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

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We had a very intensive Foreign Affairs Council - a lot of talks, very important topics. That is why we are also running over time, so sorry for that. Then, we have the Syria conference coming, so unfortunately, I cannot take a lot of questions. I will try to be brief so there is more room for questions.

First on Ukraine: there is broad political support for [the] defence initiative of [€]40 billion. Of course, right now the discussion is in the details. [In the] last European Council we had the wording that we need to move swiftly with this initiative, and we have done some more work on this. So, hopefully I will be able to really move on because everybody understood, around the table, that we should really show our resolve right now and support Ukraine so that they can defend themselves.

Then, of course the Jeddah talks. Everybody welcomed the results of the Jeddah talks. And now the ball is in Russia's court than what we see right now that Russia really does not want peace. Also, what was [the] understanding around the around the table is that Russia cannot really be trusted. They will seize this opportunity to present all kinds of demands. And what we already see, they are presenting demands that are their ultimate goals. So, let's see how this develops further.

Then, we discussed the Middle East; and particularly the situation in Gaza, but also Syria and Iran. So, on Gaza, everybody condemned the politicisation of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid has to reach the people in need in Gaza, and we were also welcoming the Arab peace plan or Arab reconstruction plan for Gaza. Of course, there are elements that need to be discussed further. What is very important for the EU is that Hamas does not have any future role in the rebuilding of Gaza.

When it comes to Syria, we have the 9th Syria Brussels conference today, where we will hear a lot of pledges, and of course we were discussing the situation and the violence against the people in Syria. This is a very worrying development. And so, we had the intelligence brief: how to really read the situation? So basically, there we have the possibility to either continue with the ease of sanctions because if the people are not able to work and develop their prosperity there, it is going to create chaos in Syria and chaos could create civil war. So, this

is our position right now that we are helping Syria to move further. Of course, we want to see that the current leadership base is taking very seriously holding accountable those who were responsible for the violence and we also want to see the inclusiveness of government build up because Syria has a lot of different groups.

On Iran, the regional destabilisation is worrying for us and also the military aid that Iran is giving to Russia is of great concern. We were discussing also the hostage policy that Iran has, and how we can all, then, [in a] unified manner deal with this, and the big question is the nuclear programme and how we can proceed there. Of course, there we have the E3 countries which have a very specific role, but it is important that we all are on the same page. So, these were, in broad, the discussions we had.

We discussed also our relationship with the United States, but it was very much focused on the tariffs and the trade relations. So, we had Commissioners Šefčovič who was also giving us the overview on what is the current state of play, [and it was] important that we are all on the same page here.

Thank you, I am ready to take questions.

Q&A

Q:Could you tell more about results of negotiation in Jeddah? It was initiative to include EU in negotiation. The President of Ukraine already formed its negotiation group. The United States has its negotiation group. When will we see EU’s negotiation group or some idea of how you could be involved in this negotiation?

We are discussing these matters with the different interlocutors, and it is right now really shuttle diplomacy because there is no negotiation table. Of course, last week also had the meetings with the American counterparts. [We] also voiced our worries about different elements that could be brought up by the Russians and what to take into account. But right now, as we see, there is no negotiation table yet because Russia is not coming to the negotiation table. Thank you.

Q: High Representative, you have spoken about further sanctions relief for Syria - the idea of that - but is there actually any appetite among ministers to go further than what has already been agreed in terms of sanctions relief? For example, could you consider allowing remittances to be sent to Syria via the traditional banking sector? And if so, when? I know many Syrians would like to know that, here in Europe. And then just quickly: you have condemned the violence we have seen in coastal areas. Concretely, if something like that happens again, what will you do? Will you put the break on sanctions relief? Thank you.

Yes, thank you very much for this question. So yes, the discussions are [on] whether we have this step-for-step approach. If we see the right steps from the Syrian side, we are also ready to make steps from our side. So, now the question was whether this violence is actually

showing that we should take a step back. But the discussion among the ministers was that at this moment, if we want to prevent further violence, we need to give the people hope in Syria. And giving the people hope is also access to the banking services. That means that salaries can be paid, so that means that the companies can invest in and develop all this life in Syria further. And that is why right now we are going with our plan to relieve the sanctions. But of course, we are keeping a very, very close eye on the actions taken by the Syrian new leadership: how they are reacting and prosecuting the people who conducted this [violent] massacre in the coastal areas. I think this is very important to see, but also what are the further steps from their side. And why I have to rush from here, is because actually, I am meeting the foreign minister of Syria also to raise all these issues. But currently we are in this position. Of course, in April we decided that we will revert to this issue and again, look what is happening and whether we have to take steps back, but right now the position is such.

Q: My question is about Radio Free Europe. I know that you are supposed to discuss it today. Do you think that there is any opportunity to find some funding for Radio Free Europe, keeping in mind that they played a very important role fighting disinformation? And do you think that it is possible to give Russian journalists who work in there [some] kind of temporary protection status, because they cannot go back to Russia of course, but also, if they lose their contracts, they can be obliged to leave the EU in three months.

Thank you. Yes, this issue of Radio Free Europe was raised and, I mean, also coming from the other side of the Iron Curtain, actually, it was by the radio that we got a lot of information [about] what is actually going on. So, it has been a beacon of democracy and very valuable in this regard. Of course, it is sad to hear that the US is withdrawing its funding. Now the question for us is, can we come in with our funding to fill the void that the US is leaving. The answer to that question is: not automatically; because we have a lot of organisations who are coming with the same request to us, but there was really a push from the foreign ministers to discuss this and find [a] way. So, this is the task [on] our side; to see what we can do.

Thank you.

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