European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell

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Check against delivery!

Thank you to all of you for following this press conference after the third meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers meeting on this very difficult week.

We had again with us the Foreign Affairs Minister of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, who joined us and offered a strong moving account of what is happening in the ground and the behaviour of the Russian troops. And also about the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian forces, which can certainly be called freedom fighters for Ukraine.

[Foreign Minister] Kuleba joined us via videoconference, from Ukraine, where he is busy defending his country and despite his high spirits, he certainly drew a dire picture of the situation on the ground. Civilian targets have been hit, putting innocent people's lives at risk and I am underlining this as we need to grasp the gravity of the situation. I will never insist enough on the gravity of the situation. An independent country, without doing anything to deserve it, has been invaded with strong military capacities by another one that has a nuclear bomb and threatens to use it against anyone who dares to intervene in this invasion.

As you know, in a sign of immediate support to Ukraine, we have adopted a sanctions package that was agreed last night by the leaders of the Member States. You know that the European Council provides political guidance in order for the Foreign Affairs Council to approve it formally and put that into action.

Today we have listed President [of Russia, Vladimir] Putin and Foreign Minister [of Russia, Sergey] Lavrov. This is the final outcome of the discussion that was not finished yesterday at the European Council and has been decided today by the ambassadors and the Ministers during the intense discussions that have been taking place this morning. So, President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov are on the list of sanctioned people, together with the remaining members of the Duma, who are supporting this aggression. And also with relevant members of the Russian Security Council. You know very well that this is an important step. Let me flag that the only leaders in the world who are sanctioned by the European Union are [President Bashar Al-]Assad from Syria, [President Aleksandr] Lukashenko from Belarus and now [President Vladimir] Putin from Russia.

We will also target those in Belarus who collaborate with the Russian military aggression against Ukraine. And we will not stop there.

We have also adopted a proposal to target all - I mean all – those who are significantly providing economic support, all who are having a significant economic role in supporting the regime.

We adopted today important restrictions on financial, trade, energy sector and visa policy. Allow me to go a little bit more into details, although I know that everybody knows it, because it has been communicated thoroughly and with a lot of details.

First, we are cutting Russian access to the most important capital markets, prohibiting the listing and provision of services in relation to shares of Russian state-owned entities on European Union trading venues and significantly limiting the financial inflows from Russia to the European Union.

These sanctions will target 70% of the Russian banking system and key state-owned companies, including in the field of defence. They will increase Russia's borrowing costs, increasing financial costs, increasing inflation and gradually eroding Russia's industrial base, and attracting less Foreign Direct Investment.

I want to stress that we are not targeting the Russian people. Many of them spoke up against this senseless war and I want to salute their courage. The courage of the people that in 58 Russian cities have been demonstrating against the war. And we certainly make a difference between Kremlin and Russia. Putin is not the Russian people.

We also agreed to intensify our diplomatic efforts to ensure the widest possible international condemnation of Russia’s illegal and unprovoked aggression.

We need to hold Russia to account internationally, and this requires a diplomatic effort to explain to everybody what is going on, what Russia has been doing and why we ask for the Russian condemnation at the United Nations.

We already summoned Russian ambassadors to the EU and in Member States.
All our Delegations and Embassies have been instructed to actively explain to partner countries the dangers of Putin’s aggressive behaviour. It is not just a problem of Ukraine, it is not just a problem of the European Union, it is a problem of the international community. Russia needs to see that it is going to be isolated from the international community.

We are mobilising support for the vote in the UN Security Council this evening. We know that Russia will veto this proposal, but then it will go to the UN General Assembly. There we will have the temperature; we will see how many people support the condemnation of the aggressive attitude of Russia.

To prepare this I have spoken to Foreign Ministers of China, India and others to explain to them that this is not about Ukraine. This is about the respect for international rules and the UN Charter.

Putin launched a war against a neighbour during an emergency session of the UN Security Council on Ukraine. It shows the respect that Russia has for these institutions.

Now they are also verbally attacking even the Secretary General of the United Nations [António Guterres] for speaking up in favour of peace and respect of international rules. This is about the United Nations. Follow in the next days the result of the vote both at the UN Security Council this evening and at the General Assembly later.

Apart from the United Nations, we are seeing the first reactions. I welcome that today the Council of Europe's Council of Ministers adopted the decision to suspend Russia's rights of representation in the organisation. All EU27 Member States supported this unanimously.

Let me say one thing about that, this does not entail Russia's expulsion from the Organisation. It is in the interest of the Russian citizens to keep benefiting from the protection granted by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Then, Russia has also been excluded from the Eurovision Song Contest. It might look like a small thing from a geopolitical point of view, but this will have a wide social resonance. Also, The [UEFA] Champions League Final will not be held in St Petersburg and the Russian Formula 1 Grand Prix has also been cancelled due to the actions of the Russian leadership.

