European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas at the press conference

2026-04-21 · Luxembourg · EEAS Press Team

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Good afternoon.

We had just a long but focused meeting of the foreign ministers.

First, of course, we discussed Ukraine. Ministers, like always, heard directly from the Ukrainian Minister of the state of play. And although there was Orthodox Easter ceasefire declared, Russia did not keep to it. It actually increased its attacks against Ukrainian civilians. And it shows that Putin has not given up on his maximalist war aims.

We must continue to give Ukraine what it needs to hold its own, until Putin understands that this war leads nowhere.

Following Hungarian elections, there is a new momentum and I expect a positive decision on the €90 billion loan in the next 24 hours. Ministers also urged to rapidly move forward with the 20th sanctions' package.

We should also revisit long-blocked decisions, including opening negotiation clusters with Ukraine, also the European Peace Facility weapons fund. Also, we should revisit sanctions that have been on the table and not agreed before. But also, we should move on with the new sanctions' package.

The EU remains Ukraine biggest supporter, in addition to the military and financial support, also our EUMAM mission has now trained over 90,000 Ukrainian soldiers. And there was also broad support today to move ahead with the fourth pillar of European security guarantees, focused on the defence sector reform, hybrid cyber threats, as well as the veterans.

However, wars are not only fought with drones and missiles. We must also continue to fend off Moscow's destabilisation attempts. So, today, ministers approved additional sanctions against those behind disinformation campaigns inside the European Union. We also extended measures against those destabilising Moldova.

While Russia bombs museums, destroys churches and seeks to erase Ukrainian culture, it should not be allowed to exhibit its own. Russia's return to the Venice Biennale is morally wrong, and also the EU intends to cut its funding.

Finally, we will come with proposals to restrict former Russian combatants' entry to the European Union by the time of June's European Council.

Turning to the Middle East, the region stands at a moment of both risk and opportunity. Ceasefire in Iran and Lebanon largely hold, but they come with a rapidly nearing expiration date. If the fighting resumes tonight, it will come at a very large cost for all, and that is why it is important that the next round of talks happens.

Lebanon is paying a heavy price for a war it did not choose. We heard today from Prime Minister Salam about Lebanon's peace talks with Israel and its efforts to lift the country out of Hezbollah's grip. There are too many civilians that have lost their lives in this war. Europe has committed €100 million in humanitarian assistance. We also continue to support the Lebanese Armed Forces and work on a possible EU civilian mission. The more we strengthen the Lebanese army, the weaker we make Hezbollah.

On Iran, ministers were clear that freedom of navigation is non-negotiable. Daily U turns, whether the Strait of Hormuz is open or closed, are reckless. Transit through the Strait must remain free of charge. Europe will play its part in restoring the free flow of energy and trade once the conditions allow. Our ASPIDES naval mission is the quickest way to protect shipping in the region, and I have asked ministers to make more assets available.

The EU already has sweeping sanctions in place on Iran, but today we also reached the political agreement to widen our sanctions regime to also target those responsible for breaches to freedom of navigation.

Iranian drones used against our Gulf partners likely incorporate Russian tech upgrades. We are engaging closely with Gulf partners to limit this, including through possible cooperation on sanctions. We also want to deepen our cooperation with the Gulf regarding security and defence.

None of us want to see a nuclear armed Iran.

We are in agreement with our regional partners that any durable settlement must address also other issues in addition to the nuclear, including Iran's missile programme and its continued support to terrorist groups, and those are also central priorities. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of Gaza and the West Bank - the EU is the biggest supporter of the Palestinian people. Yesterday, I co-chaired two meetings with over 60 delegations to put a political perspective for future of the two-state solution back on the table. The implementation of the Peace Plan, in line with the UN Security Council resolution 2803, remains the best way forward.

The EU will continue to push for improved humanitarian access, condemn illegal Israeli land grabs in the West Bank and call for Hamas disarmament.

Now on the relations with Israel. Some Member States today proposed a full or partial suspension of the EU Association Agreement, as well as for restrictions on trade coming from settlements. And others were expressing their opposition to such proposals. Given that the suspension of the Association Agreement needs unanimity, there was no support for this needed in the room. The measures that we have already on the table that require qualified majority will require states shifting their position. We did not see that today, but these discussions will continue.

Syria has so far escaped the regional war, but risks to its stability remain.

Ministers today reaffirmed our support for Syria's transition, our new counter terrorism blueprint for the region will strengthen cooperation within the global coalition. The European Commission has now proposed a full resumption of its 1978 cooperation agreement with Syria. We will discuss further support next month, when we host the Foreign Minister of Syria for the EU Syria High-Level Dialogue.

Ministers also stressed that Europe has a strategic interest in a stable and secure South Caucasus. Progress in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process is a real opportunity for the region, and the EU is significantly stepping up its support.

Today, ministers agreed to establish a new EU civilian mission for Armenia. It will strengthen countries' resilience against massive disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks. When Armenians go to the polls in June, they alone should choose their future.

