Polish Premier and Italian Foreign Minister Win Top EU Jobs

Warsaw's Tusk Becomes Council President, While Rome's Mogherini Named Foreign Policy Chief

By Frances Robinson
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BRUSSELS—Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini were named to top European Union roles after several hours of negotiation between heads of state and government in Brussels on Saturday.

Mr. Tusk, 57, replaces Herman Van Rompuy as European Council president, a job focused on building compromise among the bloc's 28 leaders on key policy issues and at summits for euro-zone leaders. He is the first person from one of the newer Eastern European members to hold so senior a role.
Over the past few months, "the situation around Europe has dramatically changed," Mr. Tusk told reporters after his appointment was announced. "The presence of people with Eastern European experience will be badly needed in Europe."

Mr. Van Rompuy tweeted the decision from his official account. The former Belgian prime minister steps down from his EU leadership role in late November, handing over to his successor on Dec. 1 for a 2½ year mandate. He said his successor had "managed to steer Poland through the crisis... without ever falling into recession," and called him "a statesman for Europe."

Mr. Van Rompuy said the three biggest issues Mr. Tusk would face in his new role are the Ukraine-Russia Situation, which he called the "gravest threat to continental security since the Cold War," ending the economic stagnation of Europe and the relationship between the EU and the U.K.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has pledged to hold an in-or-out referendum on Britain's EU membership by 2017 if his party wins next year's general election. The euroskeptic UK Independence Party also performed well in the May European elections.

"I'm sure the future of the EU is not about making it smaller, about contraction, no reasonable person can imagine the EU without the U.K.," Mr. Tusk said. He said Mr. Cameron had put forward many proposals for reforms, and was confident they could reach an agreement.

He also hinted he had limited tolerance for slack ing when it comes to meeting euro-zone membership rules.

Under President François Hollande's supervision, France has already negotiated a two-year delay to 2015 from 2013 to get its budget deficit within the EU rule of 3% of GDP, and others hope to follow suit.

"My experiences as [prime minister] points to the fact that fiscal discipline on the one hand and growth on the other, combining these is possible," he said. "We had cumulative growth in my term of 20% and we managed to maintain budget discipline."

The leaders also named Ms. Mogherini, 41, as the new foreign policy chief for the bloc, replacing Britain's Catherine Ashton. The selection process was far from straightforward: Last month, a group of mainly Eastern European leaders blocked her candidacy, expressing concerns about her approach to the Ukraine crisis, with some diplomats saying she was too pro-Kremlin.

Asked by reporters about a recent visit to Moscow, Ms Mogherini pointed out she'd also visited the Ukrainian capital Kiev, meeting President Petro Poroshenko, foreign minister Pavlo Kilmkin and others there, before traveling to Russia "trying to facilitate a form of dialogue."

"We still all know the military way is not the solution to the crisis, for the Ukrainians first," she said. "As we work on sanctions we also have to keep the diplomatic way open, that's our job to do both."
She also promised to focus on the Mediterranean region and Middle East, saying threats such as the radical Islamic group calling itself Islamic State and European militants returning from fighting in the region.

Italy's Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

In the lengthy process to decide who will join former Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, recently chosen as the new European Commission president, in the top tier of EU leadership, Ms. Mogherini was also criticized for her lack of foreign-policy experience. She became Italian Foreign Minister this past February and has been a member of parliament since 2008.

"Age is something you cannot change," she said, joking that Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who has pressed her nomination, is younger than she. Moreover, she added, her youth compared with other senior EU figures could be an asset, with young people feeling increasingly disaffected.

"There is a new generation of European leaders and I think it's very good to have it represented in the European Institutions," she said. "I hope this can help in bridging the gap that is sometimes is felt by some of our citizens in Europe."

Mr. Juncker will nominate his full team for the Commission, the EU's executive body, next month. He has said member states need send more female nominees for the roles. There are currently just four among holders of the 28 positions. Ms Mogherini will serve a five-year term like the rest of the commission, where she will also be a vice president.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tusk received accolades from neighboring Germany. "This decision was taken with great consensus and I look forward to working together," Chancellor Angela Merkel said, adding German-Polish relationships were stronger thanks to Mr. Tusk's
work. "We all know large challenges lie before Europe and therefore it is good that we have such a qualified, a so engaged, a so passionate European."

The outgoing Polish PM is seen as a careful political operator who has prioritized very close ties with Berlin and is seen as a strong proponent of the EU. He has been an outspoken critic of Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Mr. Tusk is from the same center-right bloc as Ms. Merkel, while Ms. Mogherini is a socialist. Still, his hesitant English and complete lack of French have been cited as a cause for concern for a job which centers on backroom negotiations with EU leaders. "Nothing is good enough for you, including my English today," Mr. Tusk said, switching out of Polish to say he would work on his languages. "I will polish my English and as I mentioned, I will be ready in December 100%." 

—Laurence Norman in Brussels and Nicole Lundeen in Vienna contributed to this article.

Write to Frances Robinson at frances.robinson@wsj.com