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Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas at the press conference

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EEAS Press Team

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Thank you, I am happy to be here. It is my first foreign Affairs Council – and I can tell you, it is different than the European Council. And you know, it was the first, so we can always do better.

We had many issues on the agenda; key items were Syria’s transition, Ukraine, and Georgia.

I have updates for you on all three [issues].

First, on Syria.

I debriefed the Ministers on my visit to Jordan where I met with the Arab leaders as well as Türkiye and the United States, to discuss the basic principles that we all agree on – for the engagement with the new leadership of Syria. How we will engage in that respect.

I announced earlier today that our top diplomat will go to Damascus. He has been there now. It is not the Special Envoy, but our Head of Delegation who is currently stationed in Beirut, and that went to Damascus and had some high-level or had some meetings there.

The aim is to be in contact with the country’s new authorities, and to convey the messages to the group about how they also intend to govern, so that we understand all this.

There are the basic principles that everybody agreed with the Arab countries, the neighbouring countries, Türkiye and the United States, and the European Union as well. These are the principles of territorial integrity; sovereignty; accountability. Also, inclusiveness of government – taking into account especially the minorities and women’s rights in this case.

This process has to be Syria-led and Syria-owned and reflect the Syrian people in all of its diversity. This is very important.

Extremism, Russia and Iran should have no place in Syria's future.

In parallel, of course the European Union remains the biggest humanitarian aid donor to the Syrian people. Since Assad's fall, we opened an air bridge for 100 tons of humanitarian aid to support health, education, and shelter.

Going forward, I can announce that we will be organising the 9th Brussels Syria conference that is meant to be a fundraising conference here in Brussels.

We stand with the Syrian people throughout this transition, as we did when it was [under] Assad's brutal rule.

We also discussed broader developments in the Middle East.

On Gaza, Ministers reiterated the need for a ceasefire, the release of all hostages and the delivery of sufficient and unimpeded humanitarian aid.

We also need to have a Dialogue to push for that, and the Two-State Solution. So, I proposed to have an Association Council with Israel. That was also supported by Ministers. Then, also after that, the first High-Level Dialogue with the Palestinian Authority soon.

Second big topic was Ukraine.

Today we continued our push to limit Russia's ability to wage war:

First, we adopted the 15th sanctions package against Russia. This round targets the [Russian] shadow fleet, North Korean officials, and for the first time, Chinese firms making drones for Moscow. Our message is very clear: You cannot fuel a war in Europe and get away with it.

At the same time, Ukraine needs our support on the battlefield. The stronger they are on the battlefield, the stronger they are also behind the negotiation table. Not just to hold on, but to tilt the balance to their favour – because Putin will not stop unless he is stopped.

I think what the fall of Assad's regime also showed is that Russia is weakened, and you cannot put your bets on Putin. He does not support you when you need him.

We must support Ukraine militarily. By end of winter, the European Union will have trained 75,000 Ukrainian troops. This month, the EU provided Ukraine €4.2 billion to support its budget. From January, we will be providing €1.5 billion per month.

But more support is needed. As Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha told us when he joined us by video, it is a very difficult situation for Ukraine on the battlefield.

We all heard him loud and clear: Ukraine needs more ammunition, stronger air defence and more support for its own defence industry as well. We must give

Ukraine what it needs to win this war.

Third topic was Georgia.

The situation is not going in a positive direction for the Georgian people. Democracies do not oppress opposition voices or curtail the freedom of media.

In response, we have downgraded political contacts and cut funding for the Georgian government.

Today, we agreed the need to hold the visa free regime for diplomatic passport holders, and Commission will make a proposal already this year.

We also discussed the sanctioning of these Georgian officials who are behind the violence against peaceful protesters.

Going forward, we will continue to stand with the Georgian people, including by redirecting funding from the authorities towards the civil society, the Georgian people and independent media.

Because the future of Georgia, as it is in Syria for all Syrians, is for the people of Georgia to decide what the future can be.

Q&A.

