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Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas upon arrival

Brussels, Belgium

Check against delivery!

Good morning.

Sorry to start so early, but we have a very long and busy day ahead.

So first, we will greet our Western Balkan friends, and this is also great opportunity to discuss what more can we do. They are interested in our cooperation regarding standing up to the hybrid threats that they are facing. Also, we are discussing this cooperation. In return, we of course, expect reforms from them, so that we can also move on with the enlargement.

Then we have Ukraine. Of course, we saw that this ceasefire that Putin wanted was only very cynical to protect his parade, whereas they were actually attacking civilians in Ukraine. Ukraine kept to the ceasefire, like previously, offered ceasefires unconditionally, what Russia did not really stand up to this.

But today, we also expect to move forward with the sanctions targeting those people who are helping to work with the Ukrainian children that they have deported from Ukraine. And we also have a high-level event regarding the Ukrainian children: how to really bring them back, what more the international community can do, because this is awful, what is done to these children.

Then we have Foreign Minister of Canada here. Of course, our relationship with Canada is better than ever. We are very like-minded partners, and we discuss what more can we do together, also on the international fora.

Then, of course, Middle East: there we have a lot of topics. We discuss the freedom of navigation and Operation ASPIDES, whether there is appetite to really change the operational plans as well there, so that we can contribute to de-mining and escorting the ships.

And of course, we will also discuss the different issues that have been on the table for quite some time. I expect political agreement on the sanctions of violent settlers - hopefully we will get there. And there are the proposals put forward by the Member States, but that require unanimity or qualified majority in cases where we do not actually have it. So, let us see whether Member States are willing to move there.

Then, we have High Level Political Dialogue with Syria. As you know, we are also moving forward with unsuspending the cooperation agreement with Syria. We will discuss where we can help Syria to build up institutions and all these issues - what they need for correct functioning of the country.

Q&A

Q. [Inaudible] proposition of Putin to appoint Gerhard Schröder as negotiator from the European Union [inaudible] and that Ukraine should withdraw troops from Donbas to start sustainable negotiations?

First, if we give the right to Russia to appoint negotiator on our behalf, that would not be very wise. And second, I think Gerhard Schröder has been high level lobbyist for Russian state-owned companies. So, it is clear why Putin wants him to be the person so that actually, he would be sitting on both sides of the table.

Q. What needs to be done to really bring back abducted children? What are the concrete steps that the EU can also help with?

Yes, this is a very good question, because it is very, very hard. With the prisoners of war. You can exchange them, but because Ukraine has not deported any Russian children, you cannot really exchange children to children. So that is why it is much more difficult. As I said, we are putting forward sanctions targeting those people who are dealing with these children to really give out the message that you are also responsible. We have different options and proposals on the table as well, how to negotiate with the Russians to get the children back. And there, we need to use all the international support, also those countries who are dealing with Russia more closely. So, we will discuss these projects today as well, but it is definitely very difficult.

Q. [inaudible] slowly rebuild the same influence network in Europe as it was before 2022 again, coming back to the question about [inaudible]

Well, clearly our adversaries are not sleeping. So clearly, they want to increase the influence in Europe. We unfortunately already see this in sports organisations where Russians are let to compete like nothing has happened, and there are discussions there. We also saw this at the Venice Biennale, where they are there like nothing has happened. So clearly, they are working all the time, and we have to be vigilant as well.

Q. Today you will meet Hassan al-Shaibani, Syrian Foreign Minister. Can tell us something about that, and how many people are going to participate. If not, why not?

We will have meeting - High Level Political Dialogue with the Foreign Minister of Syria. Many topics there; of course, the worries that we have regarding the camps in Syria. What can we do there? But also, the institutional build-up of Syria. We have a lot of expertise in trying to help to build strong institutions,

because without the institutions, you cannot really have a functioning country. For us, it is important that the minorities - all the minorities - are taking into account in the government, the inclusivity is important, and that is why we are also offering our help in in drafting the Constitution, the different laws that are necessary so that they could actually have elections. But of course, there is a lot of work to be done, and we will sit down and discuss their needs, and of course, our offer as well.