We also look forward to Yerevan hosting a first ever joint Summit in May, which will be a testimony of our deepening partnership.

Azerbaijan remains an important partner on energy and connectivity. We want to deepen our ties and will resume negotiations of a new bilateral cooperation agreement soon.

Georgia shows no signs of reversing democratic backsliding. Ministers had an explicit message that Georgia needs to change the course. And of course, also genuine engagement in the human rights dialogue would be an indication that they want to change the course.

And finally, Sudan. Three years into the war, the country faces unprecedented death and displacement. While donors last week pledged €1.5 billion in aid,far more is needed. The EU's priorities are three-fold. First, push the ceasefire efforts. Second, advance civilian transition. And third, strengthen accountability. Progress on the EU's initiative on protecting critical infrastructure would be an important step. Together with the Netherlands, the European Union is preparing to support a UN ceasefire monitoring mechanism. We also reached a political agreement to impose new sanctions on

those benefiting from the war, because as long as regional powers fuel and profit from the war, the war will drag on.

Ministers also addressed many other issues, including Council conclusions on energy and climate diplomacy. The wars in the Middle East and Ukraine show how important it is to diversify supplies and reduce dependencies on fossil fuels. We have many more important topics today, but I will stop here and ready to take your questions.

Q&A

Q. On the suspension of the agreement with Israel, you have mentioned that the discussion will continue. Even if there were not enough votes for a QMV, I understand you saw a shifting in the mood. I mean, were there more countries asking for something eventually? There were some measures like Sweden and France asked for measures outside the agreement that could be done - stopping the commerce with settlements. And if I might ask you on Iran, if I understood properly, you will propose sanctions against those who impede the freedom of navigation in Hormuz. Could you specify what kind of sanctions and the timetable on that? Thank you.

I did not see the shifting of positions in the room regarding the suspension of the agreement. Yes, there were new proposals on the table regarding the trade, so I promised to take this back to the Commissioner for Trade. Because in order to discuss that, if you look at the legal provisions, then we need a Commission proposal on the table. So, I will take that back.

When it comes to the sanctions on Iran, as you know, we already have sweeping sanctions on Iran. Now, the new proposal is to address also those who are engaged in limiting the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. So, the work is ongoing. There is political agreement, but there also needs to be a legal preparation for that. We aim for the May Foreign Affairs Council.

Q. Spain's Foreign Minister told us this morning that Europe's credibility is being compromised by the inaction over Israel's violation of human law, as he put it. And I just wondered if you could corroborate that as you engage the EU's partners around the world. Are you experiencing that partners around the world are feeling that the European Union is exercising double standards, it is not taking action against Israel. Could you corroborate that? Is Europe's credibility sinking on the global stage?

What I experience actually, by going around the world, is the opposite. I see that our credibility is raising regarding all the topics, because we see what is happening in the world. And who is a credible and reliable partner is the European Union if we see what is happening on different spheres. On the Palestine issue, we have been the biggest supporters of Palestinians - in terms of supporting the Palestinian people, in terms of supporting the Palestinian Authority, in terms of supporting the Palestinian refugees, in terms of supporting also the reconstruction of Palestine. So, every time that somebody raises this double

standards issue, I also ask beforehand to see how much they are doing for Gaza and Palestinians. And usually, European Union action always trumps that. Yes, it is true that there are a lot of requirements also for Europe, especially now. Everywhere I go, everybody is turning to us because the US is withdrawing aid from everywhere. And it is clear that we cannot do everything, but we also have our worries. When it comes to Ukraine where we are asking our partners, who all ask us to be there for all the crises in the world, to come up with support. We are the biggest supporters in Sudan. We are the biggest supporters in Somalia, in terms of the mission there. I can list from all over the world, but we have a problem, which is Ukraine: we are alone, and we are the biggest supporters there - not completely alone, that is also not true, but we also have our worries. This is where we also have our worries. So, I would really push back on this issue because we are doing a lot. Yes, we do not have a full agreement on all these issues. But, on the suspension of the Association Agreement, will it stop the expansion on the West Bank? This is probably also not true. But at the same time, the proposals are there, but we do not have an agreement. So, let us focus on those issues where we actually do have an agreement, and there is a lot.

Q. On the Ukraine and the Druzhba pipeline, President Zelenskyy just announced that it will resume its operation very soon. So, do you expect now an agreement on the loan, on the €90 billion loan tomorrow at the Coreper?

Yes, like I said, we expect an agreement in 24 hours. I do not want to jinx it, I hope that everything goes well because we have seen some turns in this file, but this is the agreement that we had in December and resuming this is a promise that Ukraine made, so hopefully all the obstacles are removed.

