in vulnerability, site management, contingency planning, change management, engineers and architects, amongst other profiles. She also noted that officials of the *Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones* (SEM) are working very well with EASO personnel, highlighting that such good collaboration bodes well for the reform of Spain's reception system.

In Madrid, Ms Gregori also held meetings with various partners, including

with **Sophie Muller**, UNHCR's Representative in Spain, and **María Jesús Herrero**, Head of IOM Spain, where all agreed that synergising work was crucial in order to collectively be effective in supporting Spain. She also held a productive meeting with Spain's Ombudsperson, **Francisco Fernández Marugán**.

The Executive Director also visited the *Canaria 50* and *Colegio Leon* reception centers in Gran Canaria, meeting with EASO personnel deployed on the island and reviewing the state-of-play on the ground in the centers. She also used the opportunity to meet with local authorities and national representatives, emphasising the importance of excellent local collaboration, including with **María Teresa Mayans Vázquez**, the sub-Delegate of the Spanish Government to the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands.

Any further information may be obtained from the European Asylum Support Office on the following email address: press@easo.europa.eu