

Can the EU do without its Special Representatives?

With no firm deal yet on the nature and structure of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in place yet, some details of the High Representative baroness Catherine Ashton's plans have emerged nonetheless—and they are from not causing some concern. In particular, the idea of abolishing a number of EU Special Representative (EUSR) posts, notably for Moldova and the South Caucasus, is rather worrying, both for the countries concerned and for the effectiveness of the EU's conflict management policy.

The many EUSRs have different mandates and roles, but they all are seasoned diplomats. Kalman Mizsei and Peter Semneby, the EUSRs for Moldova and the South Caucasus, respectively, in particular have been in post for several years, built relationships with relevant parties on the ground and further afield and have been, in many ways, part of the public perception of the EU in the countries their mandate covers. They both have difficult jobs, limited budgets, few staff, and have to balance a multitude of often conflicting interests inside and outside of the EU, not to mention the highly intransigent positions of local political leaders when it comes to the conflicts whose settlement is ostensibly part of the EUSRs' mandate. Their successes, if any, may be few and far between, but given the environment they are working in, this can hardly be surprising nor should they have to shoulder all the blame for the fact.

On the other hand, one might ask, why waste scarce resources on things that have not worked so far (EUSRs) rather than try something new and fold EUSR mandates into the new EEAS? This is not a bad idea in principle, but its success hinges on three issues. The first is the extent to which EU delegations, say in Moldova, will have the time, resources, and expertise to focus on Moldova's conflicts (primarily in and over Transnistria, but potentially also renewed tensions in Gagauzia). Second, will local and regional players in these conflicts, including Russia and Romania (and possibly Turkey with respect to Gagauzia) accept dealing with an official from the EU Delegation in the same way in which they dealt with EUSR Mizsei who is well-respected and acknowledged for his professionalism and expertise. The third issue is whether by withdrawing EUSRs, the Union potentially damages any future prospects of effective conflict management on its part by effectively sending a message that indicates either a lack of interest in being active in this area or a deep pessimism about the likelihood of its own success in this respect.

If, as a consequence of setting up the EEAS, the position of EUSRs in their current form is not sustainable, I would hope that the Union will make some serious effort to establish a credible conflict management capability within the EEAS. There are some indications that this might indeed happen but it will require significant investment in terms of conceptual development, expertise, and resources to do so. As so often with international organisations, the problem might be less the availability of resources and expertise, but the political will to deploy them.