

Meet Malmström, the EU's next top trade negotiator

By Adam Behsudi

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Sweden's Cecilia Malmström needs to be ready go on an offensive — a charm offensive.

European Union Commission President-elect Jean-Claude Juncker's pick for the post of trade commissioner has been tasked with leading an effort to win support from an increasingly skeptical European public for a controversial trade deal being negotiated with the United States.

Despite her stark lack of experience, supporters say she's well-suited for the job, given her history of building relationships and consensus. But with regard to the EU's trade agenda, opponents don't expect any major policy shifts.

"Malmström is going to be the new friendly face of [the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, but] policy-wise we would not expect any changes," said Ska Keller, a German member of the European Parliament whose Greens party is adamantly opposed to the trade deal in its current form.

But Keller said she expects the 46-year-old Swedish politician to be "very open" to the concerns of parliament, which ratifies any trade agreement the EU negotiates.

That's no surprise given Malmström's past experience as a member of the EU legislative body from 1999-2006. She also has a good track record dealing with lawmakers in her current role as EU commissioner for home affairs, a portfolio that deals with thorny issues like immigration and border security, Keller said.

Pending approval by parliament in mid-October, Malmström is expected to take the trade portfolio from Belgium's Karel De Gucht, who has often been accused of being dismissive and aloof when dealing with the EU's sometimes unruly lawmakers.

Malmström, by contrast, is expected to be a strong consensus builder among the various EU institutions and the 28 EU member nations.

"A Swede getting this post shows she is someone who can work with all the member states," said Hosuk Lee-Makiyama, director of the Brussels-based think tank European Center for International Political Economy.

Sweden is viewed as one of the most pro-trade nations in the EU, sometimes putting it at odds with member states that choose to generally take a more protective stance. Malmström also hails from the Swedish Liberal Party, a very free-trade oriented political group.

But Malmström's selection as trade commissioner, a first for Sweden, clearly shows that member states consider her balanced enough to work with despite her background, Lee-Makiyama said.

“She is a strong believer in European cooperation — and that also includes cooperating with her commissioner colleagues,” he said.

A boon for TTIP

The business community on both sides of the Atlantic hailed the selection as a boon for the U.S.-EU trade talks, already describing where Malmström has supported their interests.

Malmström, in her current role dealing with immigration issues, helped push through a new EU directive allowing companies to temporarily transfer employees among EU countries, said Tim Bennett, the head of the Trans-Atlantic Business Council, which promotes trade for U.S. and EU companies.

Her work on immigration could make her potentially supportive of new rules business want in a transatlantic trade deal to ease barriers to the temporary immigration of high-skilled workers, he said.

Like the trade skeptics, Bennett said he expected Malmström to continue pushing the EU’s current trade agenda.

“What I would expect is a firm continuation of trade policy the EU has already embarked on,” he said.

That includes not only TTIP but getting parliament to ratify a new trade deal with Canada, continuing trade negotiations with Japan and possibly pursuing a trade agreement with China.

Juncker outlined where he wants Malmström to focus in a [five-page welcome letter](#) sent to her Wednesday. The World Trade Organization and its continued survival following last year’s Bali ministerial top the list. He wants Malmström to work with the commission’s vice president for jobs, growth, investment and competitiveness to develop a foreign direct investment policy.

Another priority is an assessment of the EU trade remedy instruments used to defend against dumping and heavily subsidized imports. Juncker also wants Malmström to work with the EU’s foreign policy chief and the commissioners for international cooperation and development and migration and home affairs to strengthen the EU’s strategic partnership with Africa.

A “reasonable and balanced” trade agreement with the U.S. also figured prominently.

“I will ask you to enhance transparency towards citizens and the European Parliament during all steps of the negotiations,” Juncker wrote. “Our aim must be to conclude the negotiations on a reciprocal and mutually beneficial basis.”

The fact that Juncker has selected someone who is recognized by both sides as a consensus builder is an obvious signal that he plans to put a lot of political energy into the transatlantic trade deal, said David O’Leary, senior advisor with the international political consultancy Burson Marsteller and leader of the firm’s Europe Decides initiative.

“She’s smart, I don’t think she’ll have problems getting involved in the details of the dossier,” he said.

A new structure, but no less autonomy

Unlike her predecessor, Malmström will be working under a new commission structure made up of clusters or “project teams” overseen by the seven vice presidents.

Malmström will fall under the team overseen by current Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini, who has been selected to serve as the commission’s top foreign policy official. Other portfolios in Mogherini’s team include: European neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations; international cooperation and development; and humanitarian aid and crisis management. Commissioners covering migration and home affairs; transport and space; and climate action and energy are secondary members of the group.

Mogherini is expected to “steer and coordinate” the work of the commissioners in her group, which will meet every month, Juncker clarifies in the mission letter.

O’Leary said it’s unlikely the trade commissioner would lose any ability to make independent policy decisions under this arrangement.

Mogherini is less likely to meddle in Malmström’s affairs compared to other team arrangements because the Italian will have a major portfolio of her own to handle. Also, trade is one of the “fixed points” in the commission and has a well-established and independent bureaucratic corps compared to other portfolios that have evolving responsibilities that may need more guidance from senior commissioners, he said.

“She won’t be fazed by this job,” said O’Leary.

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