Q. Question about Druzhba. President Zelenskyy has said that it now can resume operation. Seeing the Commission has spent money and sent experts to get Druzhba back up and running, can you tell us now, also because the SPU has blown up a pumping station in Russia, can you tell us now if oil can flow through Druzhba to Hungary as things stand? And if not, could that pumping station explosion risk jeopardising your happy hopes for the next 24 hours?

I may look like an oil expert, but I am definitely not giving you an answer whether the oil will flow now because I am not an expert. What I can say is that the promise was made by Ukraine, and that was the obstacle for our Hungarian colleagues, Slovakian colleagues, so this is the promise that should not derail the decision.

Q. High Representative, after Viktor Orbán suffered a defeat, Russia's sympathetic Prime Minister will come soon to power in Bulgaria after the parliamentary elections. So, is there a fear of new Orbán from Bulgaria? Especially in the policy towards Ukraine.

We are all 27 democracies, which means that we have elections and through elections, people will choose their future. Before, we do not have a government in place and we have not seen how the new government acts, so we will not jump ahead of the events. I think it is important that everybody comes to this table with a genuine interest in cooperation and also compromise because it requires compromising for everybody. And I think in the beginning everybody is treated with equal welcoming of new colleagues around the table to have agreements and cooperation with.

Q. I am very interested to ask you what is the general mood of ministers regarding the situation in Georgia? And also, for example, regarding targeted sanctions, do they believe that targeted sanctions could be an effective tool to encourage the Georgian Dream to return to the path of European integration in line with the will of the people and to ensure that those responsible are held accountable for their actions?

If you ask me the general mood, then I can answer yes. The general mood is there because if we have pushed for sanctions, for example regarding those people who are committing these actions against opposition of free media. Then we have had 26 countries on board and one against. Now, the question of recent developments is also a question regarding Georgia; does it bring new momentum in this regard? I cannot run ahead of the events, but let us see. Definitely, there was a very good discussion today, about these things, also about the engagement. Because some were saying that we should engage more. The ultimate understanding is that we should definitely engage more with the Georgian people, also outside Tbilisi, to show the people that the European Union is there and really that we are coming with good thoughts and will. But at the same time also to give very clear messages to the government of Georgia that the direction that they are taking is not in accordance with the values that Europe represents. So, this was the discussion today and we will revisit the sanctions once we have new governments around the table.

Q. Madam High Representative, is there any specific date or period when you expect the approval or a formal approval of the 20th package of sanctions against Russia? And also, is there anything you could tell us about the 21st package of sanctions? Because Croatian Foreign Minister today mentioned that ministers already started considering the 21st package.

If you ask me the date of the 20th sanctions package, then I say it is long overdue. So, I hope that we can move faster, considering the new momentum we have. We have also taken the approach that we are working regarding the sanctions on the shadow fleet on a rolling basis, so we are not putting together big packages, but as soon as we know about the ships, we are going to put them on. But, of course, also, there were ministers raising today new ideas for the 21st package of sanctions once the 20th package is adopted.

Q. My question is a bit broader and bigger, I suppose. But if you look Druzhba dispute that has been going on for quite a while now, can you tell us what you

think about who actually holds the leverage in Europe right now? I mean is it the EU? Is it Kyiv or is it Member States still reliant on Russian oil? And if you could reflect a little bit on that, that would be very interesting. Thank you.

What is clear is that what really has an effect on the Russian economy is anything we do on oil because it is their main revenue for this war. And of course, what is happening in Iran and the Middle East is actually giving them some breathing space because the oil price is going up. But it is not as big as they need in their budget gap and requirements. That is also very, very clear. The broader dispute is about Russian energy as such. We have been vulnerable because we have been dependent on Russian oil and gas. So, our approach and the roadmap has been to get rid of the Russian oil and gas completely. We still need to work with that, even if the Druzhba pipeline now is being restored. We need to diversify our portfolios, also not to put all the eggs in one basket. That is what we are trying to do.

Q: So, who holds the leverage of decision making. When you look at, when you reflect on the Druzhba situation and the result?

On the energy roadmap, we have already made the decision, so, that is already there. Regarding the Druzhba pipeline, I think right now it is that Ukraine has really fixed this. But in the end, if you are buying Russian oil and gas, then the leverage is with Russia. That is very clear. So, if we want to get rid of that leverage, we should not give them this revenue, whether it is via Druzhba or any other means.

Q. Madam Kallas, in the morning you mentioned that you will discuss how to handle the relationship with Azerbaijan. I want to ask if you discussed it, and I have another question on demining. The Foreign Office of Azerbaijan called to expand international help for demining operation because lives continues to be lost in Karabakh. So, are you going to answer that call? Because you are already doing that, but maybe expand.

We discussed also what more can we do in terms of the relationship with Azerbaijan. We need to work more and strengthen our ties on the issues of common interest like energy and trade. Azerbaijan has been a very reliable energy partner to the European Union countries. And, of course, on the demining we are helping different countries in demining in the world. So, if the request is there, we are also looking into what more can we do, but we did not have a decision on this today.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/media/video/I-287612

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