European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: Press conference by High Representative Kaja Kallas

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Check against delivery!

Good day, everybody! We had a long day.

First, we started breakfast discussing with the Armenian Minister, who briefed us on the peace process and also what is the situation. Currently they are facing hybrid threats and rampant disinformation. We already see Russia repeating the same playbook that they used in Moldova. Today, we discussed how to strengthen Armenia's resilience, including the government's help to have cyber and hybrid defences.

Then, we had a discussion on the Middle East. The discussion was around EU's contribution to the security and stabilisation of Gaza; Hamas refusal to disarm is a major obstacle to progress. Our two missions on the ground can scale up operations, one assisting border crossings and the other one supporting the Palestinian police. Both can make valuable contributions to the Peace Plan and the International Stabilization Force, but we need approval from Israeli side. We are also working on Palestinian Authority reform, humanitarian aid and reconstruction, and on the latter, it is clear that we need to have a say on how the money is being spent.

Ministers also discussed Sunday's antisemitic attacks in Australia. European position is very clear: the rise of antisemitism anywhere in the world must be condemned.

Then, we also discussed Syria, and that was the main focus of our Middle East discussion. After one year of Assad's regime fall and Syria still faces enormous challenges: sectarian violence, lack of inclusivity, lack of proper institutions, rule of law. These are problems that are still there. The killing of US soldiers by ISIS terrorists on Saturday was a brutal reminder of that. And we discussed the state of Syria's transition and how we could better support governance, security sector reform and trade.

Let me remind you that the European Union was the first one to lift sanctions to help the country to rebuild. But lifting sanctions alone does not bring economic prosperity. Investors need to trust the legal system. Investors need to be sure that the situation is stable and will not get out of hand. We are now also adjusting the EU-Syria sanctions regime as the situation evolves.

Ministers also decided to move forward with the new EU-Syria political partnership. If we do not step up in Syria, others - including Russia - will fill the vacuum.

And finally, Lebanon. Later today, actually quite soon, I will co-chair the EU-Lebanon Association Council. Lebanon is at the critical juncture. The truce between Lebanon and Israel remains fragile. Hezbollah refusal to disarm and Israeli strikes risk pushing the country into deeper instability. Today we will discuss our relations and options for strengthening Lebanese internal security forces.

Then, we had a discussion on China. China is increasingly weaponizing economic ties for political gains. We recently released our joint economic security strategy with the Commission and plan to diversify our supply of critical minerals. Today, Ministers discussed how we can better deploy our trade arsenal to strengthen Europe's resilience. No European country can match China on its own. Unity is the strength also here.

We also discussed renewed fighting in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. I spoke with Ministers of Burundi, Congo and Rwanda in recent days, and it is clear that we will explore also possible next steps for the next Foreign Affairs Council. Because for us, it is in our interest that we remain closely engaged to avoid further escalation, as the situation is extremely severe.

Now on Ukraine. Talks will continue and our priorities are twofold: putting more pressure on Moscow and generating more support for Kyiv. Europe is providing Ukraine with a record of €27 billions of military support this year, we have also met our pledge of providing 2 million rounds of artillery shells, but it is also clear that it is no time to slow down.
We have to do more to strengthen Ukraine's defence and its hand in negotiations, while Russia keeps rejecting peace. Ministers were clear that any peace deal must include strong security guarantees, as Ukraine has been pressured into giving up NATO, this will be the only safeguard capable of stopping Russia from re-invading. The EU will do its part, including with training and defence industry support.

Russia's shadow fleet remains its cash lifeline, and we are cutting it. Today, we sanctioned several individuals linked to Rosneft and Lukoil as well as shipping companies also additional 40 vessels to the sanctions list to cut off Russia's cash flow faster. We will now also sanction shadow Fleet vessels on a rolling basis, with decisions every month. Ministers also impose new sanctions on those involved in Russian hybrid actions against our countries as hybrid attacks from Belarus grow and we also broaden our sanctions regime to target those responsible. The message is clear: those who threaten our security will face consequences.

This is a decisive week for funding Ukraine. Member States have already agreed to immobilize Russian assets for the long term, and this was the right thing to do. On Thursday, the European Council is set to decide Ukraine's funding for 2026 to 2027.

