Foreign Affairs Council: Press conference by High Representative Kaja Kallas

Brussels

EEAS Press Team

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Good afternoon, everybody.

We had the Foreign Ministers [Council] today. We covered a lot of ground, and the day is not over yet.

First, on the Middle East. Syria’s transition is moving forward, but economic recovery, national reconciliation, and the reintegration of refugees remain challenging. The EU seeks a major upgrade in its ties with Syria and today Ministers supported moving ahead with the EU-Syria Association Agreement. Together with Member States, we will work through the technical and legal details to prepare this agreement for signature.

Syria needs investment and successful transition. The aim is to give Europe and Syria a framework for trade, political dialogue, and closer cooperation as soon as possible. In parallel, we will work for a new mandate from the Council to negotiate the modernised agreement. A stable Syria is in Europe's interest.

Ministers also held initial discussions on the result of [the] Israeli elections, but we will have a deep dive next time. Now, the EU is ready to engage with the next government of Israel. And at the same time, we continue to act against Hamas and its financing network, including through new sanctions that we adopted today.

The threat posed by Iran increasingly extends to Europe. Recent cyber-attacks in France have shown that European countries are not beyond Tehran's reach. The EU has already designated the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation. We have imposed sweeping sanctions regarding nuclear programme, severe human rights violations, and restrictions on freedom of navigation. We are now preparing further sanctions.

The wars in the Middle East underline the importance of working closely with Gulf partners. And Sunday's attacks by Iran and the Houthis on Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are unacceptable and increase the risk of reigniting the war. In

December, we will hold the EU-GCC Ministerial to further strengthen our cooperation.

The EU and the Gulf countries share an interest in regional stability and fully reopen Strait of Hormuz.

Then, on Ukraine. First I met the Prime Minister Koretskyi this morning, and Foreign Minister Sybiha joined us in the room.

Sadly, there are still no signs of Moscow preparing for peace.

Russia is stuck on the battlefield and losing record number of soldiers. Yet, Moscow continues to escalate strikes against Ukrainian civilians. To strengthen Ukraine for the winter, we are mobilising 500 generators, 200 buses, emergency shelters, underwater energy cables, and floating bridges.

And, in parallel, we are dialing up the pressure on Russia. Today, Ministers approved 140 new listings. They target Russian refineries, banks, e-commerce, and companies in the Gulf and East Asia that also support Russia's shadow fleet. And these measures include the largest set of listings to date against those behind Russia's cyber and disinformation attacks against European Union. At the same time, we will present the 22nd sanctions package in the coming days. And today, Ministers made a strong call to tighten visa policies and to prevent Russian athletes from competing in sports events that are held in European Union.

If Russia is betting on our fatigue, it will be disappointed. Next week, EU leaders will discuss funding options for Ukraine for 2027.

It is clear that budgets are tight everywhere, but supporting Ukraine is an investment into European security. Our way of life - better schools, better hospitals, affordable homes – depends on the security. According to estimates, European governments spend about 0.1 to 0.2 percent of their GDP in aid to Ukraine, and supporting Ukraine is a bargain compared to Putin's victory.

Finally, on peace talks. The EU has agreed [on] who will speak for Europe at the next round, and now it is time to focus on the substance. Russia's demands remain maximalist. Moscow wants to dismember Ukraine, push back NATO, and veto over European security, and all those things are non-starters. In 2021, Russia’s demands were a pretext for war. In 2026, they are a pretext for keeping the war going.

Europe has clear demands towards Moscow. Just to recall some of them: Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and the right to choose its own alliances must be respected. There can be no legal recognition of the occupied Ukrainian territories. Russia must be held accountable for war crimes and pay for the destruction they have caused. Children deported from Ukraine must be returned home. Russian sabotage and cyber-attacks across Europe must end.

A ceasefire must be a priority, then the peace agreement. Only then we can discuss anything else. Ministers were very clear today. We do not need a new security architecture. We need to restore the one we have. Russia has broken all the treaties that unpin it

Finally, we just met with our partners from Central Asia, Black Sea, and South Caucasus. [We] talked about connectivity and security. We share an interest in better transport routes, stronger energy, and digital links, and bringing our economies closer together. But war threatens those links. Just yesterday, three ships were attacked in the Black Sea. Russia has turned Black Sea into the world's deadliest body of water. Moscow strikes on grain ships deliberately threaten global food security.

