

Commentary, May 30, 2016

RENZI-MOGHERINI: THE “GREAT COLD” ON THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN AXIS

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In June 2014 the then President of the European Council, Belgian Hermann van Rompuy, arrived in Rome on a secret mission. He was to deliver an important message to Matteo Renzi – who had replaced Enrico Letta as Italian Prime Minister just a few months before. The message was on behalf of Angela Merkel, François Hollande and Jean-Claude Juncker, winner of the recent European elections as EPP leader and incoming European Commission President. At Palazzo Chigi, Van Rompuy explained to Renzi behind closed doors that, were Italy to present Enrico Letta as candidate for the European Council presidency, France and Germany would be ready to support him, which was a guarantee for success. It was a tempting proposal. It meant securing a crucial spot on the European power map - where the Council President shapes agenda and priorities - while at the same time keeping the right to appoint an Italian member to the Commission who would be able to defend the Italian interests, though always within the limits of a supranational mandate.

However, to the great surprise of his Belgian guest,

Renzi didn't like the proposal. On the contrary: “I will never have Letta preside over me” was the Italian Prime Minister's reply, according to sources familiar with the conversation. Then, for the first time, he expressed Italy's intention of aiming for the post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs by proposing young Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini as a candidate.

We shall not speculate on Renzi's reasons. He certainly proved then that he hadn't learnt one of the most important lessons by his declared model Barack Obama who, after arriving at the White House, appointed his enemy Hillary Clinton Secretary of State, following Lincoln's “team of rivals” concept.

However, we do know how the story went. After a lengthy tug-of-war that lasted throughout the summer, Renzi won the game and imposed Mogherini for the prestigious role previously held by Javier Solana and Lady Ashton. He did so winning over general scepticism and the resistance of Juncker, who would have preferred somebody with more experience and more

weight in his commission. That was when problems started, owing to a primarily structural reason, linked to the complex job description of this post. A hybrid product of the Lisbon Treaty, the role of High Representative for Foreign Affairs precariously swings between different and often conflicting functions: the Representative is head of European diplomacy, acts as vice-president of the Commission, as well as sole representative of his/her country of origin within the Commission itself. Furthermore, the Representative holds a role of third-party guarantee in chairing the Council of Ministers.

It is not clear whether Renzi fully understood the ambiguity of this post at the time of his fight in favour of Mogherini. But, after the great results achieved in the European elections, he certainly wished to claim an influential position for Italy within European institutions. A powerful representation for Italian's interests was an absolute priority, especially when it came to interests in the Mediterranean.

This was not the case. And it's here we need to look for the origin of Renzi's disappointment with Mogherini, with whom relations have been at the bare institutional minimum for at least a year (someone even says the two are not on speaking terms).

Paradoxically, this misunderstanding is not due to the fact that Federica Mogherini has offered a poor performance as High Representative. On the contrary, she has performed quite well, and has been commended and praised by many, not least by the Americans and the Iranians who unanimously recognized her acting as an honest broker in the historic agreement on Tehran's nuclear programme.

The point is that, in order to be a good head of diplomacy – of any diplomacy – one needs to travel a lot and be often away from Brussels, where crucial

matches for the future of the Union and Italy are played in the meantime. Mogherini could have used a little less of her natural cautiousness, but the fact that cannot change is that the High Representative wears too many hats to be able to act as a sharp-eyed guardian of the interests of his/her country of origin. All the more so because, after getting to Brussels thanks to Renzi's very personalized struggle, Mogherini had to build her own European credibility in order to avoid accusations of being excessively pro-Italian.

Once again, here is one of the oldest Catch-22 features in the Union's institutions: if you are too pro-European, you lose your Country's direct support and you are perceived by others as weak, but if you look after your country's interests too much, and maybe even raise your voice, you are accused of not being impartial and you are left out of the decision-making centres.

Something has changed, however, in Renzi's European strategy in the last few months, after the exaggerated tones of this past "winter of disappointment". Carlo Calenda replaced Stefano Sannino, who is a great expert but considered to be too submissive, as Permanent Representative. Calenda's brief mandate has marked some important novelties, such as the Friday coordination meetings on the European agenda at Palazzo Chigi and a more systemic relation with EMPs and Italian officials in Brussels. His appointment as Minister of the Economic Development - and the parallel return to the Representation of a prestigious diplomat like Maurizio Massari - have coincided with Calenda's intention to be much more present in Brussels, where his predecessor Federica Guidi was very seldom seen.

A certain cold climate with Federica Mogherini still persists. Perhaps it will warm up in time. But, due to

the very nature of the post, and to the Prime Minister's strong character, it seems it will characterize the whole of his mandate.