

## Time for a (more) centre-right EU foreign policy chief

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EUROPEAN SOCIALISTS HAVE HELD A DE FACTO MONOPOLY OVER THE POSITION OF THE EU'S FOREIGN POLICY HIGH REPRESENTATIVE EVER SINCE IT WAS CREATED ALMOST TWO DECADES AGO. WHEN NEW PEOPLE WILL BE APPOINTED TO THE EU'S SENIOR LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN AUTUMN 2019, THE CENTRE-RIGHT SHOULD SEEK TO DENY THE SOCIALISTS FROM HAVING AN ALMOST AUTOMATIC RIGHT TO DETERMINE THE PERSON WHO IS APPOINTED AS THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE BY CAREFULLY VETTING ALL CANDIDATES. THE MINIMUM GOAL SHOULD BE TO ENSURE THAT THE NEXT HIGH REPRESENTATIVE'S VIEWS AND BELIEVES ARE MORE ALIGNED WITH THE CENTRE-RIGHT'S VISION OF EUROPE IN THE WORLD THAN THEY CURRENTLY ARE.

The May 2019 European elections are approaching fast. In these elections, citizens from across the EU (minus the UK, which is expected to leave the Union by the end of March 2019) will choose the MEPs who will represent them in Brussels and in Strasbourg during the next European Parliament's five-year mandate. There will also be a leadership change in the European Commission because the term of current President Jean-Claude Juncker and his team finishes

in November 2019 and Juncker is not seeking a second term. The same applies to the European Council as the second and final term of President Donald Tusk ends in the same month. This means that, in autumn 2019, Brussels will be busy solving the "jigsaw puzzle" of appointing new people to the EU's senior leadership positions in a package deal that would be representative of, and acceptable to, the various constituencies.

While Brussels is already busy guessing the composition of the next European Parliament and speculating who will succeed Juncker and Tusk as Commission and Council presidents respectively, a less discussed topic is Federica Mogherini's successor as the next High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). Mogherini could seek reappointment for another five-year term, but she indicated in September 2018 that she will not do so.<sup>1</sup> Her decision was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that, even if she did seek another term, her chances of being reappointed are virtually zero because her centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) is no longer in government in Italy.

<sup>1</sup> *AFP News*, 'EU's Mogherini prepares for successor next year', 3 September 2018, accessed at <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/eus->

[mogherini-prepares-successor-next-104035063.html](https://sg.news.yahoo.com/eus-mogherini-prepares-successor-next-104035063.html) on 1 October 2018.

Whoever is appointed as the next HR/VP in 2019 needs to enjoy the backing of all EU leaders, including the leader of his/her home member state. Alas, it is extremely unlikely that Italy's current government led by the populist Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) and League (Lega) parties would support Mogherini's reappointment as HR/VP.

## The High Representative

The HR/VP is an influential figure who leads the European External Action Service (EEAS) and shapes EU foreign, security and defence policy. His/her main responsibilities are outlined in articles 18 and 27 of the Treaty on EU. He/she is appointed for a five-year term by the European Council with the agreement of the Commission President. The HR/VP conducts and contributes to the development of the EU's foreign and security policy and also contributes to the development of the Union's security and defence policy. He/she also chairs and sets the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council, where the member states' foreign and sometimes also defence ministers meet. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty merged the positions of the former Council-based High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Commission-based External Relations Commissioner to create the current "double hatted" HR/VP position. The aim behind this merger was to ensure better consistency in the EU's foreign and security policy. When acting in his/her VP role, the HR/VP is responsible for issues in the Commission with external relations aspects and for coordinating the Union's external action in development assistance, trade, humanitarian aid and crisis response. Last but not least, he/she heads the European Defence Agency (EDA) and chairs the board of the EU Institute for Security Studies.

It is often forgotten that all HRs and HR/VPs have so far come from the ranks of the Party of European Socialists (PES). This is due to an informal understanding on the way that appointments to the EU's most senior positions are made: the largest European party gets to appoint the Commission President, the second largest the HR/VP, and the one that has the most seats in the European Council gets to appoint its President. In every European election since 1999,

the second largest party has been PES. This has enabled them to control the HR/VP position without interruption for almost two decades. In 1999, former NATO Secretary General and Spanish Foreign Minister Javier Solana from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) was appointed as the first permanent<sup>2</sup> High Representative for the CFSP. In 2009, Solana was succeeded by Lady Catherine Ashton from the British Labour Party, who had previously served as the Leader of the House of Lords and briefly as the European Commissioner for Trade. Ashton was also the first person to hold the double hatted HR/VP position. Finally, in 2014, Ashton was succeeded by then Italian Foreign Minister and PD politician Mogherini.

