

# POLICY BRIEF

## Federica Mogherini and Her First Year as HRVP

Tereza Novotná  
Université libre de Bruxelles

- **November marked the first year of Federica Mogherini's tenure as High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP). During this period, the European Union (EU) has been overwhelmed with a series of international emergencies, ranging from the conflict in Ukraine and tense relations with Russia up to the refugee crisis that has been primarily caused by a deteriorating situation in countries such as Syria, Libya and Iraq. Despite Mogherini's personal commitment to solving the crises, there is no sign of any viable solution on the horizon either in the East or the West of the EU's borders. On the other hand, the High Representative has successfully accomplished what Catherine Ashton, her predecessor as HRVP, had already started, such as negotiations on Iran's nuclear program and the stabilization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.**
- **A year is not only a significant date from both a political and symbolic point of view, but it also represents an important milestone from which we can start judging the results of the institutional aspects of HRVP's work, that is her ability to reshape the European diplomatic service (European External Action Service or EEAS). Moreover, we can examine relations between EEAS and other EU institutions and compare the steps that Mogherini took in this area with those of her predecessor.**

### Comparison with Catherine Ashton

Both Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini represent European left-wing parties (i.e. the Italian Social Democrats and the British Labourists). At the time of taking up their jobs, they were both criticized for their lack of experience. In both cases, however, such criticism was not entirely fair: Ashton previously served as EU Commissioner for Trade while Mogherini was Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs for nine months and has been dealing with foreign policy issues since her university studies. In addition, both women were experienced parliamentarians: Ashton led the Labour group in the British House of Lords whereas Mogherini was elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

Nonetheless, there are also striking differences between the two women. Mogherini is 17 years younger, studied abroad and can speak several languages. Ashton was 53 years old when she became HRVP, is fluent only in her mother tongue and, until becoming a member of the Commission in Brussels, worked mostly in the British public service. Last but not least, both women have different personal traits. Mogherini is more open and communicative towards her staff and colleagues while also being better skilled at public diplomacy and interaction with media, perhaps because she is an experienced politician who, in contrast to Ashton, was twice elected an Italian MP (in 2008 and 2013).

Ashton was also heftily criticized because of her reported inclination to 'micromanage' and inability to delegate tasks, but also due to her mistrust towards the wider surroundings apart from her closest collaborators. Yet Ashton excelled in 'quiet diplomacy' behind closed doors, such as with the negotiations on the Iran nuclear issue and the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Nonetheless, both HRVPs came into their posts under different circumstances and were faced with different challenges. Ashton had the thankless task of building the EU's diplomatic service from scratch which she spent a considerable part of her term in the office on, while Mogherini can fully devote her time and skills to the real substance of her work: the creation of a European foreign policy.

### Relations with the European Commission

Despite the usual claim about the double role of an HRVP, we can argue that any HRVP is in fact 'triple hatted': she wears an 'HR hat' related to her responsibility for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a 'VP hat' as the Commission's Vice-Presidential and, finally, a third hat as a chair of the various formations in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). Ashton bore frequent criticism for the fact that she has neglected her VP hat by 'forgetting' it at home in the drawer. As a result, relations between EEAS and the Commission were close to the freezing point. So far it seems that Mogherini has proactively fixed the problem by 'putting her VP hat back on'.

Thanks to the agreement with Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the Commission, Mogherini moved her office from the EEAS HQ to Berlaymont, the seat of the Commission, which facilitates her daily contact with other Commissioners. In spite of a heavy international travel

schedule, Mogherini also regularly participates in the weekly College of Commissioners meetings. During the first year of her term in the office, Mogherini attended about 70.7% of the College meetings. Ashton, in contrast, was often absent: during her five years as HRVP, Ashton took part in, on average, 45.7%<sup>1</sup> of these meetings. Consequently, not only was the British voice often missing while taking decisions in the College, but she also met her Commissioner colleagues less often and hence knew them less.

President Juncker has restructured the current Commission into several clusters that are led by the Commission's Vice-Presidents. Out of seven teams, Mogherini chairs the group which is in charge of the EU's external policies (the so-called Group on External Action).<sup>2</sup> The rationale is to intertwine and coordinate purely foreign policy issues with the EU's internal policies that have an external dimension, including international trade, migration, energy security and climate change. A Relex Group of Commissioners existed during the previous Barroso Commission in a slightly different form but it rarely met, notwithstanding any chance of being chaired by Ashton. In a similar vein, Mogherini is much keener on releasing statements and co-organizing visits with her fellow Commissioners. It can therefore be argued that both Juncker and Mogherini are more interested in pushing for the 'comprehensive approach' and connecting the EEAS with the Commission both at political and institutional levels.

Last but not least, Mogherini hired half of her Cabinet out of Commission officials. Stefano Manservigi, head of her Cabinet, is a life-long Commission official (he focused, among others, on home affairs and migration, an experience that Mogherini can draw well on during the current refugee crisis). Moreover, before joining Mogherini's Cabinet, Manservigi served as EU Ambassador

<sup>1</sup> The author calculated the data based on the minutes of the College of Commissioners meetings during 2010-2015, see here:

<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/index.cfm;jsessionid=B8C11F26C8AFD4857DCFB861B77DD4CA.cfusion14501?fuseaction=gridyear> (accessed 1 November 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The Group on External Action consists of Commissioner responsible for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (Johannes Hahn, Austria), Trade (Cecilia Malmström,

Sweden), International Cooperation and Development (Neven Mimica, Croatia) and Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management (Christos Stylianides, Cyprus). In addition, other Commissioners may be invited, thus enlarging the Relex Group into the entire foreign policy cluster, including Commissioners responsible for Climate Action and Energy (Miguel Arias Cañete, Spain), Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship (Dimitris Avramopoulos, Greece) and Transport (Violeta Bulc, Slovenia).

