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Foreign Affairs Council: Press conference by High Representative Kaja Kallas

Brussels

EEAS Press Team

Check against delivery!

Good afternoon,

We had a productive meeting, and we have two more productive meetings coming up.

First, Western Balkans. The Western Balkans is a strategic priority for the EU and this morning we met with our counterparts from the Western Balkans to discuss different issues. Ministers gave their political endorsement to deepen cooperation with our Western Balkans partners on foreign, security and defence matters.

Concretely, this means more EU support against hybrid threats and disinformation. A new Security and Defence Partnership with Montenegro. And greater use of the European Peace Facility to boost our partners’ defence capabilities.

But it is clear that partnerships go both ways. In turn, we expect further reforms, respect for the rule of law, and clear alignment with EU foreign policy. The Western Balkans belong in the European Union. And the steps we lined up today are geared towards this goal.

On Bosnia and Herzegovina, we discussed the announced resignation of the High Representative Schmidt. Ministers agree that it is the EU’s interest not to let the country slip off its EU path, and that we have to stick together in finding a successor.

On Ukraine, we had a substantive discussion with Foreign Minister Sybiha. The 90-billion-euro loan, Moscow’s record battlefield losses, Ukraine’s deep strikes into Russia, and Moscow's shrinking military parade show that the dynamics of the war are changing. Ukraine is in a much better position than a year ago, but of course there is no time for complacency.

Today, we took several steps.

First, Ministers adopted a strengthened mandate for the EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine. This will allow our mission to step up against hybrid threats and support the reintegration of veterans.

Second, we are also advancing work on EU security guarantees for the time of truce. This includes strengthening the EU Satellite Centre, so it could support ceasefire monitoring but also countering sanctions circumvention.

Third, we are drawing up sanctions to cut off the Kremlin’s revenue streams.

Ministers also addressed the issue of peace negotiations. In coordination with Ukraine, EU has always supported attempts to achieve a just and lasting peace. For Europe to take a more active role, we must agree among ourselves what we want to talk to Russia about, and what are our red lines. The upcoming Gymnich meeting will be an opportunity to have this discussion.

All these issues are linked to a broader principle. There can be no just and lasting peace without accountability for Russia. The EU will formally join the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression this week. Today, Ministers gave their green light for the EU to become party to the International Claims Commission.

Of all the horrors inflicted by Russia’s war, the abduction of Ukrainian children is one of its worst. Stealing children is a calculated Russian attack on Ukraine’s future. In response, Ministers today adopted 23 new listings targeting those responsible. After this press conference, I will co-host a meeting of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children where we will discuss what more we can do. The aim must be to return every child that has been stolen by Russia.

Ministers also discussed Ukraine’s accession. Ukraine has made remarkable reform progress under the most difficult circumstances. There is now new momentum, and we must use it to advance Ukraine’s path into the EU. This means opening all negotiation clusters before summer.

Getting Ukraine into the EU is not charity, it is an investment into our own security. Our message to Putin is clear: Ukraine’s European future is more important to us than the destruction of Ukraine is to Russia.

On the Middle East, Ministers agree that we need to strengthen cooperation with our Gulf partners in the wake of the Iran war. We will accelerate work on Strategic Partnership Agreements with all six Gulf Cooperation Countries, and we are ready to frontload our security and defence cooperation.

In the Strait of Hormuz, the ceasefire is under heavy strain, following Iran’s recent strikes in the region. Tehran’s hardliner grip on the world’s most important energy shipping lane is untenable. The EU is expanding its Iran sanctions to also include those responsible for obstructing freedom of navigation.

We discussed also strengthening the Operation ASPIDES, which is a naval mission and which can contribute to the freedom of navigation. This could also be our contribution to the Coalition of the Willing by France and the UK. The EU can also bring decades of hard-earned experience from nuclear talks Iran, should they resume.

In Gaza, the humanitarian situation remains dire. Talks have stalled between Israel and Hamas, and Hamas is refusing to give up its weapons and that increases the odds of a new war.

But we have also seen the surge of settler violence in the West Bank. Today, we reached a political agreement to sanction Israeli extremist settlers and entities. This goes together with new sanctions on leading Hamas figures. This means that we move from the political deadlock that was there for a long time. Violence and extremism carry consequences.

Also, we had discussions on the trade issues, limiting trade with illegal Israeli settlements. So, there was also a call by many Member States to take this forward. So, we will continue to work with the Commission on presenting proposals.

On Syria, Ministers decided on the full resumption of the cooperation agreement which had been partly suspended under the Assad regime. This is an important political signal in the normalisation of EU-Syria relations. We also agreed to lift sanctions on Syria’s Interior and Defence [Ministries].

Later today, we will also host the High-Level Political Dialogue with Syria. The EU moved fast to support the political transition and reconstruction after the Assad regime fell, and today we are ready to take the next steps. At the same time, we expect to see continued progress on an inclusive and legitimate political transition by the Syrian authorities.

We also had the Canadian Foreign Minister with us today. Canada is the most European of all non-European countries in the world and amid the chaos in the world, Canada and the EU can be a stabilising force in foreign policy and trade.

I stop here and take your questions.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/video/I-289315

Q&A

Q. Ukrainian minister and you said before meeting that there is need to strengthen the participation of EU in negotiation. And what is the decision today on this topic, and could you personally participate in in this negotiation instead of maybe Gerhard Schröder?

