

# The European External Action Service in the light of diplomatic service transformations

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The state of play with the European Union's European External Action Service (EEAS) demonstrates somewhat similar tendencies to the general transformations and shifts in modern diplomatic services. While these tendencies are affected by particular country specifics—such as history, economic ideology, diplomatic traditions, the size of the diplomatic service and the availability of financial resources—one can observe a separation of diplomats' political responsibilities from any influence and role in external economic relations. In other words, there has been a gradual separation of economic motives and functions from political arguments and responsibilities in foreign as well as domestic affairs. This trend is particularly evident in countries, such as Latvia, that have chosen the (neo-)liberal economic approach on which the original research was based.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional unwillingness of diplomats to deal with specific, narrow economic issues (especially small businesses) as well as a lack of expertise has evolved into a gradual creation of a boundary between political and economic interests.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that modern diplomatic services in many countries tend to pay more attention to general economic tendencies and the promotion of a country's economy, they appear unwilling to support individual businesses and deal with specific economic issues in general for several reasons.

First of all, businesses and their activities require very specific expertise and knowledge in the legal, administrative and taxation regulations of economic activity, which diplomats do not and are not even expected to possess. Understanding of a country's specific business culture and laws are mostly an advantage to individuals with their own business or extensive previous experience in the field. Contacts, especially long-term business contacts, are essential, but those cannot always be established with diplomats who are usually in a country for three to four years. Therefore, separate private

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Bukovskis, K. *The Responsibilities of Diplomats in External Economic Relations from the Economism Perspective: A Case Study of Latvia* for full study.

<sup>2</sup> This idea of separation of the political from the economic draws on Teivo Teivainen's idea on economism. Teivainen, T., *Enter Economism, Exit Politics: Experts, Economic Policy and Damage to Democracy*. – (London: Zed Books, 2002).

or public institutions, structures and consulting agencies are better equipped to deal with individual, specific business aspects in each country. Moreover, the idea that diplomacy is for the promotion of state interests rather than individual commercial advantage is even more popular when one considers the 'traditional' responsibilities of diplomats.

The EEAS appears to be no exception in this matter. Looking at the responsibilities retained by the European Commission during the EEAS formation process one can observe that responsibilities in the economic sphere do not fall under direct EEAS influence. The Commission preserved control in development cooperation, enlargement, trade and energy spheres; thus, external trade and energy issues, which are clearly regarded as economic rather than political fields by many analysts and professionals, are not considered to be part of the new diplomatic service, the EEAS. On 5 March 2010, while presenting her plans and ideas for the future EEAS, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, emphasized only the neighbourhood policy and international development spheres as being potentially acquired by the EEAS in future,<sup>3</sup> thus expressing also the general approach towards the EEAS and its functions. Does this demonstrate a separation of trade and energy from the 'political' fields?

If the answer is 'yes', the general conceptual question remains: 'Who then are the diplomats for economic actors?' In order to answer this, one should look at the academic conceptualizations of Susan Strange on the idea of the 'retreat of the state'<sup>4</sup> and the deregulation tendencies facilitated by the modern (neo-)liberal economic approach. Some might see embassies and ministries of foreign affairs as well as the EEAS as an obstacle because of the non-economic arguments that diplomatic services traditionally try to attach to the decision-making process. Economic cooperation could thus be distorted by political arguments involving principles like human rights, democracy, political will, historical situation and even security issues.

Moreover, big corporations and businesses in particular increasingly prefer to negotiate deals directly with other businesses and with municipalities and state institutions. Big businesses also tend to make direct appeals to officials<sup>5</sup> and politicians, avoiding the official embassy channel. These tendencies appear to contribute to the diminishing role of the foreign services as a gatekeeper. Can one thus observe the change in diplomacy from exclusivity to administration? Most likely not, as the re-regulation tendency appears. In other words, ambassadors are increasingly more often seen and understood as 'political muscle' for economic actors. The presence of an ambassador or a diplomat at a business meeting or seminar or simply as a demonstration of support is considered as 'state approval', as a sign of trust. Otherwise the embassies and ministries of foreign affairs appear as advisers and intelligence gatherers on the overall economic and legal situation specific to a particular country.

Consequently, foreign policy itself is less and less seen as an exclusive responsibility of the ministries of foreign affairs or diplomats. Diplomatic service and diplomatic interaction emerges as a separate stage for dealing mostly with political and country

<sup>3</sup> Referred to also in Vogel, T., 'Ashton to present plans for diplomatic service', 5 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2010/03/ashton-to-present-plans-for-diplomatic-service/67342.aspx>>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Strange, S., *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of the Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Riordan, S., *The New Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

representative issues or legal arrangements. The central responsibilities of diplomats have been and remain representative functions, the legal–political presence of the official state government and consular affairs. The EEAS seems to be becoming another example of this trend as it is not invested with direct responsibilities in the economic sphere.

It can therefore be observed that the emerging EEAS is perceived as dealing with political and military issues rather than managing such important external interactions as foreign trade and foreign investment. Intelligence gathering and distribution, analysis of the political and economic situation, and translations are essential functions of the EEAS and could be an important asset to smaller European Union member states, as would consular affairs also potentially have been. The European Commission, again, appears to have more experience in dealing with businesses and international legal business aspects. However, while building the European External Action Service it should not be forgotten that the best modern-day political argument is the economic one.