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Former Estonia PM Talks Russia, Ukraine in Hearing for Top EU Foreign Policy Job

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Kaja Kallas. **Nicolas Tucat / AFP**

Former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas faced questions in the European Parliament on Tuesday ahead of her potential confirmation for the EU's top foreign policy job, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Kallas served two terms as Prime Minister from 2021 to July 2024, after she took over leadership of the center-right Estonian Reform party in 2018. She previously served as a member of the European Parliament from 2014 to 2018.

She emerged as a candidate for the job after becoming a leading European voice on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the threat that the Kremlin poses to Europe. Seemingly unafraid of escalation risks, Kallas has called on Europe to do more and more to ensure Ukrainian victory.

She answered questions on a range of issues from the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to the EU's

competition with China and its role in Africa.

On Ukraine in particular, Kallas faced several questions from far-right MEPs that echoed pro-Russia talking points.

At one point, she told lawmakers: "The world is on fire so we have to stick together."

Here's what she had to say on the war in Ukraine, Russia, EU defense, Belarus and more:

The war in Ukraine

In her opening statement, Kallas said that, as an Estonian, "above all, the European Union means freedom," and called on the EU to offer Ukraine a clear path to membership.

She was asked about the war throughout the three-hour hearing.

"Everybody wants peace. There is a difference between peace and peace. We want a sustainable peace," she told Alexander Sell, an MEP from the far-right Alternative for Germany Party (AfD), "because if we just give in to the aggressor and say okay, take what you want, then all the aggressors, or would-be aggressors all across the world get the note, 'Okay, this pays off,' go for your neighbor's territories. You kill some people, you kill your own people and then you walk away with more than you had before."

Responding to Sell's follow-up, she said that Europe must resist the Russian narrative that sanctions were ineffective and that it was put forward to foment war-weariness in the West.

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On ending the war, Kallas said: "The war will end when Russia realizes it made a mistake like it did in Afghanistan," a reference to the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. She stressed that Europe needed to make tough choices in the short term to support Ukraine which would lead to benefits in the long term.

In response to a pointed question from far-right Bulgarian MEP Petar Volgin, Kallas criticized the Minsk agreements, which sought to end the conflict after Russia invaded Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, implying that they enabled the 2022 full-scale invasion.

Later, the former PM quoted historian Timothy Snyder, saying, "In order for a country to become better, it has to lose its last colonial war. And Russia has never lost its last colonial war."

Russia sanctions

Kallas stressed the need for resolve on Russia sanctions and called for unity across the bloc.

She criticized the EU for its lack of unity on sanctions but noted that even without unity, Brussels was able to renew sanctions every six months.

Kallas then lambasted EU companies that helped Russia evade sanctions, saying some

companies believe "It doesn't concern me," and then ask why the war hasn't ended. However, she praised new EU measures to criminalize sanctions evasion and called for punishing violators. She also noted that the EU needs to engage with countries that help Russia circumvent sanctions. Here, Kallas returned to her refrain that focusing efforts in the short term would be more beneficial to Europe in the long term.

In response to another question from Sell, Kallas accused him of repeating the pro-Russia narrative that the Russian economy was strong. She fired back at him that Russia had spiked its interest rate to 21%, that its sovereign wealth fund was shrinking, and that gas revenues were down.

Kallas also called on the EU to work with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) on Russia's "shadow fleet" of oil tankers. "It's a very difficult issue. Member states can prevent them from being in their borders, but we have to work in the IMO to really address this issue and put more sanctions so that they can't leave the ports and be at the sea where they are a potential risk to the climate, to the environment, to us all," she said.

Related article: Ukraine Cannot Trademark Phrase 'Russian Warship, Go F*** Yourself,' EU Court Says

EU Defense

Kallas said that there has been a "significant underinvestment in defense for a very long time in Europe," and that every country needed to meet their pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defense spending. Currently, seven of the countries that are both EU and NATO members fall short of that target.

"The problem with defense is, when you need it, it's actually too late to make the decisions," she said, urging Europe to invest more in its own defense. She criticized the fact that North Korea was reportedly sending more ammunition to the war in Ukraine than the entire Euro-Atlantic community.

However, she stopped short of calling for a common EU defense budget or defense force, stressing that NATO should be in charge of defense, while the EU's role is economic and manufacturing-oriented. "If we have two parallel structures, the ball might fall in between those chairs and we don't need that," she said.

Frozen Russian assets

Kallas said that frozen assets belonging to Russia should be used to pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine, calling it unfair to use EU taxpayer's money to rebuild Ukraine when the EU is not destroying it.

BRICS

When asked about whether the BRICS alliance was trying to decouple the Global South from the West and Western values, Kallas said that she believed multilateral fora were not responsive enough to the Global South's concerns, which allowed BRICS to attempt to create

an alternative. She said the EU needed to more coherently and effectively communicate its values and actions in contrast to countries like Russia, China and Iran.

Belarus

Kallas said she was in constant contact with the Belarusian opposition and had met several times with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. She also stressed the need to help Belarus' 1,300 political prisoners, despite the situation in the country being "extremely hard."

Kallas noted that Moscow was afraid of the democratic space expanding to Russia and Belarus, and that a democratic government might prevent wars like the war in Ukraine.

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