

The High Representative's 'double hat': How Mogherini and Ashton have differed in their links with the Commission

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Federica Mogherini took over from Catherine Ashton as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2014. But how have the two High Representatives differed in their approach? Based on a quantitative analysis of both of their speeches and statements, [Nicolai von Ondarza](#) and [Ronja Scheler](#) illustrate that Mogherini has been much more successful than her predecessor in increasing the link between EU foreign policy and the work of the European Commission.



Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini. ANSA / Guido Montani – via [EEAS](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

More coherence, more visibility, and more effectiveness – those were the objectives of installing an EU foreign policy chief with the Lisbon reforms, namely the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). For achieving the above-mentioned aims, this new post was designed in a 'double-hatted' fashion, meaning that it integrated tasks of the former Commissioner for External Relations as well as of the former High Representative (and essentially also of the Permanent Council Presidency, e.g. chairing the Foreign Affairs Council).

Being able to rely on the support of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its EU delegations around the globe in fulfilling her mandate, the HR/VP on paper seems well-equipped for tackling the challenges of EU foreign policy. But have the two officials in charge – Lady Catherine Ashton from November 2009 to November 2014 and Federica Mogherini ever since – made proper use of the instruments at their disposal? Have they succeeded in becoming a ‘strong voice for Europe in the world’?

A closer look at what both HR/VPs have publicly declared during their mandates can help answer these questions. For this purpose, we have analysed the official statements made by Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini according to their frequency, their character (Statements by the HR/VP or her spokespersons, Statements with the Commission, Joint Statements, or Statements on behalf of the EU), and their thematic or geographical scope. Altogether, 2,638 statements were considered (from January 2011 to December 2016).

Our findings suggest that there is still a long way to go to achieve a truly coherent and visible foreign policy performance. Importantly however, one can discern significant differences in the scope and the character of both HR/VPs’ (declaratory) foreign policy. While Lady Ashton’s policy style did not markedly advance from pre-Lisbon times, Federica Mogherini has made slight progress in ramping up coordination between areas of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Commission. She has furthermore given a more global outlook to EU foreign policy.

A seat at the table in the Berlaymont

Merging the positions of the former Commissioner for External Relations/Vice-President of the Commission and the High Representative for CFSP was first and foremost intended to bring more coherence to the traditionally highly fragmented realms of EU foreign policy.

Both HR/VPs adopted this objective, Ashton in the light of the many crises in the European neighbourhood that required cooperation with the Commission, Mogherini also in relation to the European Global Strategy (EUGS), which singles out coordination between the EEAS and the Commission as a particular challenge. It is striking, however, that despite her experiences as a former Trade Commissioner, Catherine Ashton in practice made very little use of her ‘double hat’. An analysis of the minutes of Commission meetings shows that Lady Ashton participated in less than 50 per cent of the meetings on average. In 2014, her participation rate even dropped to a staggering 21.2 per cent.

Her successor, Federica Mogherini, seems to enjoy wearing the ‘Commission hat’ much more. This was first demonstrated when she moved her office back to the Berlaymont building right after her appointment. But also during her mandate so far, she has engaged with her role as Commission Vice-President more actively. Unlike her predecessor, she participated in 57.5 per cent of Commission meetings in 2015. In the following year, she even increased this share to 64 per cent, which almost equals the average attendance of ‘normal’ Commissioners.

Using the foreign policy cluster

Most of all, however, the different degrees of coordination with the other Commissioners is reflected in the very different uses of joint statements employed by Ashton and Mogherini. Joint statements between the High Representative and a Commissioner could in principle embody the essence of more coherence in EU foreign policy by bringing together different strands of EU external relations.

One primary example of this is Ukraine, whose Association Agreement with the EU falls under the Commission-led neighbourhood policy, while the EU’s sanctions regime on Russia following the annexation of Crimea and military involvement in Eastern Ukraine are clearly a matter of the intergovernmental CFSP. HR/VP Ashton, however, did not make a single statement with other Commissioners on Ukraine during the height of the crisis in 2014. Overall, on average less than 6 per cent of her statements were based on cooperation with other Commissioners.

Mogherini, on the other hand, released 14.3 per cent of her 2016 statements with other Commissioners, most frequently with Johannes Hahn (European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations), Christos Stylianides (Humanitarian Aid & Crisis Management) and Neven Mimica (International Cooperation & Development). Overall, Mogherini has already made joint statements with 17 of her 27 colleagues in the Commission. These include joint initiatives on Ukraine, pressing for a humanitarian corridor in Syria, and reacting to developments in Turkey. This cooperation also shows that the internal reform of the Juncker Commission, where Mogherini was given the lead in a cluster on foreign policy, did indeed contribute to the internal coherence of EU external relations.

A more global outlook

Finally, this analysis of the High Representatives' statements also gives us a tool to evaluate the focus of their foreign policy agendas. Except for a few general statements (e.g. on non-proliferation) all statements by the two HR/VPs have a clear geographical focus, e.g. on Syria, Ukraine or Turkey. Here, the differences in emphasis between Ashton and Mogherini were rather marginal.

First of all, both pursued a highly reactive policy in their statements, by mostly stating an EU reaction to current events such as elections, terror attacks or natural disasters. Rarely did either High Representative proactively voice an EU position. Secondly, neither were willing to substantially address the EU's 'strategic partners' in their statements, with global powers like the US and China almost missing completely from either HR/VP's statements. Other so called 'strategic partners' like Brazil were not even addressed once.

The main concern of both Ashton and Mogherini was the crisis-riven neighbourhood of the EU, with a tendency towards the Mediterranean. For instance, Syria received most attention by Ashton between 2011 and 2013, while in 2014 Ukraine was her main focus. Mogherini's primary addressees in 2016 were, unsurprisingly given events, Syria (20 statements), Turkey (19) and Ukraine (14). In line with the ambition stated in the 'European Global Strategy' drafted by Mogherini, however, her focus shifted to a more global outlook. In particular, she paid significantly more attention to Eastern Europe and Central Asia as well as the Americas, where she put a noticeable emphasis on the Columbian peace process. In 2016, the latter received almost as many statements by the High Representative as Ukraine.

Conclusion

The double-hatted High Representative remains an office marred in conflicting institutional loyalties and hampered by the main general weakness of EU foreign and security policy, its lack of coherence. However, as our quantitative analysis of statements by the first two office holders shows, Federica Mogherini has been much more successful in increasing the link between EU foreign policy and the work of the Commission. This shows that the High Representative can be a strong voice for the Union.

Undoubtedly, however, the EU still has a long way to go to establish itself as a strong foreign policy player in a swiftly changing global landscape. Coherence is not only needed among the EU institutions, but also with the member states. The next chapter for the HR/VP should thus be to ensure backing from the capitals. Vertical coherence, in fact, remains the biggest challenge for an effective foreign policy. Bearing in mind the current internal quarrels of the EU, this will be a truly mammoth task for the High Representative. Supported by the successes outlined above, Federica Mogherini should not shy away from facing it.

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Note: For more information on this topic, see the authors' longer paper in [Integration](#). This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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