

Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by the High Representative



Check against delivery!

Good afternoon to everybody.

Today we discussed a number of important issues: Belarus, Libya and the EU-AU (African Union) relations in particular, apart from many other current issues – among them Venezuela.

Before the Council [of Foreign Affairs Ministers], the Ministers had the opportunity of receiving Ms [Sviatlana] Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian opposition. It was not in the Council [formation], but on the margins of the Council before it started, in a breakfast where we had the opportunity to be briefed [by her] about the situation in this country.

Then, in the meeting, we discussed it and the Ministers sent a strong signal: we do not recognise [Aleksandr] Lukashenko's legitimacy as a result of elections that we consider falsified – as clear as that. We consider these elections falsified, we do not recognise the results and so we do not recognise Lukashenko's legitimacy.

We are stressing our solidarity with the people of Belarus, their democratic aspirations and their call for new, free and fair elections under the OSCE's supervision.

We are extremely impressed by the determination and perseverance of the Belarusian people. Despite the brutal and increasingly lawless repression – something that we have not seen for years. Belarusians stand firm in their peaceful demands – in spite of the thousands of people detained and tortured – for the respect of their basic human and political rights.

We stand firm in our support for a free and democratic choice by Belarusian people of their leader and their country's future.

In the talks this morning and in the breakfast, it was clear and we expressed that we do not have a hidden agenda. We do not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of the country. We just want to support people who are asking to have a political system that allows them to elect their rulers.

We only ask for a national dialogue on how to resolve the current crisis, and for free and fair elections.

We support the sovereignty and independence of Belarus, and we call on all partners of Belarus not to interfere in Belarus' internal affairs, because it is the people of Belarus who have to decide their future.

Ministers discussed the sanctions issue. Although there is a clear will to adopt those sanctions, it has not been possible to do that today, because the required unanimity was not reached. The issue will have to be considered by the heads of states and governments at the [European Council later this week for their political guidance.](#)

We have also discussed the review of our overall relations with Belarus and further financial support to the civil society and independent media.

On Libya, I briefed the Council on my [visit to Libya](#), both to Tripoli and Tobruk, and [also to Egypt](#) – where the most important part of my visit was devoted to the situation in Libya and the Egyptian approach to this problem.

It is clear that the latest developments, and especially the ceasefire, give us a window of opportunity to advance on what we see as the three main priorities that we have in Libya.

First, to reach a permanent and sustainable ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire agreement is there, let us see if it is sustainable. The UN-led 5+5 Joint Military Committee negotiations are the right framework for this.

Second, to mobilise all our efforts to fully lift the oil blockade across Libya. Since the beginning of the year, the oil blockade has cost to Libya more than 10,000 million dollars. Just compare this big figure with the amount of our help, which is, in the best of the cases, some hundred million dollars. The country is losing its revenues and, at the same time, they are lacking electricity and water in the main cities.

The political dialogue is the third of our objectives. We agreed to step up our efforts for the resumption of the political dialogue in the framework of the Berlin process.

In the meantime, Operation Irini continues to contribute to implementing the United Nations arms embargo in a tangible way. We are not doing everything that is needed, but nobody is doing more than the European Union on that side.

On September the 10th, a German frigate of the Operation Irini inspected and diverted a vessel transporting military fuel in violation of the embargo. This vessel was seized and brought to a port and the load of the ship was confiscated. This demonstrates Irini's capacity to act effectively.

We also have our own restrictive measures. Today, new listings were adopted – two persons involved in human rights abuses and three entities which were involved in violating the United Nations arms embargo.

At the same time, there is an agreement on the delisting of Aguila Saleh [President of the Libyan House of Representatives] and Nuri Abu Sahmain. This proves how can we use our sanctions regime from a strategic point of view.

Then we went to our relations with the African Union. The coronavirus restrictions have been slowing down our outreach efforts, but not our ambition to move our partnership to the highest possible level.

We have to use the coming weeks to agree on joint priorities that should pave our cooperation for the next decade.

I think it is important to continue focusing on tangible deliverables, in the spirit of a “Team Europe” approach.

We will continue our discussions on how to step up relations with the African Union at the informal meeting of development ministers next week. As you know, the Summit and the Ministerial meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council has been delayed – I am afraid – until next year.

I also want to inform you about some current affairs, mainly on Venezuela. I debriefed the Council on the [decisions taken by the International Contact Group](#) and also on my contacts with the Maduro government and the main opposition groups during the summer and until the last week.

The Council unanimously supported the decision of the International Contact Group to continue this negotiation in order to look for the possibility of an election that could be observed by our missions.

This is not the case right now, the conditions are not met. But we still believe that there is a window of opportunity. We do not know, the opposition is divided, some of them are still thinking on this possibility and others believe that this possibility does not exist anymore. In any case, in order to send an electoral observation mission, the schedule of the elections should be reviewed, because we need 5 or 6 months before the election takes place in order to participate as observers. We will continue reaching out to the Maduro government and both parts of the opposition groups to see how we can be useful for a peaceful and democratic transition in Venezuela.

