European External Action Service (EEAS)

Foreign Affairs Council: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference

2020-10-12 · Luxembourg

Check against delivery!

Good afternoon, we have had a packed agenda today. I will try to summarise the most pressing issues from our discussions.

First, on Nagorno Karabakh, we heard the assessment from the French Foreign Minister [Jean-Yves Le Drian] on the efforts of the Co-Chairs of the [OSCE] Minsk Group to stop the hostilities and to return to the negotiations. We discussed how we could provide tangible support to the ceasefire agreed on 10 October. We stressed the importance that this ceasefire be respected. Ministers [of Foreign Affairs] also stressed that all regional actors should contribute to stopping the armed confrontation and contribute to peace.

On Varosha and the most recent Navtex issued by Turkey, we have had a discussion, listening to our colleagues from Greece and Cyprus on the last events. We consider that the reopening of Varosha beach undermines mutual trust. Ministers [of Foreign Affairs] stressed that such actions increase tensions and should be reversed.

For us, it is of vital importance that the United Nations-led efforts on Cyprus settlement are relaunched as soon as possible. Yesterday was the first round of the elections in the Turkish-Cypriot community in the island and, as soon as these elections have been concluded, - I think there is going to be a second round, if my information is correct - next Sunday, we will support the United Nations to resume the Cyprus settlement as soon as possible, which is the framework to deal with many issues.

We consider that Turkey needs to engage actively in finding solutions and not to engage in negative behaviour.

The latest Navtex announcements by Turkey affecting Greek and Cypriot maritime zones are also regrettable. This will lead to new tensions instead of contributing to the de-escalation efforts that we were calling for at the last European Union Council, and that we want to pursue and continue to call for.

On the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, our EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák informed the Council [of the developments], and we remain determined to bring the dialogue to a successful conclusion, asking the parties to work in good faith and in a spirit of compromise between the two of them.

The success of this dialogue is key for the stability of the Western Balkans and for the EU itself. The [Foreign Affairs] Council expressed full support and unity for this work and strong support for the work of Mr [Miroslav] Lajčák.

On Belarus, I briefed the Ministers [of Foreign Affairs] on my phone call with the Minister [of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir] Makei last Friday. I was in Ethiopia, but I could join Minister Makei and I had a conversation with him. I told him that the EU is united in the support of democratic freedoms and rights of Belarusian citizens. I stressed that we are ready to engage and encouraged an inclusive national dialogue, as well as the acceptance of the OSCE's mediation role.

Today, Ministers [of Foreign Affairs] reconfirmed that Mr [Aleksandr] Lukashenko lacks any democratic legitimacy and gave their political green light to start preparing the next sanctions package, which will include [Aleksandr] Lukashenko himself.

Council Conclusions on Belarus were adopted today. They send a clear message to the Belarussian authorities, saying that 'business as usual' is no longer possible in our relations. The Conclusions also include a very concrete package that the EU is ready to offer for a new democratic Belarus.

On Russia, we reaffirmed the continued relevance of the five guiding principles decided in 2016. We insisted in the full implementation of the Minsk agreements, we consider it as a key condition for any substantial change in our EU-Russia relations.

We also need to step up our support to Russian civil society, human rights defenders and continue to foster building bridges between our people.

We have discussed possible elements of a strong EU common response to the use of a prohibited chemical nerve agent and implement the proposals made by France and Germany about restrictive measures against those linked to the assassination attempt [of Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny]. There has been a political agreement to implement these restrictive measures, that will be done by the technical bodies of the Council.

Finally, during lunch, we had a discussion on our relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean. I think that there is a shared sense of urgency of the need to relaunch our inter-regional dialogue, given the economic and geopolitical importance of Latin America for Europe and we discussed about how to do so.

In particular, we talked about the Mercosur agreement, which is much more than a trade deal and we noted the recent vote at the European Parliament about this issue. We are ready to

help our Latin-American and Caribbean partners to address all the political and socio-economic challenges and, in addition to that, the environmental issue, which is one of the most important topics in our relationship, taking into account the importance of the Amazon, as the lung of the world.

We are ready to pursue together ambitious environmental and digital policies. I reminded my colleagues that European Union firms have invested more in Latin America than in Russia, China, India and Japan together, which is quite amazing and that together, we represent one third of the votes at the United Nations. This is a good example of how important our economic relations are and how important our political relationship is. We have to continue building on and developing this political strength.

