



# STRATEGIC FILE

No. 14 (77), July 2015 © PISM

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## The Labours of HR Federica Mogherini: Her Pursuit of a Strategy and Effectiveness

**Elżbieta Kaca<sup>1</sup>**

*High Representative Federica Mogherini seems to be struggling with her role. With limited scope to be involved in major EU policy dossiers, she has focused on improving the institutional and strategic basis for fulfilling her tasks. Nevertheless, if she does not manage to contribute to any of the most urgent political questions of EU foreign policy and capitalise on Member State support for relevant actions, her term may diminish the significance of the High Representative.*

The experiences of Catherine Ashton, the first EU High Representative under the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, showed the limited political willingness of Member States to commission leadership in the strategic dossiers of foreign policy of the EU.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, she engaged and played an important role in two negotiation processes—one on Kosovo and the other on the Iranian nuclear programme—in which consensus among the Member States was relatively clear. At the end of the day, her term was marked by the conclusion of a landmark agreement between Kosovo and Serbia and brokering of an interim agreement with Iran as chair of the talks between Iran and the E3+3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom plus China, Russia, and the United States). Besides those issues, the EU's big players tended to act while often omitting the Union's diplomacy.

Now, almost nine months into her first term as High Representative, Federica Mogherini is active in international crises and the EU foreign policy agenda, dominated by troubling situations in the bloc's neighbourhood such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the civil wars in Syria and Libya, and the threat from the Islamic State (aka ISIL/ISIS) and a migration crisis. In terms of global challenges, a major issue on her plate was the just completed negotiations on the nuclear deal with Iran, but in this case the High Representative's visible role of moderator was overshadowed by U.S. diplomacy. Despite the numerous challenges faced by the EU, Mogherini, as with Ashton, faces a limited mandate from the Member States for action.

Being aware of this fact, Mogherini has acknowledged from the very beginning that her role will be primarily to bridging Member State positions.<sup>3</sup> So far, it seems she has chosen to work on ensuring a better strategic and institutional basis to perform her role by launching a revision of EU strategy in global affairs and for its neighbourhood as well as working on better coordination with the European Commission. Unlike her predecessor, the attention she has paid to developing good contacts with all stakeholders, such as the

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Carsten Schmiedl, an intern at PISM, who contributed to the research.

<sup>2</sup> S. Lehne, "EU—Actor or Toolbox? How Member States Perceive the EU's Foreign Policy," in: A. Hug (ed.), *Europe in the World: Can EU Foreign Policy Make an Impact?*, Foreign Policy Center, London, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> "Answers to the European Parliament questionnaire to the Commissioner-designate Federica Mogherini," European Commission, Brussels, p. 6.

Member States, media, think-tanks, and academics, she is assessed by Brussels-based journalists and policymakers as a vigorous diplomat with good skills of communication and representation.<sup>4</sup>

However, Mogherini's approach increases the risk that she will not try to shape EU foreign policy in a meaningful way, which would have dire consequences for the future. Not undertaking political initiatives backed by EU capitals can limit the position to only representative and advisory functions and could lead to a deterioration of the High Representative's role vis-à-vis the Member States.

## **In the Shadow of the Member States' Leadership in the Eastern Neighbourhood**

When Mogherini took up her role, the most urgent issue on the EU agenda was the crisis in Ukraine, troublesome for numerous Member States as it capsized relations with Russia, an important economic partner for the EU. During Ashton's term, at first the diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict were delivered by Weimar Triangle ministers. Later, the major negotiations between the Ukrainian and Russian sides were led in the Normandy format by Germany and France and resulted in a ceasefire agreement (Minsk I), agreed in September 2014. In those talks, the High Representative and other EU institution representatives were not present. Moreover, it was mainly Chancellor Angela Merkel, in cooperation with the EU's biggest players, who worked to establish a common position between the Member States on economic sanctions against Russia, which were imposed in July 2014, as well as coordinating the EU position with the United States and others in the G7.