I want to make this very simple. Supporting Ukraine costs money, that is very clear, but letting Ukraine fall would cost us much more. Accountability for Russia's crimes is essential for a just and lasting peace.

Tomorrow, in The Hague, we will establish a commission to address claims for war damages caused by Russia. The Commission’s register has already received 80,000 submissions. It will review, assess and determine the compensation owed to Ukraine. Russia will not escape the bill for the homes, schools and hospitals it has destroyed.

And finally, on issue of territorial concessions, only Ukraine can decide the terms of any deal. But we all know that Donbas is not Putin's end game. If he gets it, he will want more. Concessions should be made by the aggressor, not by the victim. There is no moral equivalence between the two sides.

I think I got all points. Now, I am ready to take your questions.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/video/I-282082

Q&A

Q. Regarding the talks in Berlin, would you say that the talks are moving in the right direction? I remember that last time, and also now you say that the pressure should be not only on the victim, not only on Ukraine, but also on Russia. Was this taken into account? And I am asking this question, also on the background of the fact that reparations loan is very much in doubt. It is not clear whether there could be agreement on this. Thank you.

I have said pressure should be on the aggressor, not the victim, not only on the victim, because the victim has not done anything wrong. We expect also pressure to be put on Russia, because, again, we do not see them coming to the negotiation table and really negotiating in good faith, or really negotiating, for that matter. On the reparations loan, we had short discussions today, but the leaders will discuss this on Thursday. The preparatory work is done to really come to a solution there. It is clear that it could be really a game changer for this war, because it shows to Russia that it cannot outlast, and it also gives very clear signals that they have to really bear the burden of these damages that they have caused to Ukraine.

Q. You had a conversation this afternoon with the two American Envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, was wondering if you could tell us more about what they said and what you say to them, and also, if you are a bit more optimistic, talking about the reparation after the discussion you had, the short discussion, you had this afternoon.

I have actually nothing much to report from the discussions with Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. As I do not know if it was a cyber-attack, but definitely technology did not work correctly. So, we did not really have good discussions. On the reparations loan, it is very hard. It is very difficult. Of course, today we also heard Belgium's worries, and I think

everybody around the table understands Belgium worries and is willing to share those burdens, and that is why, - my personal opinion is - if go further with the reparations loan, then actually the pressure would be off Belgium, and we will share the burden and risk with all the Member States, because then it is a European proposal, and it is Europe that is responsible, not Belgium. So I really do hope that we will achieve results Thursday, but right now I am optimistic, by nature, but - I am also seeing how difficult it is, so I do not want to give any estimates, saying that the work is ongoing.

Q. Staying on the same point, it is difficult approving the reparation loans. Some countries have put forward suggestions that maybe the Commission should explore, or keep exploring other options, but we know that the clock is ticking, so maybe there is no time for other options now to be sketched out. So, I would like for you to tell us if really there is no plan B, there is only plan A, and also what will be the consequences for Europe if cannot agreed or fail to agree again on the reparation loan.

We have been exploring the different options for at least three last years already to find funding for Ukraine to defend itself, and we have come to the place where this reparations loan is the most viable option, as we know. I have been also proposing, in my previous capacity as Prime Minister of Estonia, the Eurobonds, because if we share the burden also in terms of the loan, it is cheaper for everybody. But it is unanimity decision, and we do not have everybody on board, and that is why it has not worked for the last three years. And that is why I think this is really a viable option. Because again, this is built on the principle that the one who does the damage should also compensate for that, and as Russia is doing the damage for Ukraine, it is based on their frozen assets, and it is the best option we have right now.

Q. I want to ask about another element that has come up in the peace negotiations that is Ukraine succession to the European Union. We heard the latest reports talking about maybe admission by January ‘27 which seems extraordinary, given the country has not opened a single cluster yet. But regardless of these reports, where do you stand on this matter? Do you think any peace deal should set a fixed deadline for Ukraine's accession? Because that seems to run counter to the position that you know, accession is merit-based and should flow naturally according to the progress made by each candidate. So, what do you say do you think accession should be based on merit or on a peace deal?

The accession should be merit-based. We have said also to Ukraine, to Moldova, all the accession countries that there is no discount, also for Ukraine, but the circulation of this deadline, and that it is stated in the peace deal, shows that the Americans might be pushing it, which could be a good signal to one of our Member States to unblock the opening of the clusters so we can move forward.