It was just by accident that this discussion on Latin America has taken place on 12 October, which is the National day of Spain, in which we celebrate the arrival of [Christopher] Columbus to the “new” continent. It was just by accident, it was not made on purpose. But it is a good sign of a strong relationship from a cultural, linguistic and human point of view.

Thank you.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-196279

Q&A

Q. On Turkey, it has been less than 15 days since the European Council, but as you mentioned, Turkey is not contributing to de-escalation. On the contrary, it keeps its provocative actions. Practically, how is the European Union going to react from now on since Ankara does not behave like a country that is in favour of de-escalation and in favour of respecting European Union rules?

The European Council already dealt with the relationship between the European Union and Turkey and it is going to take stock again this week about the recent events. It is up to the European Council to decide how to react to this.

On the last meeting of the European Union Council, it was said that at the end of the year we are going to have a complete assessment of our relationship with Turkey, depending on the hope that Turkey will stop implementing activities that can jeopardise this relationship. Until now this has not been the case and this most recent news about a new Navtex will be considered at the European Council next week.

Q. Russia and Syria are planning to hold a conference next month about the return of Syrian refugees to the country. European Union counties were invited to attend. What is your view on this conference?

Any return of refugees to Syria - we have already said this many times - everybody wants the refugees to go back home, but these returns must be safe, voluntary and dignified, in line

with the parameters defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The conditions inside Syria do not fulfil these minimum requirements. I think everybody agrees on that. This was also agreed at the fourth Brussels Conference for Syria and the region that I had the honour to chair at the end of June. So we consider the Russian initiative as premature. We also think that the UNHCR should be fully associated to such initiatives in the future. We are not opposed to exploring the important issue of refugees' returns, but it has to be on the basis of agreed parameters and in close coordination with the United Nations.

Q: On Belarus. For almost two months you have maintained this claim that the European Union does not want to sanction personally Lukashenko in order to leave a possibility for dialogue. Now you say that Lukashenko will be sanctioned. Does it mean you do not believe that Lukashenko is ready or open for dialogue? What has changed and what is your message on this?

The adding of new names to the list approved by the European Council at its last meeting is an answer to the evolving situation in Belarus. Yesterday, on Sunday [11 October], we saw again a strong and disproportionate response to the demonstrators. There has not been any signal from the Belarus authorities to engage in any kind of conversation, in any kind of talks - they have not accepted the OSCE mission. I had the opportunity to talk about it with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. A set of countries has proposed a new set of names, among them [Aleksandr] Lukashenko himself, and all members [of the Foreign Affairs Council] accepted this proposal, understanding that what has happened since the last listings shows a complete lack of will on Lukashenko's side to engage in negotiations, contacts, anything that could bring a democratic and peaceful solution to the situation in Belarus.

Q: On Russia, can you explain a little bit more about these sanctions on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny?

I cannot provide more details. The technical bodies of the Council will deal with the list provided by France and Germany, with evidence also provided by these two countries. There was a complete acceptance by all Member States. No one showed any kind of reluctance, everybody was supporting this proposal, and now the technical bodies of the Council will proceed with the practical implementation.

Q. On the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, could you please tell us a bit more on the content of the debate among Ministers? Is it correct to say that the dialogue is going through a kind of crisis as the two sides cannot agree on the topics to discuss and how to move on with the discussions? On the European perspective for both sides, as the dialogue and the European perspective are closely linked, Mr [Miroslav] Lajčák ahead of this meeting said that he wanted to hear from Ministers how they see the European perspective for Serbia and Kosovo. He also said that some far-reaching decisions from Serbia are expected related to Kosovo and

that President [of Serbia, Aleksandar] Vučić is asking the ultimate question: is Europe ready to provide concrete European perspective in return? What would be your view?

This is a complex process. This dialogue is not easy. I have been witnessing how emotional it is from both parts. But nevertheless, the talks continue.

We have had have three high-level meetings with the President of Serbia [Aleksandar Vučić] and the Prime Minister of Kosovo [Avdullah Hoti]. I witnessed that this is not always easy, but both sides declared their readiness to advance the talks, in spite of the painful and complex issues at hand.

For the time being, I do not have any other news about it. Both leaders have confirmed that they attach the highest priority to the European Union integration and they know that to find a solution – whatever it can be - to the Belgrade-Pristina conflict, is a necessary condition on their way to the European Union. That is clear.