EU Solidarity Lanes help Ukraine's grain get to the markets, but roads and railways do not carry the same volume as ships. Ceasefire would protect lives and food trade. Ukraine has proposed it, and Russia has rejected it. The EU is investing €50 million in the Black Sea Maritime Security Hub to help countries share information faster and detect threats to shipping sooner. This complements regional initiatives on coast guard operations and mine countermeasures.

After this press conference, we will have a Ukraine Mine Action Conference that I will co-chair. Ukraine has become the most landmine-contaminated country in the world. The EU is the largest financial supporter of efforts to demine Ukraine, and this afternoon is an opportunity to see what more can we do with our partners from all over the world.

Now I am ready to take your questions.

Watch the video of the press conference here.

Q&A

Q. High Representative, two questions. One on Syria. You had a discussion on Syria, do the Ministers share the same objective concerning Syria? What barriers do they see, and what conditions they want to see to be met in order to proceed towards an Associate Agreement with Syria? And secondly, concerning the peace talks, you said that we have to restore the current security architecture that exists in Europe. How do you see Ukraine in the current security architecture?

Do we share the same objective with the Member States? Yes, we do. Everybody said that we need to engage with Syria because if we do not engage, then this vacuum will be filled by other players. Now, the question was regarding the Agreement status because it was negotiated in 2008. There is quite a lot of time since that negotiation. The question was whether we should make amendments to this. You know how the European Union operates, which means that it takes time. That is why the compromise would be that we sign the Association Agreement that is from 2008. That gives us the framework to

deal with all the issues that are [of] interest for us and also for them. And then, simultaneously, we work with the Council on a new mandate for a modernised agreement. And there, Member States' Ministers were making many points; that we should have clear conditionality regarding human rights. We should have also the non-recognition of occupied Ukrainian, Georgian territories that they have recognised under Assad regime and different things that Member States propose. Now we work in the Working Parties to sort out the technical and legal details, but we move forward with this.

On the security architecture, if you think about the agreements that have been the basis of European security architecture, by the way, Russia was also part of these agreements. If you think about Helsinki Final Act, if you think about the Paris Agreement [Charter of Paris], if you think about Budapest Memorandum. We have several agreements. The issue is not the agreements. The issue is not where Ukraine stands in this. The issue is that Russia is really breaching those agreements and not keeping to these agreements. So, how do we restore the European security architecture? And, of course, there comes also a question that many have raised: Post-war, is it better when also Ukraine is part of NATO? It is clear that Ukraine is having the most competent army, the most well-equipped army, and it is definitely important for us that they are contributing to the European security like they already are, and we will see how much more this can go. But again, I want to stress one thing: let us not go into the discussions with Russia regarding the security architecture at the moment, because first we need to see ceasefire. They are just trying to blur the picture to say "oh, we are just brainstorming". They are not brainstorming. Whatever gets out will be used against [us], and then the focus goes away from that we actually do not have a ceasefire, and they continue to weaken Ukraine and kill the people every single day.

Q. Follow-up for the negotiations mandate. What is your plan: when this mandate will be ready? Who shall adopt it? It is at FAC level or at leaders' level? And what is the most important thing that you want to see in this mandate? It is the first one, and the second one on Russian ex-combatants. I already asked this question one time after July, when the 21st package of sanctions mentioned that there shall be a total ban of entering Russian ex-combatants and current combatants. What is happening? Why is it still not implemented?

We have already prepared with the Foreign Ministers maximum demands. When I was a lawyer, then how you enter negotiations is that first you present or you prepare the absolute maximum you want to see, and then not openly you also prepare where are you ready to step back, and what are your red lines, which are absolutely no goes. And there, we had the discussion also with the Foreign Ministers today. We have the FAC, the Foreign Ministers meet every month. Maybe it is not often enough. But then we also have Ambassadors. What many Member States' Ministers said is that they do not want to be debriefed about these things. They want to be involved in these talks, and if anybody has better ideas how to do that, then of course we can discuss. But we

have done this work so far, and the Foreign Ministers are ready to take this work forward. Today also several Ministers were proposing different things.

On the combatants. As I said, we are presenting in a few days the 22nd package to Member States, and let us see if that will be in it. The discussions are ongoing. Some Member States have question marks about implementation. But what I must say is that Russia is actually very bureaucratic, so they keep the data of all these people who have been in this war. So, it is I assume probably quite easy to get considering that everything is digital nowadays. So, I think we can solve the implementation issue.

