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## EU'S WEAK AND SLOW REACTION TO ARAB SPRING HAS NO EXCUSES

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**E**U's slowness in reaching an agreement on sanctions against Muammar Qadhafi's murderous regime, weeks into the horrific violence against the peaceful demonstrators in Libya, has raised a number of questions regarding the efficiency of the Union's common foreign policy as well as that of its "foreign minister", Catherine Ashton.

On Monday, 28 February, the EU member states finally managed to agree on sanctions against Muammar Qadhafi's regime, including an arms embargo, a visa ban on Qadhafi and on others responsible for the violent crackdown, as well as a freeze of the assets of the dictator and some of his family members. However, it is characteristic that the Union was able to move ahead swiftly only once the UN Security Council had sealed its deal the weekend before, with the EU implementing tougher and wider-reaching sanctions than the latter, though. Similarly, the EU had watched earlier the events unfold in Tunisia and Egypt, without taking immediate action.

The "absence of Europe", and particularly that of Lady Ashton, the High Representative of EU's foreign policy in the enrolling events, has been widely lamented by pundits, experts and politicians alike. As the events have been unfolding in the Northern Africa and the Union delayed a coherent response, due to pressure from some of its member states, it has become increasingly clear that the EU is far from developing a common foreign policy and that the member states' interests continue to prevail in this policy area.

The EU member states have come up with individual and collective statements, such as the joint one by UK, France and Germany on the situation in Egypt, as well as a string of ideas on how to shape the EU's policy towards its changing neighbourhood. Citing stability concerns, Franco Frattini, Italian minister for foreign affairs, has, for example, called for the creation of a Marshall Plan allowing Europe to assist in the shaping of the regional order, as well as the reinvigoration of the Union for the Mediterranean. The ministers of France, Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Malta and Slovenia, have joined him in the call to revive the Union but also asked for the shifting of the EU's assistance from the East to the South. Most recently, Herman van Rompuy, the President of the European Council has called an emergency summit on Libya, apparently on the proposal

of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. According to the media, the idea was also supported by Italy, Spain and the UK, and initially opposed by Germany. The smaller EU countries were ignored in the process. Every time member states take the lead, the Union's common foreign policy is weakened.

In this cacophony of voices and bickering among the member states, that of Europe has been missing. Lady Ashton, who should be providing the leadership, has taken the position of an observer, excusing her lack of vigour with the need to consult with all 27 member states. However, this requirement does not mean that the High Representative should always fall back to the lowest denominator and could not show leadership herself. Although the weakness of her job description is a valid point, it is her task as the first ever chief of the EU's Foreign Service to fill the post with substance. If the lack of real authority were an issue, Mr Buzek, President of the European Parliament, should have refrained from any statements. However, he issued strong statements in support of the aspirations of the peoples in the Southern Mediterranean.

Moreover, the "wait and see" policy of the bloc has done nothing to bolster the role of the EU "as an honest broker" in its Southern neighbourhood, as Baroness Ashton has hoped to see in her recent speech in Budapest. Further, the Baroness has, in the same speech, seen fit to defend EU's past diplomatic, trade and financial cooperation with the endemically corrupt and violent regimes in the Southern Mediterranean, citing that "it is better to proclaim the principles of democracy, but deal with the world as it is", while promoting democratic change within. The bloc's "foreign minister" argued that this approach had served Europe well in the past in its dealings with the Soviet Union, a claim that would make anyone who suffered under the Soviet repressions cringe. Her views do not, however, seem to be shared by her colleague Stefan Fuele, the EU Commissioner for enlargement, who has pointed out the need to "show humility about the past", since the EU has failed to defend the human rights and democratic forces in Northern Africa.

Further, it is no secret that the personal commitment of the Baroness to her job has been called into question recently, as the media have cited her lacklustre attendance of the Commission college meetings, in which she participates as a Vice-President of the Commission, and her general reluctance to stay in Brussels. If the EU is to develop a common foreign policy, as spelled out in the Lisbon Treaty, and if it wants to have a voice to be heard on the global scene, the Union must become more than just the sum of its member states. Contrary to the claims of the Baroness, the EU both as an entity and as a collection of its members can have enough weight, diplomatic tools and political arsenal to take decisive action and shape the events, instead of being a bystander.

In order for that to happen, it needs a seasoned and experienced foreign policy chief who has enough authority to bring the member states together in times of external crisis. A consensus seems to be emerging that in such times, the EU cannot afford to keep failing once and again. Instead of letting Ashton potter along, the EU member states and the European Parliament, the bodies that have approved and mandated her, should put pressure on her to step up to the plate or, failing to change her approach, show political nerve and replace her with someone with a vision of how the EU could become the force for reforms and the rule of law in its neighbourhoods as well as a voice to be heard on the global stage.