European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: Press conference by High Representative Kaja Kallas

2026-02-23 · EEAS Press Team

Check against delivery!

Good afternoon.

We just concluded the Foreign Affairs Council.

First, we had a discussion on foreign influence, manipulation and interference. Today's wars are not only fought with tanks and drones. They are also fought with lies and algorithms. FIMI is a weapon aimed at the heart of our democracies. Russia will spend billions on influence campaigns only this year. China's foreign information operations are growing more sophisticated and insidious. We cannot afford to lose the information battle.

Winning a fight requires a shield and a sword. We are already building the democracy shield, now we must also sharpen our proverbial sword. That means moving from rapid alerts and assessments towards pushing back harder against adversaries online. And today, Ministers reconfirmed the need for clearer communication of our values and what Europe stands for: reinforcing sanctions on FIMI networks and strengthening cooperation with law enforcement.

Now, on Ukraine. Tomorrow, we will mark a brutal and senseless anniversary. Four years on, Ukraine is paying a heavy price for Russia's fatal miscalculation, but also Moscow has failed to achieve any of its strategic objectives. Its military is bogged down. Its economy is in rapid decline, and Ukrainians are resisting and holding firm. Unfortunately, we did not reach an agreement on the 20th sanctions package. This is a setback and a message we did not want to send today, but the work continues.

Everybody understands that diplomacy is preferable to war, yet after a year of talks, we still do not even have ceasefire. It is not Ukraine that is the obstacle to peace, Russia is. We must flip the script: from pressure on Ukraine to surrender territory to what Russia must do to meet the basic conditions for a just and lasted peace.

Europe has a clear and legitimate interest in how Russia's war ends. For European interests not to become collateral damage, we must be clear about what we expect from Russia: respect for borders, end the end of sabotage, the paying of war damages, and the return of Ukrainian kidnapped children are not just far-fetched asks, they should be a

baseline. So, before we talk to Moscow, we ought to be clear what we want to talk with them about. Russia's maximalist demands cannot be met with minimalist response.

At the same time, we continue to strengthen Ukraine. We will use better the European Investment Bank to fund defence industrial cooperation. As Russia is targeting energy infrastructure, we doubled contributions to the Ukrainian energy fund in the last year to 1.85 billion euros.

We are tightening the net around Russia's shadow fleet, including with the compendium on best practices. Today, we sanctioned more people for massive human rights abuses in Russia. I have also decided to limit the maximum size of the Russian Mission in the European Union to 40 people. We will not tolerate abuse of diplomatic power. And together with the Commission, we are working to keep potential hundreds of 1000s of former Russian soldiers out of the Schengen area. We do not want war criminals and saboteurs to roam our streets.

Then, on the Middle East, the real progress in Gaza hinges upon disarming Hamas and subsequent withdrawal of the Israeli forces. We discussed this with High Representative Nickolay Mladenov today, and also we had the administrator of the UN Development Programme, Alexander De Croo, to brief us about the situation in Gaza. The European Union supports Gaza's future. We have redeployed our EUBAM Rafah border crossing mission, but there are still too few crossings. We are the top donor to Palestinians, and we work on expanding the training of the Palestinian police.

Ministers also addressed the serious situation in the West Bank. Israel's expansion of powers there breaches international law and hits at the heart of any future Palestinian state.

The United States and Iran are inching dangerously towards war. The window of diplomacy is very narrow and, of course, we have many concerns with Iran: its nuclear programme, its ballistic missiles and support for terrorists that are also a threat to Europe. But any military intervention risks hard-to-control consequences. The EU has imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran. The designation of the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation sent a clear message that there cannot be any impunity.

In northern Syria, the sudden change of power dynamics has upended the security at the camps holding ISIS fighters. This brings new risks, such as potential movement of terrorists towards Europe. Today, Ministers discussed how the EU can contribute towards more rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. We will also explore more support to Syrian women and children leaving the camps in cooperation with Damascus. As a co-chair, the EU will propose to use the Global Coalition to coordinate these efforts.

Ministers also discussed a range of other issues, including the situation in the Great Lakes, Western Balkans and Venezuela, but I will leave it here and take your questions.

Thank you.