Q. Ahmed al-Ahmed, au péril de sa vie,
a désarmé l’un de terroristes de l’attaque antisémite le jour de la

fête juive de Hanouka, en Australie. Ce héros de Bondi Beach n'envoie-t-il pas cependant un message très fort qu'il ne faut confondre l'Islam,
les islamistes, terroristes et que tous les musulmans ne sont pas
des terroristes, comme le prétendent parfois certains gouvernants et certains partis politiques.

This is a clear sign what we have always said in European Union. I mean, it is no place for antisemitism. It is also no place for anti-Islamism. This is if we are talking about terrorists. These are single individuals that could come from all the religions, all the backgrounds. And this is also clearly showing it.

Q. Although your VTC did not work, perhaps with the American negotiators, you did also have the Ukrainian foreign minister. Is it your understanding that when President Zelenskyy says he might be willing to drop Ukraine's NATO ambitions. Does he talk about going as far as changing the constitution so that that is no longer part of the Ukrainian constitution?
I do not know if you got to talk to the Foreign Minister that much and through other intermediaries. Is it your feeling that the US position is evolving so that there is, perhaps more evenly spread pressure, even if you did not get to speak with Witkoff and Kushner?

More evenly spread as to spread also to Russians?

Follow-up - [inaudible]

I think what Minister Sybiha, of course, was explaining the difficult position, but also how open they are to the peace negotiations, and they are agreeing to everything to have peace. To illustrate that Russia does not want this peace. Of course, the concessions that we have heard, or the points we have heard are extremely difficult. And to me, actually, they illustrate the Russian negotiation tactic. They just go forward and more pressure and ask this is not good enough, not good enough. And instead of really zooming out the picture is that you offer them more, not really having a clear picture, that we have one aggressor and one victim. In order to have sustainable peace, long term peace in Europe, we need to have concessions from the Russian side. And therefore, putting the pressure on Russia is our policy. We clearly see that they are not in good place. And if our allies would do the same, I think we would be very strong in terms of Russia as well.

Follow-up - [inaudible]

He did not explain this any further. But of course, we know that NATO is enshrined in their constitution. So if they concede into this, then first we need to really - by all Member States and all countries, also Americans - give them very, very strong, tangible security guarantees, not only on paper, but really tangible, like, how many troops on the ground, how much capabilities, because then this is the only thing that really protects them. So, it has to go hand in hand with extremely strong security guarantees. But in the end, it is up to Ukrainians to decide what they are willing to give up to have peace and for Ukrainian people.

Q. I wanted to ask about Belarus. Are you concerned about the US lifting sanctions at a time when Lithuania is raising a lot of concerns about Belarus, and just as the EU is moving to widen its own sanctions regime. Thank you.

As long as this war is going on and Belarus is clearly helping Russia in its war efforts and also hybrid attacks against European Member States, our position has been very clear. We are putting more sanctions on Belarus and to pressure them into not using these tactics against us. So, raising the cost for them to change the calculus.

Q. My question is almost traditionally on 20th package of sanctions. Was it discussed today, when will it be ready, and what may it contain of and actually, I do not see that the Commission is very much in a hurry to adopt this 20th package. Is it connected with the peace negotiations? Maybe? Are you waiting for the result? And actually, if the EU will think about lifting sanctions against Russia, if the peace negotiations will be successful? Did you already think about it, when and in which circumstances, the European Union, may be ready to lift sanctions against Russia during this process?

We decided last time that we are going to put sanctions on shadow fleet on rolling basis. So, like I said, we did 40 vessels and some enablers today. So not waiting, huge packages, but actually going with the ones that we can move forward. Because really, when we did it, the first time we saw it has a huge impact on the oil revenues. Of course, Russia is getting more creative, has some friends, and we need to be agile and really move fast. And that is why we are doing this on rolling basis every month. Of course, the work on the 20th Sanctions Package is going in parallel, but I think we should not wait, and we have shown that we are not waiting behind those packages, but actually moving faster with the rolling of the sanctions on shadow fleet. Lifting sanctions right now not discussed because we are definitely not there. As I said, we have to put the pressure on Russia so we are doing actually more in order to deprive them from the funds to finance this war.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/video/I-282655

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