Given that PES has controlled the HR(/VP) position for almost two decades without interruption, they can claim (not without merit) to have played an important role in delivering some of the biggest achievements of EU foreign, security and defence policy. Under Solana, the EU's European (now Common) Security and Defence Policy was established, the Union began to launch civilian and military crisis management operations for the first time, and the first-ever European Security Strategy was adopted. Under Ashton, the EEAS was put together. Under Mogherini, the EU has adopted a Global Strategy, launched Permanent Structured Cooperation, and set up the European Defence Fund. Yet, PES's de facto monopoly over the HR/VP position means that they also bare special responsibility for some of the EU's biggest foreign policy blunders. Under Ashton, EU foreign, security and defence policy entered a period of stagnation. This was because the global financial crisis and the following European debt crisis made the Union more inward looking than before, but also because most of Ashton's energy was consumed by the setting up and finetuning of the EEAS. Yet, these do not excuse the EU's inability and incapacity to act in 2011 in Libya, in 2012 in Mali, and in 2013 in the Central African Republic. Under Mogherini, EU foreign, security and defence policy has reacquired some of the dynamism that characterised its development in the early 2000s, but the HR/VP herself has demonstrated a worrying tendency to avoid standing up against some of the West's biggest adversaries, especially Russia and Iran.

<sup>2</sup> The Amsterdam Treaty introduced the HR position and stated that the Secretary-General of the Council would also be the HR. This meant that, when the treaty entered into force in May 1999, then

Council Secretary-General Jürgen Trumpf became the very-first HR for six months until Solana was appointed to the position.

## Reasons for concern

The European centre-right should be concerned about the control that PES holds over the HR/VP position for two main reasons. First, it gives PES influence over the substance and direction of EU foreign, security and defence policy that is disproportionate to the size of their representation in the European Parliament and in the European Council. At the time of writing, PES controls 188 of the 751 seats (i.e. 25%) in the European Parliament,<sup>3</sup> and five of the 28 seats (i.e. 18%) in the European Council.<sup>4</sup> Yet, by controlling the HR/VP position, PES gets to indirectly set the agenda and work programme of the Foreign Affairs Council, take care of issues in the Commission that have to do with external relations, have an extra voice in European Council meetings, represent the EU around the world, and make senior appointments to the EEAS and the EDA. For a party with a one-quarter-sized representation in the European Parliament and less than one-fifth-sized representation in the European Council, having an almost 20-year monopoly over a position that grants such powers seems disproportionate.

Second, PES's control over the HR/VP position enables certain views and beliefs to direct EU foreign policy that are antithetical to the centre-right's vision of a Europe in the world that promotes its values but is also conscious of its interests, willing to take action to defend those interests, and stand up to its adversaries together with its partners. In the context of EU-Russia relations, for example, HR/VP Mogherini has demonstrated willingness to push for the normalisation of relations with Moscow regardless of the Kremlin's actions. Less than a year after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and at a time when Russia was stepping up its military campaign in Eastern Ukraine, the EEAS prepared an issue paper that asked EU member states to consider resuming political dialogues

with Moscow, circumventing the bilateralism of EU-Russia relations by establishing ties the Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union, and resuming sectoral dialogues and cooperation in various areas of interest.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the clearest example of the current HR/VP's sensitivity to Moscow is her attitude towards the EEAS's East StratCom Task Force, which was set up in 2015 to combat Russian disinformation operations. Officials with knowledge of East StratCom have told the author that the HR/VP sees the existence of the Task Force as a provocation towards Russia and is therefore actively undermining it. She and her team have done so by delaying the approval of funding for East StratCom, refusing to hold meetings (not even informal corridor ones) with its members, not requesting any briefings, and (with the exception of the spokesperson) not communicating at all with the Task Force. Similar reports about the difficulties that East StratCom is experiencing with the HR/VP can also be found from the media.<sup>6</sup> This is why security experts from both sides of the Atlantic and also a group of frustrated EU member states have already urged the HR/VP to do more to counter Russian disinformation.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, HR/VP Mogherini has avoided criticising the regime in Iran despite its intelligence operations in Europe and the way it treats its citizens. In early 2018, the Iranian government cracked down violently on people across the country who were protesting against the ruling regime in Tehran. However, given that the EU's number one foreign policy priority at the time was to preserve the Iran nuclear deal, the HR/VP waited for six days before saying anything about the demonstrations in Iran. When she did release a statement, it did not explicitly condemn the violent actions of the regime, stating instead that the EU expects 'all concerned to refrain from violence and the right of expression to be guaranteed'.<sup>8</sup> Due to her seeming desire to appear neutral even when