During Mogherini's term, the negotiations continued to remain outside the EU institutions with a second ceasefire agreement (Minsk II) negotiated again by the Normandy format in February 2015. Due to Russia's lack of progress in meeting the conditions of the agreement, the major Member States continued with their work on keeping a common EU line on sanctions policy towards Russia. Mogherini was limited to explaining European Council decisions to the outside world. Therefore, she regularly condemned Putin for not respecting the commitments Russia had made in the Minsk deals and also continued to refuse to recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, even when commissioned by Member States to propose EU actions to counteract Russian propaganda, she launched a group of experts at EEAS to work on the issue.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, she tried to contribute to the EU position a more incrementally conciliatory approach towards Russia, but due to continued antagonistic behaviour from Moscow, no political steps in this direction were possible. For this reason, the strategic document on EU-Russia policy that she prepared before the January Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) was not taken into consideration by the Member States.<sup>7</sup> She called for supplementing the sanctions by proposing an incentive policy for Russia and for reconciling the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreements with the Eurasian Union, but this approach was interpreted as going back to business as usual. Moreover, her remarks suggesting that sanctions policy does not work were interpreted by the German media, for instance, as undermining the EU stance.<sup>8</sup>

## **Limited Potential for Action in the Southern Neighbourhood**

Ashton's first term as High Representative was marked by the events of the Arab Spring and the reactions to it from the EU were generally led by the Big Three: France, the UK, and Germany. In the end, no consensus was found on greater EU involvement to stabilise the region. The lack of agreement on NATO intervention in Libya and limiting the EU's involvement in Syria to imposing sanctions on the Assad regime were indicative in this respect.<sup>9</sup> The High Representative's role consisted mainly of developing contacts in the region and reviewing European Neighbourhood Policy.<sup>10</sup> On a positive note, Ashton scored in the

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<sup>4</sup> D. Helly, "Already 100 days for EU foreign policy under the leadership of Federica Mogherini. What has changed so far?," *Europe is talking* (College of Europe blog), February 2015, [www.blog.coleurope.eu](http://www.blog.coleurope.eu).

<sup>5</sup> See: "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Crimea," Council of the European Union, Brussels, 16 March 2015.

<sup>6</sup> A. Rettman, "EU hiring 'myth-busters' on Russian propaganda," *EUObserver*, 16 April 2015.

<sup>7</sup> K. Liik, "The real problem with Mogherini's Russia paper," *ECFR*, 20 January 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "What did you say, Ms. Mogherini?," *Die Zeit*, 6 November 2014.

<sup>9</sup> T. Schumacher, "The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2011, pp. 107–119.

<sup>10</sup> R. Balfour, "EU Conditionality after the Arab Spring," *Euromesco paper*, the European Institute of the Mediterranean, June 2012.

region in terms of engagement in Egypt. After the coup d'état there in 2013, she arranged wide range talks in Cairo with key figures and was the only Western leader allowed to visit the detained former president Mohamed Morsi. This wiped out the impression of the EU's silence on the coup and general EU diplomatic inaction towards this region.

Even though the situation in the southern neighbourhood is aggravated during Mogherini's term, the Member States are even less eager to become involved in Libya and Syria.<sup>11</sup> In relation to Libya, Mogherini proposed to send an EU mission to maintain the ceasefire, with the backing of Italy and France.<sup>12</sup> EU capitals remained reluctant, however, and instead the EU continues developing confidence-building measures.<sup>13</sup> Despite this fact, Mogherini engages personally in diplomacy aimed at building the government in Libya. She tries to get backing from other actors by highlighting the effect the lack of a stable government in Libya is having on the EU migration crisis.<sup>14</sup> Due to various challenges in Libya hampering any compromise on creating a single, representative government, it will be an extremely difficult task to obtain this goal. Very limited chances for stabilisation exist also in Syria. In this case, visibly, the UK has taken a leadership role in diplomatic efforts and, for instance, tries to include Russia in mediation of the conflict.<sup>15</sup> At the EU level, the Syrian questions are dominated by discussions at the EU level on limiting terrorist threats from Islamic State.<sup>16</sup>

The EU's negligent attitude has wrought tangible security challenges for it during Mogherini's tenure. The migration crisis—the result of increased flows of migrants in 2015 from mainly Libya to the EU via the Mediterranean—has become an urgent issue to be solved at the EU level. In this respect, the High Representative was entrusted by the European Council in April 2015 to prepare a possible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation to identify, capture and destroy smugglers' vessels. Based on the EEAS proposal, the EU approved in May a plan for naval operations to go after human traffickers by chasing and boarding boats.<sup>17</sup> In order to make it fully internationally operational, Mogherini appeared before the UN Security Council to request UN backing to for the mission to enter Libyan territorial waters. She also made a trip to Beijing to get the green light from China. In this task she was supported by the Security Council's EU members—Britain, France, Lithuania and Spain, which are working with Italy on a draft resolution that would endorse an EU naval force.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the resistance of some countries, namely Libya itself and Russia, hampers the process and the final success of the mission is in question.