Q. Should the European Union be preparing for talks with Russia about the future of the European security architecture? And do you think the EU needs a special representative for this?

First, before we discuss with Russia, we should discuss amongst ourselves what we want to talk to them about, and that is why we have Gymnich meeting coming with the Foreign Ministers, where we will discuss the proposals that are put on the table to address the issues that we have. Because, again, the issue of the European securities that Russia is constantly attacking its neighbours, and how we can actually prevent that. For that, we need concessions, also from the Russian side. I was just last week in Moldova. There are Russian troops, for example, that could be also one of the conditions to have stability and security in the region, that they take their troops away. But there are, of course, a lot of questions related to what are our requests to Russia, in order to have a stable and peaceful Europe.

Q. [Inaudible] several proposal to member states is the full ban option, a trade measure, or CFSP sanction measure?

Currently, when we tested this on Friday with the Ambassadors, it seems that we do not have the necessary majority to pass these measures. So, we will also discuss the French Swedish proposal regarding the trade with settlements, but that also requires a Commission proposal that is currently not there. But really, what more can we do? I really do hope that we have a political agreement regarding the violent settlers' sanctions that has been on the table for quite some time, but I hope we can actually go forward.

Q. [inaudible] Right now, the Kurds are denied to the right of education in mother language. Would you address these issues today with Minister Shaibani?

Yes, we will address these issues because also the question of minorities and their rights to have education in their own language in Syria. Of course, more broader, all the majorities, all the groups that are living in Syria, but of course, the Kurds issue also comes up.

Q. About the situation in Iran, Mr. Trump today rejected the Iranian deal or whatsoever going there. You are promoting a political solution. But can you tell us, what are you promoting exactly? Aside of promoting political solution, and again, ASPIDES as you are planning now to change the plans, is it going to lead the international coalition? What role it is going to play?

So, as I said, we are supporting the diplomatic solution, and we are engaged also with those countries who are mediating the two parties. We are also engaged with the Gulf countries, because we have the same worries. Even if there is ceasefire that there is also long-term talks about the threats that Iran poses to the region. That is not only nuclear - where we have actually offered our expertise, because we have the experts who have negotiated nuclear deals before - but it is also the issue of other threats that Iran poses to its neighbourhood; the proxies, the missile programme, also their hybrid and cyber activities in Europe. So, we are discussing also, when this point comes, that we are part of the security architecture of the Gulf, because we see this in the same way it is our immediate neighbourhood. It has very much effects on us. But of course, right now, the push is to have the first phase, which is stopping the war, opening the Strait of Hormuz. And there, of course, Americans and Iran are negotiating themselves. We can only support them, but we cannot really agree on their behalf.

Q. What does the withdrawal of US troops from Germany actually mean? And would not the troops actually strengthen the NATO Eastern flank, in case they are getting redeployed there?

There is troop deployment all the time happening in Europe that troops are moved. So that is really not something new. I think it is important that the American troops also stay in Europe because they are protecting American interests in Europe, as well as European interests. So, this is the announcement that Pentagon has made. And of course, there is still time to look into what it means practically.

Q. What do you expect today from the Western Balkans Ministers, and what will be your message to them today?

We will discuss, of course, enlargement, what more can we do, so that they move on with the reforms. We will discuss also the cooperation regarding them standing up to the hybrid threats that are also posed in the Western Balkans. We have had good experience and practice from Moldova. Now we are also working with Armenia. Western Balkan countries ask the same because they also see the attacks against their democracy. We are discussing security and defence, especially also security and defence partnership with Montenegro, for example. What we expect from them is also alignment with our foreign and security policy and the reforms that they have to do.

Q. Will you engage more on Belgrade-Pristina – Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue?

We had actually planned the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, high level political dialogue. I had the agreement from both leaders from Kosovo, as well as Serbia, but now we have elections in Kosovo coming up again, which is, of course, pushing this forward. But I am working separately with both of them, so that we can move on with the implementation of the agreements that are already in place.

Watch the video.

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