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## **In a turbulent world, a weak leadership remains Europe's Achilles' heel**

**By Richard WERLY**

*International correspondent for the Swiss Daily Le Temps ([www.letemps.ch](http://www.letemps.ch)). He is also an Associate Fellow of DiploFoundation (Geneva), and the EU Centre in Singapore*

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### **Abstract**

The political correctness of appointing the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as President of the European Council, and the Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini as the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs shows once again, despite pressing global challenges, EU member states prefer to keep the leadership of European Union institutions relatively weak.



Photo: EurActiv

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The incoming President of the European Council does not speak fluent English or French, or Spanish. Appointed on Saturday night (30 Aug) in Brussels by the Heads of State or Government of the 28 EU member states, the outgoing Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk will be largely forced to speak through a translator, whenever he travels around the world to be « the voice and face » of the European Union.

In similar fashion, though she is much more gifted with foreign languages, the multilingual Italian academic Federica Mogherini will soon take over the very sensitive position of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy without much preparation. Aged 41, Ms Mogherini is nearly unknown on the global stage, therefore reigniting the controversy that surrounded the nomination, five years ago, of another unknown woman, British Baroness Catherine Ashton, to this crucial post as Foreign Minister and Head of the EU's diplomatic service or the EEAS (European External Action Service).

The third European nomination to date, though decided in July, is equally worrying. Though well known in international circles, and a savvy conservative politician, the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, 60, due to become President of the European Commission from 1 November 2014, also does not appear to fit the requirement for a « strong » leader. A very affable personality, this lawyer-turned-politician who has haunted the corridors of Brussels since the mid-1980s, holds before all the reputation of a consensus maker. And though he may be able to pick up the phone and answer in very good English if Washington calls Europe in an emergency, his capacity to react quickly, and to “impose” his views on European capitals in case of disagreements between Paris, London, Berlin, Madrid or Rome seems presently close to zero.

So here we are, after weeks of trading names and positions among the 28 EU member states, following May’s European elections, whose most striking outcome was a clear rise of the far right and openly anti-EU parties, like the National Front in France and UKIP in the United Kingdom. Without disrespect for Mr Tusk, who has proved to be a very resilient prime minister of a fast developing Poland, his capacity to reach the people of Europe and to convince them can be easily questioned.

Before he became head of government, Mr Tusk was not particularly known as a firebrand European, unlike the late Polish historian and politician Bronislaw Geremek. His choice is mainly a reward for Eastern European countries longing for more EU visibility after their integration into the community ten years ago. The same applies for Ms Mogherini who owes her position to her gender, and to an extraordinary level of active lobbying by Italian PM Matteo Renzi, who holds the current rotating EU presidency and will host the biennial Asia-Europe summit (ASEM) on 17-18 October. On a geopolitical scene dominated by foreign affairs veterans and abrasive personalities such as Vladimir Putin or Hillary Clinton, her Italian charm might prove soon insufficient to demonstrate the EU's credibility and determination.

The truth is that, once again, and despite the severe warnings sent throughout the financial crisis about the need of a strong community leadership, European governments remain more preoccupied with their domestic agenda, issues of gender equality, or political party manoeuvring, than with choosing the right cast for those high-profile jobs. Right after the European Parliament elections, some Brussels-based commentators, irritated by the probable choice of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the EU Commission, suggested the name of Christine Lagarde, the present IMF Director General and former French minister of finance. A prominent lawyer, well known on global stages, and well versed in global finance, Ms Lagarde would have indeed brought changes to the Brussels bureaucracy. Another very strong contender, this time for the foreign affairs job, was the high profile Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski, whose confrontational attitude with Russia had the merit of awakening the West Europeans to Putin's threats. But both names were very quickly

discarded. A bit like Tony Blair who was name was flagged for a while, in 2009, to be candidate for the newly created position of European Council president, before stepping out of the fray and letting the quiet but astute Belgian PM Herman Van Rompuy, to be nominated.

The reality, after these nominations, is that the EU does not yet understand the scope of the global crisis which is affecting its interests, from Russia to Asia. Despite a severe economic crisis, continued high debt in many Eurozone countries, an explosive rate of unemployment in several southern countries, and an ageing population tempted to become more and more conservative and easily manipulated by nationalists, the EU still believes it has time to fix problems, and still sees communication, charisma, and public diplomacy as tools rather than as agents of change.

This assessment is dead wrong. In 2014 more than ever, the besieged European Union Europe is in serious need of gifted political operators, capable of simultaneously addressing the challenges of economic divergence between the north and the south, the difficult constraints of a single currency for 18 (soon to be 19) of its member states, and the reality of a declining military power challenged, to the east, by the Russian bear. To believe in Europe, Europeans need therefore to have leaders they see as capable of defending their cause, and not politicians brought into Brussels' high positions by deals brokered between their national governments and the European Parliament, for the sole sake of preserving their respective powers. Experience, courage, and vision are a must. If Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk and Federica Mogherini, share such a vision, they should better demonstrate it quickly and forcefully.

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