## Searching for Role No. 1: Strategic Thinking

Facing the constraints of her mandate, Mogherini is trying to find her place by making EU external policy more strategic. Ashton was criticised for not prioritising her actions properly and not developing a medium and long-term strategy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the only EU strategic document on external relations, European Security Strategy, was approved in 2003 and has become outdated due primarily to the new security challenges in the neighbourhood and the new institutional situation after the enforcement of the Lisbon Treaty.

Mogherini announced that she would address this deficiency and has launched a process of reviewing EU strategy in foreign affairs. To this end, she started at least one year of consultations by presenting in June the global and internal challenges the EU is facing as a starting point for discussion.<sup>20</sup> In her document she focused on several priorities, such as reengagement with the EU's neighbours (Western Balkans and Turkey, eastern partners), the upheaval in North Africa and the Middle East, the EU's relationship with Africa, its transatlantic partners (TTIP and NATO relations), and Asia. The study points out also the limits

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<sup>11</sup> "European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2015," ECFR, January 2015.

<sup>12</sup> "EU Proposal to Send Soldiers to Libya Met With Skepticism," *Reuters*, 15 March 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "Council conclusions on Libya," Council of the European Union, Brussels, 16 March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "Statement by EU HRVP Mogherini—United Nations Security Council: Cooperation between UN and Regional Organisation on the Situation in the Mediterranean," European Union Delegation to the United Nations, 11 May 2015, New York.

<sup>15</sup> "UK and Russia to resume talks over Syria conflict," *BBC*, 26 May 2015, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-32877719](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32877719).

<sup>16</sup> "Council conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat," Council of the European Union, 16 March 2015, Brussels.

<sup>17</sup> "EU Naval force to tackle Med smugglers set up by EU Foreign & Defence Ministers," EEAS, 19 May 2015, [http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2015/190515\\_fac\\_defence\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/190515_fac_defence_en.htm).

<sup>18</sup> "Libya blocks UN action on EU migrant plan," *Euractiv*, 3 June 2015.

<sup>19</sup> A. Willis, "Belgian minister publicly attacks EU foreign relations chief," *EU observer*, 5 May 2011.

<sup>20</sup> "Global Strategy to steer EU external action in an increasingly connected, contested and complex world," EEAS, 30 June 2015, Brussels.

of the numerous EU policies related to counterterrorism, cybercrime, migration, development and humanitarian aid, energy security and climate action, trade, and CSDP.

A major barrier to Mogherini's approach is the lack of constructive recommendations of potential options for the EU to explore in foreign affairs and how to avoid discussion of the tools of implementation of the chosen priorities. The whole process might risk arriving at a strategy on paper with no follow up. Moreover, the question of CSDP and EU military capacity has been neglected as the High Representative prioritises cooperation between the Member States and NATO.<sup>21</sup> The final success of the strategy will therefore depend on her capacity to choose a few priorities from the wide list presented in June, discuss them in close consultations with the Member States, and then obtain a green light for actions as well as involve interested ministers of foreign affairs to support her efforts.

Simultaneous to her work on global strategy, Mogherini launched a revision of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) together with Johannes Hahn, the commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. The reason for the separate consultation process is that the EU perceives the direct neighbourhood as an important region for leveraging its action. Created in 2004, ENP has not delivered the expected tangible results and therefore is undergoing regular revision. The last such revision was delivered by Ashton in 2011 due to the Arab Spring, though it resulted in minor changes such as additional support for North Africa as well as prioritising civil society support.<sup>22</sup>

For Mogherini, the revision of ENP is a chance to differentiate this policy, update it to the ongoing security challenges and improve the flexibility of EU tools. This revision will be hard to achieve due to several limiting factors. First, even though EU officials held consultations with the major EU capitals, it seems the biggest challenge will be to get the Member States on board to change the concrete terms of the policy. Besides a Weimar Triangle letter on the future of ENP no other noticeable action has been undertaken with the EU political agenda dominated by potential exits and questions about the coherence of the EU. Second, Mogherini has not tried to work on bridging the gap to find common ground between countries interested in development of the southern or eastern dimensions of ENP, such as France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the Baltic States. This is a decisive factor for any real modification of ENP. Third, there are limited options to introduce greater flexibility. The priorities for cooperation were set through 2017 for the majority of ENP countries and the rules for financial assistance were settled under the EU budget for 2014-2020 (Multiannual Financial Framework), with the first opportunity for crucial updates only expected during the mid-term review to be launched in 2016.