As for Ukraine as such, we need to continue our support in any way that we can. There was a clear consensus on that.

Finally, let me stress the importance of the information war. Lies and disinformation coming from Russia are extreme by now, even from the highest political place. Please follow the reports from our [European External Action Service's] Strategic Communications team to debunk and curtail the disinformation flows. You will see how they consider [President of Ukraine, Volodymyr] Zelenskyy as "war criminal", a "Nazi", using the words of "genocide" to justify the invasion of Ukraine, which had the purpose of avoiding [President] Zelenskyy committing "genocide" against Russian speaking people in the Donbas region. And saying that when they seize Kyiv they will do the same they did in Nuremberg to send to the court the people responsible for genocide. This kind of disinformation has to be combatted, debunked and curtailed.

And then there is the danger and risk that other countries in the neighbourhood of Russia can be suffering. We need to strengthen our support to Moldova and Georgia and look at the Western Balkans, because we will see provocations to the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in order to support the stability of the country I have decided to

mobilise the reserve force of Operation Althea, which means to deploy 500 members of this mission on the ground. This is going to happen in the next days.

That is more or less what I wanted to tell you about this important meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, where, according to the Treaty, the decision about sanctions on Russia has been taken.

Q&A

Q. Do you know what kind of assets do Mr Putin and Mr Lavrov have in Europe? Is it only a symbolic measure? Or there are also some concrete effects of your decision? Also, you are talking about the third package of sanctions, it was mentioned by President Michel and several Ministers. The second package was discussed and adopted last night by the leaders. Does it mean that you don't consider it strong enough if you feel the need for a third package?

The package is very strong. It has been adopted very quickly. You have never seen the European Union acting so quickly. It is not a matter of weeks or months. In two days, in 24 hours. Do you know how much work is behind his decision? Preparing the legal documents, going through the administrative circuit, putting everybody in agreement, 27 Member States, the Commission, the Council. There is a lot of work. It has been done very quickly. The package is complete, strong. But maybe there is something else. SWIFT is something that has not been included in the table because the discussion was not mature enough. But nothing is off the table. Maybe it can be adopted in the following days. It will depend. We are exploring all possibilities and they will be adopted depending on the Russian behaviour and depending also on the possibility of taking more restrictive measures. But the possibility of taking more should not weaken the importance of what we have done. You are always asking for more. Please, pay attention to what this package is. It is a very complete package done in agreement, in coordination with the United States and the United Kingdom. They do not have more elements in their packages that we have in ours.

About the assets of [Mr Lavrov and Putin]. I am not in the secrets of Mr Lavrov and Putin’s wealth, and it is not my duty. There are people who will take care of that.

Q. Une précision concernant le gel des avoirs de Monsieur Poutine et Monsieur Lavrov. Est-ce que des pays en dehors de l'Union européenne s'associe à cette décision et donc d'étendre la juridiction de la saisie de leurs avoirs à leur territoire ? Et plus généralement est ce que les ministres - encore une question hypothétique -, mais là lucidité, petit peut-être, de voir que Kyiv va tomber un jour prochain aux mains du Kremlin et de l'armée russe qui est en chemin. Est-ce que les ministres envisagent cette possibilité de se retrouver à très brève échéance avec une Ukraine que l'on tente d'aider mais qu'il ne sera plus l'Ukraine dirigé par ces gouvernements pro-européens, mais avec un pouvoir aux ordres du Kremlin ?

Si c'était le cas, évidement, tout serait à revoir. Mais pour l'instant encore les Ukrainiens résistent. C'est évident que la dimension, la portée de l'attaque russe en Ukraine n'a pas l'ambition d'occuper une petite partie de ce qui reste du Donbas. L'attaque est une attaque massive, de tout pays par le Nord, par le Sud, par l'Est. Le but c'est d'occuper Kyiv - c'est clair - de mettre en place s'ils le peuvent, le gouvernement à leurs ordres. Si c'était le cas, évidemment on serait dans autre un monde. Et tout ce qu'on essaie de faire maintenant pour aider le gouvernement ukrainien n'aurait pas de sens. Mais on n'en est pas encore là. Le Ministre Kuleba nous a expliqué la volonté de la résistance de l'armée ukrainienne. Çe n'est pas moi qui vais spéculer sur les évènements qui ne se sont pas encore produits. Et j'espère qu'ils ne se produiront pas. Et c'est pour ça qu'on essaie à travers des sanctions, de faire pression sur la Russie. Tout en sachant que, comme tout le monde le sait, les sanctions n'ont pas un effet immédiat.