On Russia, we have been analysing the results of the medical tests in the German hospital. Again, we call for an urgent international investigation of the poisoning of Mr [Alexei] Navalny in full transparency and cooperation with the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons]. [The Foreign Affairs Council] will have a comprehensive discussion on Russia next month.

We also considered Lebanon, China and Turkey. [On Turkey], we had a short exchange of views. There are some positive steps, but the extended and new NAVTEXes (navigational telegrams), extending the drilling and exploratory operations in Cyprus’ waters are regrettable. This will be the main issue to

deal with at the forthcoming European Council, where I will inform about the debates of the Foreign Affairs Council.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-195316>

Q&A

Q. I have two questions on Belarus. The first one on sanctions. You said that Ministers could not reach unanimity. It is an open secret in Brussels that it is Cyprus who does not allow to introduce these sanctions on Belarus because it asked for sanctions on Turkey. What can you say about this blocking? It has been more than a month since the Summit when the leaders said that they would like to introduce sanctions and there are still no sanctions because Cyprus is blocking. You said that you do not recognise Lukashenka's legitimacy. What does it mean in practice? Do you not recognize him as President now, or after his term ends, or will you then stop trying to have contacts or dialogue with Lukashenka?

Por la segunda pregunta: En el caso de [Aleksandr] Lukashenko estamos en una situación muy parecida a la de Venezuela. No reconocemos la legitimidad democrática del señor [Nicolás] Maduro como Presidente de Venezuela, exactamente por las mismas razones y condiciones por las que no reconocemos la legitimidad democrática del señor Lukashenko. No consideramos que las elecciones hayan sido válidas. Lo hemos dicho claramente, consideramos que el resultado de las elecciones en Bielorrusia ha sido falsificado. Pero no reconocer la legitimidad democrática como Presidente no quiere decir que no reconozcamos la realidad. La realidad es que, obviamente, el señor Lukashenko en Bielorrusia y el señor Maduro en Venezuela tienen el control del gobierno, de la administración y del territorio.

So, one thing is to not recognise the democratic legitimacy and another thing is the fact that we have to work with them. But the situation is different. With Maduro there was also a moment in which we considered that he was rightfully elected and then, from a certain moment, we considered that he was not rightfully elected. And this has practical consequences from the point of view of our relationship. You do not work equally with someone that you consider democratically elected or someone you do not consider [democratically elected]. Does it mean that tomorrow we will withdraw the embassies? No. In Venezuela there continue to be embassies of Member States, some of them withdrew their embassies, but most of them they are still there. But it means that from the point of view of our relations we will downgrade these relations. In fact, the External Action Service and the Commission are working on how to review these relations from the moment that Lukashenko takes office on the basis of a falsified election process. It has consequences for example for the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership or in meetings at high political level.

About sanctions, you said that it is not a secret for anyone that we do not have unanimity because one country has not participated in the consensus. In fact, the adoption of sanctions was not even on the agenda. Because the [COREPER](#), when discussing this issue, had to recognise that there was not the required unanimity and that the ministers could not adopt [the sanctions]

without unanimity. We have had a political discussion and from this discussion, everybody agrees on the need to adopt sanctions against Belarus and I hope that by the next Foreign Affairs Council it will be possible.

I will do whatever I can in order for sanctions against Belarus to be adopted at the next Foreign Affairs Council. It is becoming a personal commitment because I understand clearly that the credibility of the European Union and the forging of a Common Foreign Policy depend very much on our capacity to sanction Lukashenko[’s Belarus]. If we are not able to do that, then I understand perfectly that our credibility is at stake. But be patient. I am sure we will be able to do that after the political guidance of [the next European Council \[on 24-25 September\]](#).

Q. For clarity: you just said sanctions on Lukashenko, did you mean Lukashenko or Belarus? When the sanctions are finally adopted, will Mr Lukashenko be on the list? I gather there is still some opposition to that. On Libya, how long will it be before the EU is able to draw out some options on how it might support a durable ceasefire, and will that include boots on the ground?

On the first question, certainly I was referring to Belarus, not to Lukashenko personally. This is something that is still under discussion. It is a matter of tactics, a matter of graduation, a matter of going step by step. Some Member States consider that Lukashenko has already done enough to merit being included in the sanctions, but there is still no agreement. In any case, since today we were not going to approve the sanctions, these discussions have been set aside until the next round [next time].

Whatever has to be done to monitor the ceasefire in Libya has to be done under the United Nations framework. Exactly in the same way the control of arms embargo that Operation Irini is implementing is being done because the United Nations asked the European Union to do so. We are ready to participate in the implementation and the control of the arms embargo and this has a political and or diplomatic side and it has a military [side for] intervention on the ground. We are merely waiting for the first one and for the meeting of the 5+5 of the two sides that was decided in the Berlin process, and also for a ministerial meeting, under the Berlin process framework, that Germany will call as soon as possible.

We are also waiting for [the appointment of] a UN Special Envoy for Libya. It is taking too long. We have decided also to nominate a special representative of the European Union for Libya. But nobody has been asking or proposing to send European troops to Libya.