First, on the need of participation. As I said, we were discussing that before we talk to the Russians, we should agree and talk amongst ourselves what we want to talk to the Russians about. And that is why I have presented also a list of

requests, concessions that we need to see from the Russian side already some months ago, and we will discuss this in Gymnich. On your other question: for half of my working life, I have been a lawyer, partner in a law firm, participating in a lot of negotiations. And the difference between politics and private sector is that in private sector, if you are a good lawyer or negotiator, you do not have to tell yourself, because others are telling this. But in politics, you have to, like George W. Bush said: “When a politician does not toot his own horn, the horn usually remains untooted.” So, I have to say, I think I could see through the traps that Russia is presenting. But of course, we are not there in entering the negotiations in any way right now. We do not see that Russia is really negotiating in good faith at all. And first we have the discussion with the Member States on what we want to see Russia conceding as well.

Q. I have a question about the 21st package of sanctions, but before, a small clarification, what you said about opening the clusters before summer? Did you mean Ukrainian summer or European summer? Because in Ukraine, the summer starts on the first of June. And on clusters, what you are you predicting have to be in this new 21st package. What will hit Russia, mostly, and would you insist on maritime services ban which was not included in the 20th package. Thank you.

Thank you. On the summer, actually, in the morning, we had the same discussion, because there was, like something is supposed to happen before summer and I said, that is in two weeks. But actually, apparently, European summer is August, so let us see. But on the 21st package, There is a call for the Member States to put forward proposals. So we are targeting the military industrial complex of Russia and of course, Member States can put forward ideas on shadow fleet as well. But as we agreed last time that we are putting the sanctions on a rolling basis, not gathering a big package together, but just on a rolling basis, when we see that this could actually achieve our goal, which is to deprive Russia of the funding to finance this war.

Q. On the Western Balkans, what was the focus of discussion? Security was mentioned, and Russian influence as well. Are all countries of the region really willing to fight this influence, because we have Serbia, that is, apart from refusing to implement sanctions, Serbia is being used by Russia to influence the rest of the region. And additional question on the resignation of Mr. Schmidt, do you see the possibility for further institutional complications in a country which is even now complicated in the functioning of institutions, and how could you proceed with choosing a successor, knowing that on this you have to discuss, also with Russia.

So first, yes, we discussed the security and defence cooperation because the Western Balkans are also worried about the hybrid attacks that they see in their societies, and exchange of views of our practices that we have already had with Moldova, that we are now using with Armenia as well, [is] helping them to really be resilient to these attacks. Foreign malign influence is one of the issues. Of course, you know very well that all the Western Balkan countries are

different, and they also have a different view, and that is very much reflected in the alignment of Common Foreign Security Policy. For some of the countries, it is 100% aligned also sanctions, which are hard. For some others, it is much lower. Member States were also expressing that they expect all the countries to move on the European track, to be fully aligned with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, because in this geopolitical times that we are living, it is not a box-ticking exercise, but it is actually showing whether you see the world in a similar way.

And on Christian Schmidt, of course, the question is maybe a bit rhetorical question, but the operation, functioning of this country, can it get more complicated? But I think it actually can. So that is why we were discussing how we are supporting that the new High Representative is appointed by the Peace Implementation Council that is supposed to take place I think in June, but this is the format that Europe is supporting.

Q. Just a quick follow up on Ukraine, if I may, Putin suggested that for the first time that the war could be coming to an end. Do you think he has finally understood that Russia cannot outlast Ukraine, and that is ready to negotiate in earnest. And second question on the Middle East, on Israel, you have just announced some sanctions against settlers. But for many Member States, it is not enough, and they want EU to go further, especially on trade - trade from the settlements. And some asked for a proposal from the Commission. Why don't we see this proposal on the table at the FAC?

Yes, we were analysing also what do these messages by Putin mean. Because it is different than he has said before. And I think the overall understanding is that Putin is in a weaker position than he has ever been before. We see that they are losing on the battlefield a lot of lives. There is growing discontent in the Russian society. That is why they are also turning off the internet that people could not access the actual news. That is why, also their deep strikes that Ukraine has made, have made really an impact. The support for Putin's war is going down. We see also influencers expressing this more. So, I think it all shows that actually really Putin is not standing that strong, but what we are not in the point where actually they would genuinely negotiate, because they are still presenting maximum claims, and that is why we need to continue with our work.

On your second question, yes, it is true that many Member States want more. There are also many Member States who do not want more. So, this is where we are, but I am happy that we were able to put sanctions on the violent settlers, and agree on that today, because it has been on the table for quite some time.

Q. I just have a very quick follow up, because he did mention that some states were expecting a proposal today, and if I recall correctly, at the last FAC, you said you would carry the French-Swedish proposal to your colleague at the Commission and come back with a proposal. So why did you mention this

morning at your doorstep that on Friday you discuss the possible measures with EU ambassadors, but there was no qualified majority? But why wait until Friday and why not come today with a proposal?

Maybe you do not know, because it is logical that High Representative should also deal with trade, but it is not my portfolio. So, it is Commission's initiative, and every Commissioner has their portfolio. Immediately after the last FAC, we also had the Commission. I raised this issue that Member States want this proposal. I asked this, but the proposal is not there, and I cannot draft it.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/video/I-289293

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