Q&A

Q. My question is about the 20th package of sanctions, which was supposed to be adopted today, but was blocked by Hungary. How do you see the solution of this situation? Because Hungary insists for Ukraine to restart the transit of Russian oil to Europe. And will the EU just wait when this transit of Russian oil to Europe will be restarted? Or maybe there are some other means to push on Hungary to make them not demand this. Thank you.

We have seen this scenario already before. We have also seen that we have been able to achieve solutions together. We are doing the outreach on different levels to Hungarian and Slovakian colleagues to move on with this package. Of course, it is not easy. It is never easy, but the work continues. I really regret that we did not achieve an agreement today, considering that tomorrow is the sad anniversary of the start of this war, and we really need to send strong signals to Ukraine, that we keep on helping Ukraine, but also putting more pressure on Russia so that this war would stop.

Q. I want to pick up on this Hungarian veto. Well, double veto, because it also affects the 90 billion loan that EU leaders had agreed to provide to Ukraine in December. We all remember what happened back then. There was enhanced cooperation to exempt Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic from this loan. And despite this, Hungary has now blocked the loan at the very last stages. How do you qualify the attitude of Hungary, because several ministers have accused Hungary of electioneering, of doing this to score extra points ahead of the elections on the 12th of April. Do you share this view, and what else can you do right now to ensure that this life-saving assistance reaches Ukraine? Thank you.

We know that there are elections coming in Hungary, but it is very hard for me to see, considering and knowing the history of Hungary, that the people of Hungary would actually support not helping the people of Ukraine that are in need. I find it very hard to believe that it would bring you any bonus points in the elections. But of course, I do not know the Hungarian political climate. It is really regrettable that the decision that all countries reached in the European Council, all the leaders, that there is now stepping back from this decision. I know that President Costa and President von der Leyen are both in Kyiv tomorrow, and will definitely also raise this with Prime Minister Orbán, because it is not really in accordance with sincere cooperation clause that we have in the treaties.

Q. The key bone of contention here seems to be the Druzhba pipeline, its exact state and how quickly it can be repaired, and whether all efforts are being made to do that. High Representative, in your capacity as Vice President of the Commission, head of the EEAS, or with your Council hat on, do you have any information about the state of that pipeline, how quickly it can be repaired? And who is at fault here, if anyone?

Who is at fault is Russia, because they bombed the pipeline. And actually, not only the pipeline, but I think 80% of Ukrainian energy infrastructure. And I cannot really blame Ukrainians for repairing the energy infrastructure that their people need in minus 25 [degrees] to have warmth and electricity, that they are prioritising the people who are suffering from this over this pipeline that just takes cheap oil to other countries, that they are prioritising their own people. But who is to blame? Of course, if Russia had not started this war, we would not have these problems either. That is also very clear, and that is why we also need to go forward with sanctions to actually punish or pressure, Russia, for doing this and pressure them to stop doing this.

Q. High Representative, can you please first confirm whether there is such a document sent by you to all Member States, which includes, from the European perspective, all the concessions that Russia needs to make for a stable peace in in Ukraine? We learned that there is a special European request to ban Russian military presence and deployment in post-Soviet countries, including the Republic of Moldova. What is the likely, I mean, is this a break deal for Europe in negotiating the peace in Ukraine, and what is the likelihood for the withdrawal of the Russian troops to actually happen, taking into account Russia's lack of ability to keep its promises? Thank you.

Yes. Starting from where you finished, I counted at least 30 international agreements where they have agreed to different obligations that they are not following and I do not remember exactly when it was, a long time ago, when they agreed to withdraw the troops from the occupied territories in Moldova. But we also have the same in Georgia, in other parts. So yes, I have shared with the EU Member States the paper on the concessions that we should see from the Russian side. Of course, we need to discuss but if the first point would be that Russia would honour the obligations that they have already taken in the international agreements, then that would also refer to the territories that they have occupied and should withdraw their troops from.

Q. I have two questions, if I may. So one on this 90 billion package. I mean, the situation in Ukraine is quite dire. It is supposed to run out of money in April. Was there a discussion among ministers about a potential plan B, if Hungary refuses to drop its veto on this 90 billion package? That is the first question. And the second question, so obviously Marco Rubio gave that speech in Munich, and then he went to Bratislava, then he went to Budapest. He held his relationship with Orban and Fico. So, do you regard Hungary and Slovakia's behaviour as linked to that? Is that just correlation, or is there causation there? And one final question, actually, if I may. You have said that the Middle East does not need a new war. Are you in contact with Marco Rubio or counterparts in the US, are you attempting to dissuade them from attacking Iran? Because the build up there looks like some kind of military action might be imminent. Thank you very much.

