

## A New World (dis) Order?

The students of Global Governance had the amazing opportunity and honor to have a conversation of great interest with the British politician **Catherine Ashton**, who served as leader of the House of Lords (2007–08), European Union (EU) trade commissioner (2008–09), and high representative for foreign affairs and security policy for the EU (2009–14).



As was mentioned, in 2008 she was appointed to the European Commission as trade commissioner. With the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in November 2009, European leaders were faced with the task of filling the roles of president of the European Council and high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Ashton was appointed for the high representative office. Upon taking office in December, she became one of the most powerful women in the world, representing the voice of the EU in all matters of foreign policy.

Ashton faced criticism working to define her role within the EU bureaucracy. One of the main critics was her alleged slow response to the events of the Arab Spring in 2010–11. Over time, however, Ashton proved to be effective, although her difficult relationship with the media meant that her successes were not as celebrated as they could have been. Unfortunately, as often happens, the potential failures of a leader are more in the light than the successes. Catherine Ashton also facilitated the negotiations regarding Iran’s nuclear program; her personal participation in the discussion about the deal was key and therefore she was asked to continue coordinating them also after the expiration of her term in 2014. Probably Ashton’s greatest challenge was the crisis in Ukraine. Ashton worked to coordinate successive rounds of economic sanctions against Russia, the Russian government was accused of leading a campaign of “direct aggression” in Ukraine. The cases of Iran and Ukraine are in a way connected, in fact, Ms. Ashton made the students reflect on the links between the two cases: on one hand the EU was collaborating with Russia to arrange a deal about Iran’s nuclear program and on the other hand, at the exact same time, the EU was having a negative experience with Russia due to the events of Ukraine. A great form of collaboration on one side and a profound critique of Russian’s acts on the other. It is a clear example of how diplomacy works in a way that at times may seem paradoxical and not coherent, but compromises are of key importance in order to avoid major conflicts. Ashton’s direct experiences and involvement in the matter of foreign policy of Europe are key in understanding how great has been for the Global Governance students to listen to a speech about the European (dis)order.

During the past years the European Union has faced issues of legitimacy as public support, for instance, is highly put into question. A rhetoric of insecurity, fragility, threats, unstableness, chaos, and destabilization characterizes all the European countries in this historical moment. The EU is facing key contemporary challenges that are affecting the whole world and all people on heart, a clear example is the flow of migrants that are moving to the regions of Europe in order to escape from war and hunger. Not only external challenges but also internal problems of coordination, within the European Union itself, are weakening the institution of the EU. Ms. Ashton made us notice how it is not absolutely possible for a divided Europe to resolve the current global crises; not much can be done in an international scenario if the EU does not stand united. Key challenges that should be faced by a united Europe are for example climate change, internal and regional conflicts and terrorism; no country alone can fix and face any of these contemporary issues.

Ms. Ashton also focused on connection and cooperation that should be at the base of a united Europe, remembering the values and the beliefs of the European Union as essential. How is it possible to spread fundamental values if not even the member states of the EU respect them? Remembering why historically was decided to start the collaboration between the different countries of the European region is a way to understand how to build the future of the region itself. Fundamental values such as human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law now seem far away concepts, almost slogans of a unity that now, looking at the reality of the facts, falters. When it comes to group cooperation, countries might not always have the same values or show the same values but at the end the differences are forgotten when all the attention of different countries focus on something important to be achieved, something which will bring them together, as it happened with the Iran negotiations.

Ms. Ashton stressed the importance of being patient when it comes to diplomacy, a discipline which, in order to be effective, requires time and requires several steps to be respected; talking about bringing peace to regions like Syria and Libya does not make sense if before the several conflicts of the area are not tackled, tackling conflict in an effective way is the priority, so that peace will be easier to be achieved afterwards.

During the final part of the conversation was mentioned that diplomacy works in a way like physics, if there is an empty space it will be or it will be tried to get filled as fast as possible. One of the last considerations and reflections of the conversation was about the differences that exist between a politician and a statesman: the politician is looking forward to the next elections while the statesman is looking forward to the next generation. In the interconnected world today, where every action has a clear and profound consequence on other people, thinking about next generations is vital.