Q. Will there definitely be a third package of sanctions? And if so, what will be the trigger for a third package? And secondly, are there oligarchs on the list of sanctions that is being approved today? And if so, how many?

Il y a 26 personnes qui ne sont ni responsables gouvernementaux, ni membres de la Douma, ni d'institutions politiques. Ce sont des personnalités, vous les appelez des oligarques. Ce sont des personnalités liées au monde financier russe et on considère qu'ils sont en train d'appuyer le gouvernement ou tirer avantage de ces évènements qui se sont en train de se produire en Ukraine. On les considère responsables ou bénéficiaires de ses actions là. I would not like to coin the concept of third package. We have just said that everything was on the table. We have been working hard to put in action this package and now we have to concentrate our efforts on implementing it, which is not so easy. The only thing that yesterday the two President said on their press conference, is that if there are more measures that have to be taken, measures identified, and they meet the necessary consensus – consensus meaning unanimity among the Member States - they will be taken. But do not expect a third package on the next days or hours, because this is not the idea. Because the idea is that if it is necessary to do more, if we identify actions from the Russian side, if we have identified consensus around more measures, they can be taken.

Q. Could I have your thoughts on the statement by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman of Russia about the two EU Member States, Finland and Sweden? She said that were they try to join NATO, they would face political and military consequences. What are your thoughts about a statement like about two EU Member States?

Je ne commente pas les commentaires de la porte-parole du Ministère des affaires étrangères russe. J'ai d'autres choses à faire. Et en tout cas, je peux vous dire ce que l'on dit toujours: Nous considérons que tous les États sont libres de choisir leur politique extérieure et leur politique d'alliances.

Q. I just want a clarification on what you said about the sanctions against Lavrov and Putin himself. This is a big point of discussion today and I just want to know what you can tell me. Are you sure that these specific sanctions would hurt them personally?

Comme tout le monde. Ces sanctions sont les mêmes qu'on applique au reste des sanctionnés. C'est à dire, le gel des avoirs. Et puis, il y a tout un travail à faire par les moyens techniques que nous disposons pour identifier les avoirs et les geler, s'il y en a. Evidemment, s'ils n'ont pas d'avoir, ils ne seront pas gelés. Mais c'est exactement le même traitement que beaucoup de gens quand les avoirs son gelés. Croyez-moi, si vous avez des importants avoirs que, de tout d'un coup vous ne pouvez pas en disposer, évidement ça vous nuit. Mais je ne suis pas en mesure de le dire, parce que je ne le sais pas, quelle est l'importance des avoirs, que chacun des sanctionnés ont en Europe.

Q. I want to know if the EU is seemingly unable to avoid bloody conflicts on its own doorstep, is it still a peace project?

Pourquoi est-ce que l'union ne serait pas considérée comme un projet de paix ? Je ne comprends pas.

Follow-up question: because it is unable to stop conflicts on its own doorstep. It is unable to avoid the loss of lives on Europe's own borders.

L'union européenne est un projet de paix. Elle est fondée sur la paix. Sur la paix entre les états membres qui se sont battus pendant des siècles et grâce à l'Union on amené la paix en Europe. Et ce que nous faisons dans le monde c'est appuyer la paix. Nous sommes le contraire de la guerre. Nous sommes le contraire de ceux qui cherchent des solutions aux problèmes interétatiques à travers de la violence.

Follow-up question: Do you think that Ukraine will agree with you?

I am saying what the European Union is.

Q. Can you tell us more about your conversation with the Indian and Chinese Ministers? If they gave reassurances on what they will do in the United Nations Security Council? And also if you can tell us about the SWIFT discussion. Are you reconsidering the idea of kicking Russia out of the SWIFT system? You and the Ministers, what is the level of the discussion around this option?

Cette question a été considéré mais pour l'instant ça n'a pas fait l'unanimité nécessaire. Donc, elle n'est pas dans le paquet mais elle n'est pas dehors de la table. C'est une possibilité à garder pour des futures considérations.

Je ne peux pas dévoiler mes conversations avec les ministres Chinois ou Indien. C'est évident qu'elles ont porté le débat aux Nations Unies et les raisons pour lesquelles nous, les européens, avons tablé, à travers la France, cette proposition. Je leur ai expliqué la raison,

nous avons discuté de ce qui se passe en Ukraine et [nous avons] analysé les raisons des uns et des autres, en particulier les nôtres sur cette problématique là. Mais je ne vais pas dévoiler qu'elle est leur position, ça c'est à vous de leur demander.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-219278

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-4_en