Q. Two questions, please. The first one on Syria: the Dutch Foreign Minister said this morning that a condition to be put upon the new Syrian leadership should be that they abolish the Russian military bases in Syria. Do you agree with that proposition? Has it been discussed today? The second question is related to China. At the previous meeting, which was still chaired by Josep Borrell, a big discussion was about the production, or the development and potential production of a military drone for Russia in China. At that time, several Member States found the intelligence provided conclusive; but apparently this was not the opinion of your predecessor. My question to you is: how do you view this, and are you going to initiate action against the relevant actors?

Thank you. First, on Syria [and] Russia’s presence. This was discussed. Many Foreign Ministers took this up to say that it should be a condition for the new leadership. That they also get rid of the Russian influence there, because it is a base where they also conduct their activities – towards Africa and southern neighbours. So, this is definitely of the worry of European security as well. We will raise this issue with the leadership when we have the meetings on different levels. This was brought up by different Ministers. It should be something that we definitely also ask – but coming from Jordan, I must say that this was also discussed around this table with the Arab leaders. It is also their worry, that they do not need, and they do not want the Russian influence there. So, I think this is also something where we can cooperate and see what we can do together.

When it comes to China, first we have the sanctions on Chinese companies in the 15th package. It clearly signals that it has a cost. Helping Russia in this war also has a cost for China. We have to be very clear on this, because we should not make the mistake that we have done with Russia. [We need] to really be strong here and show our unity in this regard. When we were in Ukraine, they were also telling about the satellites that are providing for the killer drones, for example, that are provided by the Chinese. I have not checked whether it is true, but this is what the Ukrainians are saying. So, I think we need to work with that, to be very clear that having this role in the war, or helping to wage the war, has a price for those who are helping [with] this.

Q. [Follow up] Sure, I understand that, but the sanctions published today are not related to the case that was discussed at the last meeting. So, that is why I would like to ask you again. Are you convinced of the evidence provided and will you take action?

Well, I was not at the last meeting so I cannot comment on the last meeting, but these are the steps that we are taking currently. Of course, we are looking into whatever the Chinese are doing, or the Chinese companies are doing, whether we can, you know, implement sanctions on this. Also, the circumvention of sanctions is another topic.

Q. Madame High Representative, Syria is de facto an occupied country. It has a very complex situation inside Syria between the Syrians, the ethnic [inaudible]. My general question: how the European Union is going to navigate the Syrian complexities? And, if you do not mind, a more specific question on sanctions: have you discussed that? There are some sectors like banks, transport, energy that are vital to the Syrians' daily life. How do you see these sanctions, [if they] could be at least sectorally lifted in due time?

Thank you. Yes, I agree with you, it is a complex country and that is why we need to work with the regional actors, the Arab countries, the neighbouring countries, by having a unified approach here to address all these worries that are there. When it comes to [the] European Union, I think we should avoid the mistakes of what we have maybe done before; maybe not to leave a vacuum. I think we also need to be present there, because, you know, if we are the ones also to help with the reconstruction, we also need to be the ones who are around the table with whom the regional actors also discussing the conditions – like it was [the case] on Saturday, in Jordan. Now, when it comes to sanctions, then, the question I put forward today with the Foreign Ministers, not to decide today but to start work on this, is whether we are ready to adopt our sanctions policy when we see positive steps, not words but actual steps and deeds from the new leadership of Syria. [The reason] why I say we need to start working on this right now is, because we all know we are 27 democracies and this takes time. But we need to have the plan ready when we see the steps, then we also are ready to act positively in this regard to help the development of Syria as well.

Q. I had a question on minorities. You mentioned several times it was very important for minorities to be respected by HTS. I want to understand better: do you mean that you want political representation in a manner that is maybe similar to Lebanon – but which may cause paralysis, nepotism, government collapse, as we have seen when ‘x’ number of Ministers had to be from ‘x’ religious group? Or do you mean minorities’ rights need to be protected, they must be allowed to exercise their civil rights? It would be interesting to understand which side you mean.

