European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas after the meeting

2025-05-20 · Brussels, 20/05/2025 · EEAS Press Team

Check against delivery!

Good evening, everybody,

We had a very intense day. First, we started with the Foreign Affairs Council on Defence and then we had the Foreign Ministers when we [discussed] a wide range of topics.

So, four points. First, the first discussion on Ukraine. Our top priority remains a full and unconditional ceasefire.

Ukraine agreed to it over 60 days ago already, but instead of seeking peace Russia is still playing games and Russia has escalated its attacks. The only option is to put more pressure on Russia to negotiate seriously.

Today, we adopted another sanctions package. This package is also targeting Moscow's shadow fleet, among others. And we also had the discussion. We had David O'Sullivan, and we had also Daniel Markić showing how the sanctions are affecting Russia's economy. So, the impact on Russia's economy, of the sanctions, is significant, and they hamper Russia's capacity to wage the war. The effect on the European economy is limited because we have diversified our energy resources.

Ministers asked also for a fast progress on the next round of sanctions. We have said, many countries have said, if Russia does not agree to full an unconditional ceasefire, there will be more pressure. And of course, working on the next package of sanctions is the pressure we can put [on].

We also discussed the contributions to security guarantees given to Ukraine and what more can we do also on the European level in this regard.

[The] second discussion was about European defence. EU leaders have set out the priority areas. Now we have to translate these into real capabilities and we have put forward proposals also how to find funding and how to really increase the leverage that the Member States can use - the financial leverage. And also, the discussion was about how we can work together and how we can do the procurements together. And we need the progress by [the] European Council [in June]. Just to remind you, it is also together with NATO's Summit.

I'm also pleased to announce that the 5,000 European troops, part of the [EU] Rapid Deployment Capacity are now operational. And this will allow Europe to act faster when crises erupt.

Then third, we had a very intensive discussion on the Middle East. The situation in Gaza is catastrophic. The aid that Israel has allowed in is, of course, welcomed, but it is a drop in the ocean.

Aid must flow immediately without obstruction and at scale because this is what is needed. I have made these points also [during] my talks with Israelis. I have had talks with [the] UN and the regional leaders as well. Pressure is necessary to change the situation.

It is clear from today's discussion that there is a strong majority in favour of [the] review of Article 2 of our Association Agreement with Israel. So, we will launch this exercise and, in the meantime, it is up to Israel to unblock the humanitarian aid. Saving lives must be our top priority.

On Syria, Ministers agreed to lift all economic sanctions while maintaining those related to Assad’s regime and human rights violations. This decision is reversible and conditional also on progress. There can be no peace without the path to economic recovery, and we all need a stable Syria. Is everything ideal there? No, it is not. It is very clear. But I think we need to give the Syrian people a chance.

Then, we also discussed the situation in Da’esh camps in addition to ongoing fights, work on [the] fight to radicalisation. A financial package worth of €18 million will go towards improving the conditions in the camps.

And finally, in a time of growing, unfiltered content, independent journalism is more important than ever. And that is why I am pleased to announce that we are preparing a € 5.5 million contract with the European Endowment for Democracy, and this will support the vital work of Radio Free Europe. It is [a] short-term, emergency funding designed for the safety net for the independent journalism.

I am happy to take your questions now.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-272078

Q&A.

Q. European leaders keep saying that they want to strike some sanctions against Russia. Some of them even mentioned massive sanctions. You mentioned the 17th package. But we all know that this package has been in discussion for a long time, way before the necessity of imposing more sanctions was raised by some leaders. So, could you give us some more details on this sanctions’ package? What kind of sanctions could be really a game changer for Russia?

It is true that the 17th package was already in process, but it is not a long-time process – I think our last package was [adopted] in February, if I remember correctly, and now we are in May. The announcements of countries [which] say to put more pressure on Russia, after it is clear that they [Russia] do not want peace and do not agree to unconditional ceasefire. We have to put more pressure on Russia. It was last week, and it is something that we are working on. So, the strongest [element] of this [upcoming] package is, of course, energy. The oil price cap is something that has a clear effect on Russia's economy. President von der Leyen has pointed out what is there regarding Nord Stream – it is more for the future, that is true. There are also discussions about banking services. But I think the most important is the oil price cap, because what we heard today from the intelligence [reporting] was that Russia's economy is not doing well. And so far, they have been able to cover this with propaganda saying that the economy is actually rising, and there is nothing to see here, but now they cannot even cover it with the propaganda anymore, and they are saying that it is in stagnation. So, energy is a big part of Russia's National Fund, which is almost completely depleted. If we can put more pressure there, then it would also be the pressure that might help to end this war.

Q. Madame High Representative, regarding the decision on Syria, do we understand that, in your view, Syria is in the right direction, the right track? And this decision of lifting the sanctions, is it also a consequence of the historical one that Mr Trump took last week in Riyadh? About Israel, is there any deadline for the reviewing of the Association Agreement? Let's say next FAC?

First on Syria, like I said: is everything going very well? No, it is not. But I think we have two choices: either we give Syrian people a chance, that they have, services, they have jobs, and their salaries could be paid so that there is less radicalization in Syria, or we do not give that opportunity, and then we also do not have any say on the human rights and all the issues that actually worry us. [When it] comes to Syria, I think we have been very well cooperating with our regional partners, also because they have their eyes and ears on the ground, whether these things are going to the right direction or not. And when we all keep together, I think we can have a lot of influence. When it comes to your other question then, I must say that we as European Union are not as good at selling all these decisions we have made, because you have been here in the press room as well, and you know that we have been working on relief of sanctions already from January. So, we did the first package then - think it was February, but I might be wrong, but anyway, in the beginning of the year – and we have been working on the technical details. It is true [that] in the European Union, it takes much more time, because we are 27, we have very intensive discussions. It is maybe easier in some countries when you only have one person who makes the decisions. But I think I am proud that we have been able to reach [an] agreement today. On the Association Agreement, [on] the review, we are launching this exercise, and in the meantime, [I] really [hope] that the humanitarian aid is unblocked and the situation will become better. Thank you.

