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Brussels - Lithuania's former foreign minister, Vygaudas Usackas, is to become the European Union's new top official in Afghanistan, the EU foreign policy chief said on Monday. The appointment was confirmed by EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, following a recommendation by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton.

"He is an excellent choice," Ashton told reporters after the talks.

Usackas, 46, will represent both EU member states and the commission in Kabul, coordinating the bloc's aid with Afghan authorities and other key players, such as NATO and the United Nations.

The Lithuanian was preferred to the EU's current special representative in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Italian Ettore Francesco Sequi, and other candidates from Poland and Hungary.

Usackas was his country's foreign minister from December 2008 to January 2010, when he was forced to resign following a clash with President Dalia Grybauskaite.

She criticized his handling of the recall of an ambassador to Georgia and contradicted him over a parliamentary probe into a possible secret CIA prison in Lithuania. According to Grybauskaite it probably did exist, while Usackas denied it.

But Ashton brushed off any connection between the Lithuanian and the discredited practice of extraordinary rendition by US secret services.

"He did not resign over that matter and I am 100 per cent satisfied of this appointment being absolutely the right person and that there's nothing I need to look at or need to be worried about," she stressed.

Earlier in his career, Usackas served as Lithuania's ambassador to the US and Britain - the two countries which have sent the most troops to the NATO-led international force in Afghanistan.

Despite Sequi's dismissal, Italy's foreign minister Franco Frattini said the appointment was not a blow to his country, which in January had already seen its diplomat Fernando Gentilini being replaced by Britain's Mark Sedwill as NATO's representative in Kabul.

"We had two Italians as EU and NATO representatives in Kabul, it is time for a turnover," he said.

But Ashton's choice drew fire from another Italian, the European Parliament's rapporteur for Afghanistan Pino Arlacchi.

"I am not convinced that Mr Usackas possesses the requisite knowledge or profile to take on this task," he said last week, adding that "his reputation and independence could be compromised by media reports that he has been complicit in withholding the truth about CIA rendition activities in Lithuania."

The assembly, however, has no formal say over EU appointments to third countries.

Read more: <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/310617,ashton-chooses-lithuanian-diplomat-as-eu-afghan-representative.html#ixzz0qSGlqtF6>