Q. I want to ask you about what happened last week in Dublin. You were there. You put yourself forward quite forcefully as the best candidate to lead the peace negotiations on Europe's behalf. You argued that it was incumbent upon you as High Representative to take on this job, the leaders chose you for this task. But the leaders chose a completely different configuration in which you were not included. Do you regret making this pitch in Dublin, and do you think the decisions taken by leaders are making your job increasingly impossible?

Yes, I still keep [referring] to the treaties. Take the treaties out and read the treaties [about] who is dealing with the Security and Foreign policy issues. So, we always say to our partners, rule of law, rule of law. And the rule of law actually in Europe is the treaties. So, I stand by my words. And I am ready to do this job as well. Of course, as I said in Dublin as well, leaders can always decide differently. But I think right now it is also some kind of relief that we do not talk about who anymore, but we can focus really on the substance. And there, I think all the negotiators really need to answer these questions: Do we keep the line of really demanding the ceasefire before discussion of anything else? And all these things that were discussed in Dublin. I think there is work for everybody. I have very expert people in the [European] External Action Service. I hope that this kind of structure does not create parallel structures that will actually have costs on the budget because we have the budget discussions as well. We have the [European] External Action Service. We have people who know about Russia, who are experts, who know about previous agreements, who know about history, and, definitely, I think that this expertise of these people should be used.

Q. I just want to ask a follow-up to my colleague's question regarding to Syria, that there is like policy to not recognise occupied territories in Ukraine and Georgia. So, am I correct? Is it kind of a condition to Syria regarding Association Agreement, or it is just discussion? And so European Union working on this issue regarding to Georgia and Ukraine.

Many Member States raised this. As I said, we cannot change the Association Agreement that we have, from 2008. So, basically, it is just whether we sign it or not that gives us the framework to work. But it is clearly something that the Member States raised for the mandate of the next modernised agreement, because all these issues have come after the 2008 agreement, and therefore it

s not only the non-recognition, but it is a lot of things that we want to see also from Syrian side. But yes, we are keeping them separate at the moment.

Q. Two quick questions. I want to follow up on what you said about the ex-combatants. You said that these logs may be in Russia because it is such a bureaucratic country. How would you suggest acquiring that information from the Russian bureaucracy? And a second follow-up on the negotiations. You have said Europe has representatives, let us focus on the substance. You have also seemed to indicate that Russia is playing for time, blurring the lines, wasting time, and making maximalist demands, not changing its negotiation position one bit. My question is: Do you have any reason to believe that these negotiations are not a waste of time?

I think we have to judge [them] by the results. If we see, Ukrainian prisoners of war returned, if we see children returned, if we see energy ceasefire or the ceasefire on the Black Sea, or do we see the grain arrangement? I mean, little things. And if we see a ceasefire, really, that will bring the stop to the killing of Ukrainians, then I am sure that Russia is also serious about these talks.

On how to acquire the data. Well, there are ways nowadays. We all have very good intelligence people. I am not [an] expert on the technicalities, but the experts are telling that it is quite easy to obtain.

Q. Have you discussed the situation in Estonia and the fact that Estonia announced to close border with Russia from first of December? As I understood, Lithuania wants to do it as well if Russia will continue its actions. And meanwhile, Press Secretary of Foreign Ministry of Russia said that this is Russophobia. She accused Estonia being Russophobic, and Press Secretary of Kremlin Dmitri Peskov said that if Estonia is building walls, it will not bring any good to countries who are building the walls. What could you reply on that?

Yes, of course, the Estonian Minister made the points about the attacks that they have seen, and also the decision that is being prepared that will be probably adopted Thursday or Friday. Now, on the comment on Russophobia, if you think what phobia means, phobia means that you are afraid of something. Considering Russia's actions, it is understandable that the countries that have been attacked before, countries that are neighbouring Russia, countries that have been targets of threats from Russia, are also afraid of Russia. So, I think it is quite logical if you think that you are afraid and you cannot really dismiss that. I mean, this is the way it is.

Q. I have technical questions. This format - E5 - do you think maybe some countries are underrepresented in this format because there is no Nordic countries, which are one of the main supporters in term of amount of help is the position of this country, they do not want to join or they overrepresented via President of Finland and Prime Minister of Norway? Why this particular format?

Well, I was kind of hoping that we now move away from the discussion of who, because that is actually again showing that we have formats agreed how we represent also 27 Member States, and that would also cover everybody. As soon as you start to take in the countries, where do you draw the line? I mean, why not them? It is going to be a really big table.

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