Q. The President of the United States, Trump, said that he does not want to impose a new sanction against Russia, but today, you adopted new package of sanctions. The Ukrainian Minister and his EU colleagues said that it is very important to coordinate sanction policy with United States. What is your decision today, coordinated with Washington? And do you coordinate sanctions with United States? On top of this, what do you think about the sanctions initiative spearheaded by the US Senator Lindsey Graham?

I think first we are coordinating with a lot of partners outside European Union also – because then we have stronger pressure if everybody agrees and wants to really end this war. So, we are cooperating and coordinating with a lot of partners. When it comes to the proposal by Senator Graham, I think it is a very strong proposal, and it shows that there are also people thinking this similar way, in [the] United States.

Q. First, one on Russia. You have received a letter from 15 Member States asking you to renew relations with Russia's closest allies – and one of these is, of course, China. There is a lot of speculation lately about a possible reset of EU-China relations. Do you support this possible reset and do you think the conditions are right for it? Second, on Israel, the decision to launch the review. Can you tell us a bit more how many Member States were in favour? What are the next steps? What is the timeframe and if you think it is a political signal, strong enough?

First, on China. We have the discussion on China coming up in June in [the] Foreign Affairs Council. So, I would not run ahead of the curve here, but really try to listen the positions of Member States [on] China. We are in this turbulent and changing war world, and we need to listen what are the views around the table to put together a common position.

Then, when it comes to the Association Agreement and the discussion around that, I will not say numbers, and I will not say Member States, but I can say it was a huge majority for this. I think what it tells [us] is that the countries see that the situation in Gaza is untenable, and what we want is to really help the people. What we want is to unblock the humanitarian aid so that it will reach the people. The trucks are behind the borders. There are thousands of trucks. And like I said, the 100 trucks that came in are a welcome step, but it is not enough, because the needs are much, much bigger. This humanitarian aid is very much financed by the European Union, and that is why the Member States are also very keen on sending this message that the suffering of the people is untenable. Thank you.

Q. I would like to come back to the 18th package of sanctions. What is your prediction on when it may be adopted? You said fast track. You said it will be quick. Will it be during the Polish Presidency or Danish presidency? Because if it will be strong, some countries, some Member States, may block it, as, for example, Hungary is blocking Ukrainian accession. And this is my second question. It is not the topic of the discussion, but today, in the morning, we saw Marta Kos, who also participated in the meeting, and she was talking about the necessity

of opening the first cluster with Ukraine. Are there any news? What did you discuss with Marta Kos? Maybe Hungary is moving forward in this question, or no?

The work is already ongoing, but can I tell when we will be ready? I cannot tell it now. It always is one Member State [saying] “this is not going”, the other one is saying, “we need to find something else.” So these are always very intense debates. I cannot estimate how long it will take, but if the necessity and needs from the Member States are there to move fast, to send a strong signal, to put the pressure that also Russia wants to end this war, then we need to move fast. On enlargement, there were many Member States around the table who were pointing out that we need to move on with enlargement and unblock the opening of clusters. We are working on that – and definitely, the enlargement commissioner is doing a great job.

Q. Just coming back to the Association Agreement and a discussion on Middle East. Were there any discussions on sanctions against Israeli Ministers, for instance, or settlers or anything else?

Yes, the sanctions on settlers. It is prepared. We have had those discussions, but unfortunately, it was blocked by one Member State.

Q. My question is about the oil cap. Today, Andrii Sybiha asked to decrease the oil cap till $30 per bar. Now it's 60. Before, Reuters, I think, wrote that the EU wants to decrease it till $50. Do you think it is realistic? Without the United States, how realistic do you think it is? And if you can elaborate a little bit about Radio Free Europe, how it will work, when they will receive this money.

So, oil price cap. Just to recall, when we first agreed the oil price cap, the agreement was, between all the parties, that it will be: if the market price goes down, then [the cap] is always lower than the market price. That was the initial agreement by all parties. Now, when the price actually got down, we did not do this step of having it lowered. And then we had the US also on board. Right now, I know that in this big package of sanctions that the Senate is preparing, there is also the oil price cap, so the necessity is there. But can I predict how it is going? I cannot, because the work is ongoing.

On Radio Free Europe, if we look at the total amount of funding that they have for operating all across the globe, then it is clear that Europe cannot step in with all this funding that is necessary. Our focus should be really to help Radio Free Europe to work and function in those countries that are in our neighbourhood and that are very much dependent on news coming from outside on Radio Free Europe – whether it is Caucasus, whether it is Central Asia. So, to have it functioning. Like I said, it is the short-term financing. We need also Member States to come in to find solutions for the long-term financing. But when we had the discussion with the commissioners also about the foreign aid withdrawal by the United States and where we step in, the discussion was about being strategic. We gathered from the Member States what are these strategic areas, where we come in with the European money,

because we cannot fill the void with everything. One of those was free media. So, this goes in line with those understandings from the Member States.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-272530

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-kaja-kallas-after-meeting-2_en