We are acting as facilitator of this dialogue. But at the same time we know that we are the only one who has the capacity of levering this process, because the European perspective is something that has to be granted by the European Union.

I personally strongly believe that reaching a final agreement is a matter of months, not years, provided that both parties engage constructively. We are not prescribing, we are just facilitating. We do not intend to speed it up artificially, but we do not want it to drag on. There are agreements that have to be implemented and others that have to be agreed.

We know very well that there is only one dialogue that is led by us - by the European Union. We welcome all initiatives and support to the European Union-facilitated dialogue. We welcome the United States as an important partner. But the facilitator and the one who is taking care of the process is the European Union.

I want to say that the representatives of countries aspiring to join the European Union should fulfil their obligation to foster good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation. This is an obligation, to foster good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation on the way to the European Union membership.

Politicians should lead by example in choosing to work together and promoting a climate of mutual trust, respect and understanding. If this happens, the prospect to join the European Union will be there. But every country has to be judged according to its own merits. The access to the European Union is a clear perspective for the Balkans countries - for all of them - and in the case of Serbia and Kosovo, it is this specific and very concrete issue that has to be solved by the negotiations that we are very happy are taking place.

Q. There is a political agreement now to sanction Mr Lukashenko but we remember there were lots of political agreements on Belarus sanctions already in August and it took until October to get the sanctions. Are you more confident this time that there will actually be

implementation instead of just a political agreement on sanctions? You will speak to Mr Sergei Lavrov [Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia] later today, what will be your message to him because he has fingers in a lot of pies that you were discussing today?

We are going to talk about the state of play of the European Union and Russia relations, you can imagine it is a broad subject.

About Belarus - the question was whether I am confident that it will not take 3 months? Yes, I am confident. The structural obstacle for the implementation of sanctions has been overcome.

Q. On Russia, the European Union has decided today to go ahead with sanctions on Navalny, on the attempted murder of the leading opposition politician in Russia with chemical weapons. Yet, everything else stays the same: the EU reaffirms its five principles that it has had for years, economic sanctions stay the same, Mr Macron continues his high-level dialogue with President Putin and insists that it is going to carry on. At what point do we give away any serious red lines or credibility with Russia when the fundamentals of our relationship do not change even when something like the Navalny poisoning happens? How does it look credible?

Each case requires its own answer. The sanctions are related to a specific subject - the poisoning of Mr Navalny. But we have other dimensions in our relationship with Russia.

We take sanctions for one specific and concrete event. But at the same time, we have to talk about the implementation of the Minsk agreements, we have to strengthen our resilience, we have to selectively engage with Russia in foreign policy issues where we have a specific interest. All these things remain.

The whole world cannot be reduced to this unhappy event of the poisoning of Mr Navalny. This has a concrete answer, but it does not prevent the rest of the issues from being taken into consideration.

Russia is one of the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group to deal with the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, so President Macron has to talk with President Putin if we want to work within the framework of the Minsk Group in order to look for a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. We are not going to stop doing that due to the Navalny sanctions.

Q. What does it mean when you are talking about intended recalibration of bilateral financial assistance to Belarus? Does that refer to the €50 million of corona aid that was promised to Belarus to deal with the pandemic?

What we mean by that is that we will try to make sure that our financial resources go directly to the people of Belarus, and try to avoid that these resources flow through governmental channels. This is also good for the resources allocated to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. We will try to help the Belarusian people. To do that, we would like to go directly to

civil society organisations, trying to avoid to go through the governmental channels because we think it is much better and safer for the implementation of our support to go directly to the recipients. That is what we mean by recalibration - or refocusing, reflowing, redirecting. You can choose different words but this is the meaning.

Q. Did your Greek and Cypriot colleagues, or more specifically the Greek Foreign Affairs Minister, explain why the exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey did not begin already? It has been a while since it has been announced, but they are not yet in place, they are not discussing. Why is that? And did they also offer some kind of explanation on the reasoning behind Turkey's new actions? Why are they doing it? For instance in Varosha, maybe it is something that has to do with the elections in the Turkish Cypriot community?

I personally do not know. I know that the talks are in a preparatory process. There are contacts at the level of diplomatic advisors. They have not started officially, but I know that at least until yesterday there were preparatory talks. I wonder what is going to happen after the Navtex announcement by Turkey, which is not going to help for sure, but let us hope that it is going to continue in spite of that.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-196280

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