Q. We have a de-escalation towards Greece but we do not have a de-escalation towards Cyprus and we have the NAVTEX notes you have mentioned, what are you going to do about it and I mean practically because if I remember correctly the decision, the political decision after Gymnich was that sanctions to Belarus and sanctions as requested by Cyprus would go hand in hand, in parallel. So are you implying by your certainty for sanctions on Belarus that in a similar fashion we will have new listings of individuals and entities in the, let’s call it, “Cypriot catalogue for sanctions”?

The decision was that that new listing was going to be implemented as soon as possible. And it was not said that before setting up sanctions on the Eastern Mediterranean scenario we should put sanctions on Belarus, one thing before the other. It was just said "as soon as possible". And as you see, there is no proposal for sanctions neither for Belarus nor for Turkey yet, for the time being.

It is up to the European Council to analyse the relationship with Turkey, this is what the President of the Council, [Charles Michel] decided, calling this extraordinary meeting to deal with this issue and, depending on the political guidance of the European Council, we will implement it.

Q. On Belarus, members of the coordination council today in Brussels have asked the EU for more support for their movement. They specifically asked for facilitated visas and for an economic aid package, once President Lukashenko has faded away from power. Have you discussed this? Is there anything more the EU can offer to civil society than the €3 million that have been put forward by the Commission?

This has been urgent help, something done immediately with the resources available. In fact, [the European Commission has mobilised] €53 million to support the Belarusian people, and we will very much take care that all of the €53 million goes to the people and does not increase the resources that the Lukashenko government has. These resources are devoted to help Belarusian people and, one way or another, we will very much take care that it goes directly to the Belarusian people.

We have not discussed about an economic package for after Lukashenko, but for sure, Belarus will need a lot of economic and financial support to overcome this very difficult political situation.

Q. Nous avons entendu le Ministre des affaires étrangères chypriote Nikos Christodoulides expliquer qu'il n'était absolument pas opposé à l'adoption de sanctions vis-à-vis du Belarus, mais qu'effectivement il voulait aussi que soit sanctionnée une situation, que vous avez défini très bien dans votre intervention, qui perdure, à savoir les violations du plateau de la zone économique chypriote. Pour avoir une chance qu'au sommet européen les dirigeants se mettent d'accord, qu'est-ce qui doit être décidé? Je ne vois pas le président Nicos Anastasiades dire le contraire de son ministre sachant qu'eux veulent sanctionner une activité illégale de la Turquie. Je suis un peu perplexe parce qu'on nous dit les deux sont liés, puis qu'elles ne sont pas liées. Pourquoi blâmer Chypre qui est un tout petit pays, et qui n'a pas d'autres solutions aujourd'hui pour faire entendre une exigence qu'il estime légitime que de bloquer des sanctions pour lesquels il dit ouvertement qu'il est d'accord pour leur adoption? Est-ce que vous ne pensez pas que cette situation finalement sonne le glas du souhait d'arriver à une adoption à la majorité qualifiée pour des sanctions contre des violations des droits de l'homme, sachant que pour arriver à cette décision il faudra l'unanimité et qu'à mon avis aucun pays ne vous donnera l'unanimité.

Sorry but I have not blamed Cyprus for anything. I haven't done it. Have I said anything against Cyprus? No. Personne n'a posé la question dans les

termes que vous la posez. Mais c'est un fait évident qu'il nous manque Chypre pour avoir l'unanimité. Vous pouvez appeler ça comme vous voulez. Vous pouvez l'appeler blocking or not blocking, disagreeing, agreeing... Mais c'est un fait objectif : il nous faut l'unanimité et il nous manque un pays, et ce pays c'est Chypre. Et Chypre n'est pas contre les sanctions en Biélorussie mais elle ne considère pas qu'elle doive ajouter son vote pour que ce soit possible, parce qu'elle considère que, en même temps, on doit sanctionner la Turquie. I don't blame Cyprus I'm just saying that we cannot take this decision because we do not have unanimity, and we do not have unanimity because one country is not part of the consensus, and is not part of the consensus for the reason you said.

This is a high voltage political problem that the European Council will have to solve.

And I cannot tell you how the European Council will solve it. It will have to be discussed and I perfectly understand the situation of Cyprus and we discussed it in Berlin, and in Berlin we decided that if Turkey does not change its behaviour, and it has not changed its behaviour in respect to Cyprus, then we will have to consider sanctions. But at the same time, there are negotiations and there are talks and many European Union Member States considered that it was necessary to wait for the European Council to deal with that. It is a matter of synchronisation. Il faut synchroniser les deux processus. Il faut faire en sorte que ça aille ensemble, de façon à ce que tout le monde y trouve sa part. Moi personnellement, je regrette que cela ne soit pas possible.

Je pense que le prochain Conseil des affaires étrangères doit absolument décider des sanctions contre la Biélorussie. Nous verrons bien si nous en sommes capable mais à mon avis il faut absolument le faire, et naturellement c'est le Conseil européen qui doit ouvrir la porte à comment le faire. Mais nous ne pouvons pas avoir une nouvelle réunion du Conseil des affaires étrangères incapable de trouver l'unanimité nécessaire pour approuver des sanctions contre la Biélorussie.

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