## **Searching For Role No. 2: Better Coordination of EU Tools**

Mogherini also aims to strengthen the High Representative's role in coordinating EU tools for external relations. This task involves ensuring better cooperation with the European Commission and managing policies with strong external dimensions such as development, justice and home affairs, trade, energy and others. Theoretically, the Lisbon Treaty commissioned this role to the High Representative as the Vice-President of the European Commission, but the EC remains very assertive given its competences in management of concrete policies and their budgets.

This was a noticeable problem for Ashton who was criticised for insufficient collaboration with the EC. The reason for that was partly because of the internal difficulties of the Barroso II Commission to coordinate policies with an external dimension,<sup>23</sup> and also the personal ambitions of Ashton to strengthen the independence of the Union's newly created union diplomatic institution. The friction between the institutions was frequent and contributed to a large gap in strategic objectives and financial assistance as well as to delays in presenting common proposals.<sup>24</sup>

Mogherini has undertaken several concrete steps to improve the situation in this respect. First, she agreed on EC President Jean-Claude Juncker's proposal for his office to guide the work of the commissioners, whose portfolios include external policies (international cooperation and development, neighbourhood

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<sup>21</sup> "The speech of Federica Mogherini, 14<sup>th</sup> Asia Security Summit: plenary session on global security," IISS, 31 May 2015, Singapore.

<sup>22</sup> J. Techau, "What if the EU Had Reacted Strategically to the Arab Spring?," *IP Journal*, 27 February 2014.

<sup>23</sup> N. Helwig, "Fine-tuning EU foreign policy. A joint approach between the new Commission and the European External Action Service?," *FIIA Briefing Paper* 168, January 2015.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see the ENP review; R. Jozwiak, "Arab Spring Highlights EU Turf War," Radio Free Europe, 5 May 2011.

policy and enlargement negotiations, trade and humanitarian aid, and crisis management).<sup>25</sup> Second, to ensure better links with the EC, she selected half of her cabinet from EC staff. Third, she regularly participates in monthly meetings of the College of Commissioners and has moved her office from the EEAS to the Commission building in Brussels.

She has indeed increased her involvement with the EC. For example, during the first six months of her term she participated in 14 meetings of the College and arranged six meetings on external relations with the commissioners.<sup>26</sup> The improved cooperation with the EC is confirmed by numerous common actions, visits and statements issued with the commissioners. Specific examples include the revision of ENP together with Commissioner Hahn, discussions on Sahel cooperation with ministers from Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso with the support of Commissioner Christos Stylianides and a proposal in participation with Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos for concrete steps Member States can take to accomplish the European Agenda on Migration.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, before the January Foreign Affairs Council, she formulated proposals in collaboration with three commissioners—Hahn, Frans Timmermans, and Gunter Verheugen—for Member States on how they could counteract Russian propaganda.<sup>28</sup> Yet, it is too soon to assess if this change is going to result in a permanent improvement in the relationship between these institutions on external affairs as no formal inter-institutional agreement has been signed in this respect.

One institutional quirk Mogherini must navigate is the need for intense cooperation with the President of the European Council, who chairs the European Council and is responsible for deciding major directions in EU foreign policy as well as assigning representation for EU external policies. Council President Donald Tusk, unlike his predecessor Herman van Rompuy, has expressed more ambition to shape the debate on foreign issues, for example, he was active in discussions on the conflict in Ukraine. As the former prime minister of Poland and a person possessing extensive contacts within the EU capitals, he is therefore an important partner for Mogherini, mainly to get backing from EU heads of states for her initiatives.<sup>29</sup> It seems, however, the potential for cooperation has not been fully used so far by both sides as there are just a few examples visible, such as the joint visits to Latvia in January to participate in the opening ceremony of the Latvian presidency of the Council of the EU and to Tunisia in March to discuss migration and terrorism.