to Turkey, one of the key countries in tackling the migration wave. Oliver Rentschler, who was a German diplomat before coming to Ashton's Cabinet four years ago, was kept on as Mogherini's Deputy Head of Cabinet. After the retirement of Pierre Vimont from the post of the Secretary General of the EEAS, i.e. the highest-ranking official within the European diplomatic service, Mogherini replaced him with Alain Le Roy, another senior French diplomat. Le Roy who joined the EEAS as of 1 March 2015 is in charge of the service's restructuring. Together with Nathalie Tocci, an independent Italian think-tank analyst from the Rome-based Istituto Affari Internazionali, Le Roy oversees the drafting of the new European Global Strategy. Le Roy's nomination was allegedly an outcome of a bargain between Italian Prime Minister Renzi and French President Hollande who, in exchange for this top post within EEAS, agreed to Mogherini's appointment as HRVP. Yet these personnel reshuffles have indeed contributed to an improved climate and increased trust between the HRVP (and her office), the Commission and EU Member States.

### Relations with the European Parliament

Even though relations between Ashton and the European Parliament (EP) did not suffer as much as relations with the Commission, Mogherini has further upgraded the former. Mogherini sailed through her nomination hearing in the EP without any major glitch not only because MEPs did not want to upset the trade-offs about the highest posts at the top of the EU, but also thanks to her good performance. Since then, Mogherini maintains good links with the EP by, for instance, regularly attending the EP's plenary sessions. This is in a stark contrast with Ashton's practices: MEPs were often annoyed with Ashton's lack of personal participation in the EP sessions who often instead sent a substitute. Moreover, Mogherini has so far kept an exceptionally good and frequent contact with the EP's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and, in particular, with its powerful chairman, Elmar Brok (EPP, Germany). Yet Mogherini has also succeeded in reconciling

another EP Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT) that is led by no less powerful German, Ingeborg Grässle (EPP). Ingeborg Grässle waged a 'Cold War' with Ashton and EEAS over its overall budget and staff expenses. However, any good relations with Grässle may again deteriorate if she and her committee will not be satisfied with the EEAS budget expenditures once Mogherini will be for the first time responsible for the EEAS budget.

### Relations with EU Member States

Ashton allegedly once declared that it is difficult to be a servant of 28 masters, that is of 28 EU Member States. Although Ashton herself previously served as an EU Commissioner, her desire to be on good terms with EU Member States made her neglect her other 'supranational' role as the Vice-President of the Commission which in the end constituted her main weakness. Ashton's effort to prioritize EU Member States can be evidenced in, for instance, nominating national diplomats rather than EU officials into about two thirds of the managerial posts in the EEAS HQ as well as into the posts of EU Ambassadors in third countries. By doing so, Ashton created a deep discontent and tensions among the EEAS staff.<sup>3</sup>

Although (or perhaps because) Mogherini was recruited from the post of a foreign minister in which she held control over a national diplomatic service, she has tried to shift the balance back somewhere in the 'middle' between EU Member States and EU institutions, including the Commission, which is in fact the place where, according to the Treaty of Lisbon, the balance of power should be. Nevertheless, given that Mogherini has initially suspended the majority of internal competitions (which have now only restarted), it is so far difficult to judge whether the shift in the institutional balance will be visible in the personnel questions as well. We can only now say that due to the internal restructuring within the EEAS, Mogherini streamlined the hierarchical structures and decreased the number of Managing Directors and, in particular, Directors. The high number of these top managerial posts

<sup>3</sup> Novotná Tereza, Who's in Charge? Member States, EU Institutions and the European External Action Service, ISPI Policy Brief No. 228, ISPI Milan, 8 October 2014

<http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/whos-charge-member-states-eu-institutions-and-european-external-action-service-11338%20>

České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko  
Czech Visions for Europe, European Visions for the Czechs

was in fact created by Ashton in order to allow for vacancies that could be filled in by national diplomats in the newly set-up EEAS structure even at the senior level.

In any case, Mogherini changed the working methods when chairing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) in its various formations. While chairing the FAC with 28 foreign ministers, for example, the new HRVP introduced a topic for the long-term discussion on the agenda of each Council, such as the Middle East Peace Process. In addition, during the Munich Security Conference, Mogherini opened up the debate about the new European Security Strategy (ESS) which was written in 2003 (and updated in 2008) by Javier Solana, former NATO Secretary General and the first High Representative for CFSP (at that time still under the Amsterdam rules). Under Solana, the ESS represented a European response to George W. Bush's doctrine of the 'preventive war on terror'. However, given today's radically different global political and security context (e.g. the rise of Asia and China in particular, relative withdrawal of the US from an activist foreign policy, numerous conflicts

East and South of the EU's borders, etc.), a new version of the European Security (or Global) Strategy is very much needed and can contribute to creation of a longer-term foreign policy thinking and consensus among its various actors at the European level.

To conclude, HRVP Mogherini's words and activities during the first of her five year term in office represent a welcome change from the previously held tendency to react to the immediate political emergencies towards a longer-term planning within European foreign policy, including her endeavour to combine all the tools available to common foreign and security policy with the toolkit related to the external aspects of the EU's internal policies. Nevertheless, whether EU Member States will allow Mogherini to create a concrete EU foreign policy or whether her proclamations will become an empty rhetoric remains an open question particularly in the period when Europe faces probably its greatest challenge in the history, with the temptation for Member States to return to their national policies instead of finding European foreign policy solutions.



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union