20 August 2014

How Many Diplomats Answer the EU Phone?

Bogdan Scurtu

Henry Kissinger reportedly asked whom to call if he wanted to call Europe. Is it Catherine Ashton? She is the current High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Ashton’s mandate expires at the end of October 2014, and, so far, EU leaders have not nominated a successor. Ashton scored diplomatic successes: she brought Iran and the West back to the negotiating table and helped seal the April 2013 Serbia-Kosovo accord. Is she the one to call?

Why, then, does President Obama call Angela Merkel and David Cameron rather than Ashton to discuss important matters (latest instance on August 9)? And why did he pay three visits to Germany, three to France, and three to the UK, before first visiting Brussels in June 2014, five years into his presidency? Does Kissinger still have to call 28 numbers? Did EU leaders not relinquish sufficient powers for Ashton to do her job? What is the mandate of the EU foreign office?

A report by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) answers these questions. According to ECA, Europe’s foreign office – the European External Action Service (EEAS) created by the 2009 Lisbon Treaty – is “inadequately prepared,” has “vaguely defined” tasks, and is “inefficient” due to “poor organization,” allocation of resources, and “weakness in
setting priorities.” ECA auditors found that coordination between the EEAS and the commission and member states “has improved,” but is “still insufficient” to “fulfill its potential.” During a time when EU institutions were preoccupied with the financial crisis, EEAS was set up with “little preparatory work” and without “clearly stated objectives.”

Is the EEAS just an additional layer of bureaucracy set up by ambitious federalists? Are the EU member states clinging to “sovereignty” in matters of foreign affairs?

**Institutional History**

The EEAS and its High Representative had been established to combine “fragmented EU structures” and ensure that Europe has one consistent voice in foreign affairs. After two years of preparation, the EEAS began its operations in January 2011.

Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the embassies of the member states holding the union’s rotating presidency were responsible for conducting EU foreign policy. Back then, the EU Commission and the EU Council maintained separate foreign affairs services, which merged in 2011 to become the EEAS headquarters. The EEAS includes a crisis management directorate, a Military Staff and Situation Center, departments for planning, legal affairs, as well as security and communications. Personnel appointments in EEAS are based on merit, not national quotas.

The Commission’s external service included a network of 130 delegations around the world set up since 1954. Those became the EEAS delegations and are headed today by career diplomats from member states. After one or more EU postings, diplomats continue serving their member states, hopefully bringing a European dimension to foreign policy at the national level.

**Institutional Powers**

The HR and EEAS can prepare initiatives, yet the member states make final policy decisions. The Commission helps with the technical implementation of these decisions. The EEAS lacks the power that national foreign offices and their embassies have. Foreign policy tasks managed by the EEAS include:

- Development Cooperation Instrument
- European Development Fund
- European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
- European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument
- Instrument for Cooperation with Industrialized Countries
- Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation

The High Representative for foreign affairs has a “triple-hatted” mandate: chairing the Council of 28 Foreign Ministers, heading the EEAS, and serving as Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of a “cluster” of portfolios. Catherine Ashton presided over the Commissioners for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response (Kristalina Georgieva), Development (Andris Piebalgs), and Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy (Ștefan Füle).

**Is It Worth the Money?**

EU member states maintain their own foreign offices with networks of embassies around the world. The EEAS is a small and relatively affordable office. The average cost of the diplomatic services of member states is €15 per head of population compared to €1 of the EEAS’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Missions</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Budget (million €)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EEAS</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>3,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>11,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>13,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>15,024</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Foreign Affairs Costs European Policy Center*

*EuroPoint:* Would maximizing EU strength mean closing German, French, British and other national embassies? Maybe. For now, and the foreseeable future, Henry Kissinger still has many numbers to call: the High Representative’s, plus another twenty-eight.