## Prospective Roles for the High Representative

Almost nine months into Mogherini's term, she has been marginalised by the Member States in diplomatic efforts related to the most urgent issues in EU foreign policy, such as the conflict in Ukraine, relations with Russia, and particularly migration from and terrorism in the southern neighbourhood. When she proposes initiatives on her own, such as the case with Libya, they are neglected. However, she has some room to explore increased representative functions and further work on making diplomatic contacts, and supplementing these by active communication. Only in rare cases is she able to play a role in implementing Member State decisions, as was the case in the preparation of the CSDP mission to fight migrant smugglers. These problems with her role are no surprise, as Ashton faced similar constraints, but the latter still managed to find a place in EU foreign affairs and contribute to the Iran talks and improving Kosovo-Serbia relations. What is worrisome about Mogherini is that she focuses too little on involvement in EU political processes that have the backing of the Member States and too much on strategic planning and cooperation with the EC. Obviously, both are needed in order to improve EU foreign policy from an institutional point of view and to clarify the strategic scope of the EEAS's actions. At the end of her term, she will be measured according to the results of her contribution to the politics of the EU, but with nine months already expired it would be advisable for her to set concrete political priorities for the remainder of her time in post. If Mogherini's performance continues as it has, she will solidify the weak role of the High Representative, leading to repercussions in the coming years. Among them, it could result in lowering the scale of EU actions in foreign affairs. The Union's direct neighbourhood is increasingly unstable and requires more intense EU engagement on a permanent basis, while its biggest players are not always eager to pick

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<sup>25</sup> "Mission letter to Federica Mogherini from Jean-Claude Juncker, President-elect of the European Commission," European Commission, 10 September 2014, Brussels.

<sup>26</sup> See EEAS infographic at [www.pinterest.com/eu\\_eeas/infographics](http://www.pinterest.com/eu_eeas/infographics).

<sup>27</sup> "The common letter of Federica Mogherini and Dimitris Avramopoulos to EU ministers of foreign affairs," The European Commission, 10 March 2015, Brussels.

<sup>28</sup> See the proposal publicised by *L'Echo* at [www.blogs.lecho.be/files/4-ministers-letter-on-eu-strategic-communication.pdf](http://www.blogs.lecho.be/files/4-ministers-letter-on-eu-strategic-communication.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> S. Lehne, "Are Prime Ministers taking over EU foreign policy?," Carnegie Europe, February 2015, Brussels.

up issues unless they are directly interested. Also, the strong limitations on the role of the High Representative are contradictory to its founding idea, which was to ensure that the greatest challenges for EU external relations are discussed and solved with the equal participation of all the Member States. Currently, EU external affairs are dominated by the biggest players who often operate without consultations with the High Representative and EEAS, such as the Normandy format. Finally, the High Representative's weak role in EU foreign policy will result in attempts to formalise the diplomatic activities of Member States in EU external affairs, for instance, by the creation of groups of ministers of foreign affairs responsible for concrete dossiers. This might be expected in the medium term once the EU solves its internal problems related to coherence (i.e., a Grexit, or Brexit).

Therefore, it is essential for the High Representative to find areas where she might now contribute to international relations. On Iran, for example, she could not have followed in Ashton's footsteps because in the final stage of the talks, the U.S. took over the shuttle diplomacy. She might, however, contribute to the stabilisation of the situation in the Western Balkans by reviving EU enlargement policy. The process seems to be difficult in Serbia's case and is locked in relation to Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, the EU's common interest is vital and Mogherini can count on active support from Germany and the UK, and the Union's role is not questioned by other actors. This priority was mentioned in her analysis on global challenges and she might continue the debate with Member States on a policy approach. Meanwhile, her engagement in Libya is worthwhile in terms of increasing EU visibility but due to the complexity of the situation in that country as well as the inaction on the part of the Member States, she should not count on tangible results from this project.

The HR's authority (i.e., Mogherini's) would also increase significantly if she managed to make progress in EU defence policy. First, she might improve interoperability within the scope of CSDP. As the head of the European Defence Agency, she should present ways to increase cooperation on common defence projects among the Member States. Second, she should work on the development of a clearer political vision on the future of CSDP. As part of the global strategy revision, she might place an emphasis on this issue. In this respect, she could push it forward using the proposals made in April by the Weimar Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Defence.

In short, Mogherini has to begin now to clarify her vision and efforts if she is going to leave a legacy of a stronger High Representative and EEAS, as well as in finding solutions to the EU's most pressing problems. The launched revision of EU strategy in foreign affairs is a good starting point to discuss with the Member States her agenda for action. Most important, however, is for her to follow up this debate with tangible diplomatic involvement in the chosen priorities.