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament, 'Repartition of seats', accessed at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/hemicycle.html> on 13 October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Calculated by the author based on the party affiliations of the members of the European Council at the time of writing.

<sup>5</sup> EEAS, 'Issue Paper on relations with Russia: Foreign Affairs Council of 19 January 2015', accessed at <http://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog/files/2015/01/Russia.pdf> on 12 October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., R. Heath, 'Federica Mogherini 'soft' on disinformation, critics say', *POLITICO*, 22 March 2017, accessed at <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-opponents-pile-onto-federica-mogherini-eaststratcom-sandra-kalniete-jakub-janda-estonia-atlantic-council-ben-nimmofake-news-russia-putin-europe-foreign-policy/> on 12 October 2018.

<sup>7</sup> J. Janda, 'Open Letter of European security experts to Federica Mogherini: Please start taking the Russian disinformation threat seriously!', *European Values*, 20 March 2017, accessed at <https://www.europeanvalues.net/mogherini/> on 12 October 2018; A. Rettman, 'Mogherini urged to do more on Russian propaganda', *euobserver.com/foreign/139573* on 12 October 2018.

<sup>8</sup> EEAS, 'Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Iran', Press release 1/18, 2 January 2018, accessed at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/01/02/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-situation-in-iran/> on 15 October 2018.

protesters in Iran were beaten, killed and imprisoned, American columnist Eli Lake wrote that if the current HR/VP did not already exist, 'the world's autocrats would be trying to invent her'.<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations

Assuming that PES will finish second again after the 2019 European elections, the centre-right has two main options to advance its own vision of Europe in the world and decrease PES's influence on EU foreign and security policy when the Union's top positions are filled. First but rather unlikely, the centre-right could seek to break the hitherto unbroken chain of PES-affiliated HR/VPs and install a person from its own ranks to the position. This would allow it to set the agenda of EU foreign and security policy, lead the EEAS and the EDA, influence senior appointments within those institutions, and represent the EU on the world stage. The EPP has certainly no shortage of talent from which it could draw possible candidates to become the next HR/VP. Several current foreign and defence ministers come from its ranks, and there is an even larger pool of EPP affiliated former foreign and defence ministers who could be appointed to the position. There are also several highly capable MEPs in the EPP Group in the European Parliament who have the knowledge, skills, and background to perform in the position.

Second and more realistically, the European centre-right could deny PES from having an almost automatic right to determine the person who is appointed as the next HR/VP. Given the way that appointments to senior EU leadership positions are made, it is unfortunately unlikely that the centre-right would be able to secure the HR/VP position for itself. The reason for this is that Juncker's successor as Commission President will almost certainly again come from the ranks of the EPP if the so-called spitzenkandidat process is respected by other political families and the European Council. This means that the next HR/VP will most likely come from PES again and probably be a woman, given that the next Commission President looks to be an EPP man. Yet, the centre-right could at least seek to ensure that HR/VP candidates from other political families are properly vetted, and those who hold strongly disagreeable views and believes

are not appointed to the position.

## Conclusions

PES's de facto monopoly over the HR/VP position should concern the European centre-right because it gives the centre-left a level of influence over EU foreign and security policy that currently seems out of proportion with the size of their representation in the European Parliament and in the European Council. Furthermore, it enables certain views and beliefs that are antithetical to the centre-right vision of Europe in the world to direct EU foreign policy. After the May 2019 European elections, the centre-right should therefore deny PES from having an almost automatic right to determine the person who is appointed as the next HR/VP and properly vet all candidates to the position. Those candidates who hold strongly disagreeable views and beliefs about EU foreign policy should be prevented from becoming the next HR/VP.

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<sup>9</sup> E. Lake, 'Europe's High Representative for Appeasement', *Bloomberg Opinion*, View, 9 January 2018, accessed at <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-01-09/federica->

[mogherini-europe-s-high-representative-for-appeasement](#) on 15 October 2018.