Yes, well, we had a plan A that was using the Russian frozen assets. So, if that is now plan B, then maybe we should work on that. But, it was agreed to have this 90-billion-plan, it was

agreed in the European Council and we just work on Member States also respecting that agreement that was made at the leaders' level. But if that does not work, we can always go back to using frozen assets that we could do that faster. But it is true that we need to move fast on this, because Ukraine needs this help from our side.

I do not know if there is a connection with Marco Rubio's visit to Hungary and Slovakia, so I am not speculating on that.

On Iran, of course the talks are ongoing, and we are emphasising that there has to be this diplomatic approach. We are also in contact with the regional actors, but when it comes to America, then finally, it is the President that decides.

Q. The Spanish Minister is asking to lift the sanctions against the interim president in Venezuela, Delcy Rodriguez. How was this proposal received in the room? Is there a consensus among Member States? Do you see that [this] could happen anytime soon? We also hear that some Member States are asking for this relief to be tied to a benchmark or some condition. What is your personal assessment on that? Thank you.

Thank you. Yes, we had this discussion. We are seeing from the Venezuelan interim authorities some steps also regarding Europe. For example, the release of the European political prisoners that were there. So, as we are discussing and will discuss in the future also what is our new approach to Venezuela, I see these two tracks. I will propose that we will lift the sanctions on Delcy Rodriguez as the current interim President in office. Whether we have consensus then, we will see. We do not know that yet, before we have not had the proposal on the table. Then, the other track; we should have a broader discussion on what is our new approach to Venezuelan authorities. And there I can see that we could have benchmarks, what we want to see on the Venezuelan side, so that we also make steps on our side.

Q. A couple of questions on Palestine, and one on Iran. On Palestine, after the meeting of the discussion with Mr. Mladenov, do you have now a practical sense how the European Union is going to participate in the early recovery in Gaza? On the West Bank, you said yourself earlier that what is going on in the West Bank is a violation of international law. The situation is ongoing since at least 2023. What is the idea that, or the sense that European Union seems unable, not willing, uncapable of getting a practical and decisive step towards Israel, to be convinced to, because what they are doing there is undermining the two-state solution. And on Iran, you spoke about that the war could lead to consequences which will be hard to control. What do you have in mind? Are you thinking about regional instability, regional war? Do you have in mind migration flows from Afghanistan, Iran to the region and to Europe?

Thank you. So, we had Nikolay Mladenov, but we also had the administrator of the UN Development Programme, who was just in Gaza. He was giving us the overview of having been there, what does it really look like. Both of them were stressing that the needs for early

recovery are also enormous because the destruction there, and the suffering of people is very, very big. So, what we can offer to the table, or what we can bring to the table is, of course, humanitarian aid that is needed. But for that, it also needs to get through the crossing points. And really the things that they need, Mladenov was very clear about what is needed for the Palestinians: not tents, but actually housing in a better version, because tents do not really help the people. And also, materials for education for the children, and there was a long list. So, humanitarian aid is definitely something where European countries can come in. The other part is the EUPOL COPPS mission that we have, that has experience in training the Palestinian police and could do this. We are ready to do this together with Jordan and Egypt, but we also need the approval from the Israeli side. And it was good to hear from Mladenov, who is really right now trying to improve the situation, that he sees the same way that actually they also need us there contributing.

When it comes to the West Bank, then the problem is the same that we have with Ukraine. 26 countries want sanctions on the violent settlers, it has been on the table for quite some time, and one does not want. So, this is clearly the problem that we have in our decision-making processes, because it is not the majority view. And when one is blocking, then we do not do what the majority wants, but actually we are doing what this one country wants.

When it comes to Iran, the question is the risk of retaliation and that is why I also stressed before the worries that we have regarding Iran's ballistic missile programme. Because, if you think about the nuclear programme, there has been some kind of monitoring on what is going on, but when it comes to the ballistic missile programme, that is very dangerous for the countries around Iran. But also, considering how far they reach, it is also a threat to Europe. When it comes to other issues that we have with Iran, then the worry is that this will not be a conflict or war that is going to be on a smaller scale. That is also the message that we get from the regional actors there.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/media/video/I-285221

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