Yes. Well, as it was mentioned, Syria is a very diverse country. It has several groups. What we see right now, [is that] the leadership is only from one region. That is why it does not really represent the whole of Syria’s people. But the discussions, so far, on what we agreed or discussed around that table, was that we need to see the process that takes into account all the minorities. That no minorities are persecuted, that there is no revenge, no retaliation. That it does not go to another direction, that there is no civil war between different groups. This is the point where we are right now. Of course, the regional actors were also talking about the inclusive government. I think they have more tools to push this as well. For us, it is important that the minorities and the rights of minorities are protected. It also means freedom of religion and exercise of religion. It definitely also means the women’s rights that we are looking into, that it goes in the right direction.

Q. [On Georgia] If it is possible, can you tell us which kind of measures will be taken now from Commission regarding the visa free suspension for diplomatic passport owners? Also, can we expect some next steps regarding Georgia or it depends on which kind of situation will be in the country? And the last question, I saw the agenda of the European Council, Georgia is also mentioned there. Will there be just a discussion about the situation in Georgia or can we expect also some kind of steps from the Heads of State?

First, I worked so hard on this Foreign Affairs Council, I mean, in the European Council, I am not the one leading this, but I will look into how the discussions will go there. What we had today, [from the] discussions with the [European] Commission, is to suspend the visa free regime for diplomatic passports and service passports. I must say that there was very intense discussion and there was also a lot of will to do more. So, many said ‘let’s also see how the developments are and we are ready to take additional steps’, but with sanctions we need 27 on board. So, therefore, we are unfortunately not there, but I think that this visa free regime and the suspension is a first step and is also symbolic.

Q. High Representative, in 2020 the EU condemned what it called “the systematic practice by the HTS of unlawfully detaining, torturing and murdering civilians living in areas under its control.” Acts which the European Union said may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity. It also mentioned the recruitment and use of children in its forces. Do those conclusions still apply? Is that the view of the European Union about HTS today? Should it have any

bearing on how the European Union deals with that group, now that it is in charge of Syria?

Well, these are the worries not only for the European Union but also for the regional actors. That is why we all said that we want to see no extremism, no radicalisation, and it going to the right direction. Right now, they are saying the right things, but [not] everybody is convinced that they do the right things. I just want to reflect on the discussion that we had. What everybody wants is to avoid the mistakes [made] with Libya and Afghanistan. Similar things, where there was a vacuum left. Therefore, we know the troubles with those countries. When I say that Syria has hopeful, but uncertain future, is that we need to see that these steps go to the right direction. Everybody wants stability in Syria. Everybody wants all these groups to live there peacefully so that also the refugees can return to Syria – and there is a stable country in the region. Whether it will be like this, well, [there are] a lot of doubts about that – but we need to work for that to happen and help. The region is extremely complicated, and that is why I also think that it is very important to work with the regional actors. That everybody is on board, delivering the same messages to the leadership of Syria now.

Q. On Georgia: we know that Hungary and Slovakia opposed a proposal for sanctions. What is your assessment of this situation? Is your first Hungarian veto of your mandate? Are you willing to try sanctions again? Second, on Syria: you said that you sent a senior diplomat to Damascus to make contact with HTS. Are you willing to personally engage with HTS and Mr Al-Shara from now on? Do you think the engagement can reach that official level?

It is my first Hungarian veto, but I can guarantee it is not the last. But, I am still optimist, so I worked intensely with Hungarian colleagues, and I will intend to work with them in the future as well. And not only me, I think the others as well are proposing also different solutions to overcome. But we achieved a lot [in] this [first] Foreign Affairs Council: for the first one, I mean, we got the Association Council coming, we have the visa free regime suspended, so we still accomplished something, but it is not 100%, that [it] is clear. So, we will need to work on that. [When it] comes to the HTS and the engagement, we are not there yet. Today, we discussed the level of engagement with the Ministers and everybody agreed that it should be lower level right now in order to see whether it goes in the right direction. Therefore, the ambassador that we have in Syria, currently based in Beirut, went there. And of course, there are different levels of engagement, but we need to see in the coming weeks and the coming months positive action as well, not only words, but also deeds.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-265128

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-kaja-kallas-press-conference_en