



***The Anatomy of Autonomy:  
Reassessing the Autonomy of the  
European Commission***

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## Abstract

The European Commission (Commission) occupies a pivotal role as the key executive institution of the European Union (EU). Yet, the factual autonomy of the Commission remains largely unexplored, contributing to contradictory assessments of it. The ambition of this study is to reassess the behavioural autonomy of the European Commission (Commission), as well as organisational conditions thereof. To accomplish this, this paper utilizes one under-researched laboratory of the Commission: temporary officials (SNEs). It is argued that SNEs may serve as a crucial test-bed of Commission autonomy due to SNEs' ambiguous affiliation towards the Commission. Whereas past studies claims that SNEs have a predominant intergovernmental behavioural pattern, this study demonstrates that the SNEs foremost blend departmental, epistemic and supranational behavioural dynamics, thereby safeguarding their behavioural autonomy. It is also argued that to understand Commission *autonomy*, the organisational *anatomy* of the Commission organisation has to be carefully considered. The organisational anatomy is measured by considering the following four independent variables: (i) the organisational composition of the Commission services, (ii) organisational incompatibilities across levels of governance, (iii) recruitment procedures of Commission officials through a so-called "submarine" approach, and (iv) socialisation dynamics inside the Commission. The study demonstrates that the autonomy of the Commission is organisationally contingent and not only subject to what Lipsky (1980:19) calls actors' conspicuous desire for autonomy. One implication of our findings is that Commission autonomy is sensitive to reforms of the Commission apparatus.

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## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

The European Commission (Commission) occupies a pivotal role as the key executive institution of the European Union (EU). The idea of establishing an autonomous community executive was codified in Article 157 in the Treaty of Rome and subsequently integrated into the Staff Regulations. The factual autonomy of the Commission, however, remains largely unexplored, contributing to contradictory assessments of it (Kassim 2004). The Commission is seen as rifted between member-state dominance (Hooghe 2005; Kassim and Menon 2004; McDonald 1997; Michelmann 1978), the concern for the collective European good (Haas 1958), DG supremacy and portfolio concerns (Cini 1997; Egeberg 1996), as well as professional independence (Haas 1992). Academics, politicians and Commission officials seem to have different views of what the Commission is and what it should be (Durand 2006). The ambition of this study is to reassess the factual behavioural autonomy of the Commission vis-à-vis member-state governments, while also suggesting organisational conditions thereof. The study of Commission autonomy from the member-state governments resembles the study of the autonomy of government ministries vis-à-vis the cabinet at the national level, and also the study of the autonomy of subordinated agencies vis-à-vis the ministry level. However, the factual autonomy of the Commission is particularly challenged from various external pressures, while also highly disputed within the literature.

Based on survey and interview data on temporary Commission officials (seconded national experts - or SNEs, see below), this article demonstrates that the Commission blends departmental, epistemic and supranational behavioural dynamics, thereby largely safeguarding the behavioural autonomy of the Commission. It is also argued that in order to understand Commission *autonomy*, the organisational *anatomy* of the Commission has to be carefully considered.

The organisational anatomy of the Commission is measured by considering the following four independent variables:

- The organisational composition of the Commission services
- Organisational incompatibilities across levels of governance
- Recruitment procedures of Commission officials through a so-called “submarine” approach
- Socialisation dynamics inside the Commission

Commission autonomy has been measured differently in the literature. Suggested yardsticks include (i) organisational traits of the administrative services that transcend the territorial principle of organisation (e.g. Egeberg 2006), (ii) the recruitment of permanent Commission Administrators outside member-state control (e.g. Egeberg 2006), (iii) socialisation processes of Commission officials towards supranational loyalties (e.g. Hooghe 2005; McDonald 1997), and (iv) role dynamics among member-state officials attending Commission expert committees (e.g. Egeberg, Schaefer and Trondal 2003). For example, studies of the recruitment of Commission officials (Egeberg 2006) and studies of the behavioural dynamics within the College of Commissioners (Egeberg 2006; Smith 2003) picture the Commission as guided by portfolio and collective concerns and responsibilities largely outside member-state influence. Moreover, studies of political attitudes among top Commission officials view these attitudes as mainly based on nation-state (socialisation) processes, thus severely challenging Commission autonomy (Hooghe 2005). Similarly, a vast literature pictures the Commission as increasingly integrated, fused and meshed with national government systems through committees, networks and agencies. Models of the Commission as the central hub in a joint community administration that spans levels of governance view the Commission as largely lacking autonomy by being integrated into webs of external institutions, actors and processes (Hofman and Turk 2006: 583; Trondal 2001). It is argued here that a possible decline of the powers of the Commission vis-à-vis other EU institutions (Kassim and Menon 2004) may potentially go together with increased Commission autonomy vis-à-vis the member-states.

This study claims that the anatomy of autonomy should be assessed by considering the *factual behavioural and role dynamics* evoked by individual Commission officials. The Commission, like most executive institutions, has an inbuilt tension between different dynamics, notably intergovernmental, supranational, departmental and epistemic dynamics (Trondal 2006). It is argued that behavioural and role dynamics that transcend intergovernmentalism support Commission autonomy vis-à-vis member-state governments. By shifting patterns of co-operation and conflict from territorial lines towards communitarian (supranational), sectoral (departmental) and professional (epistemic) lines, the factual autonomy of the Commission vis-à-vis the member-states is safeguarded. Whereas intergovernmental behavioural dynamics uphold territorial preferences, concerns, roles and loyalties, the latter three dynamics severely weaken the extent to which territorial concerns are represented within the Commission. Commission autonomy thus rests on a de-territorialisation of the behavioural dynamics inside the Commission. Supranational behaviour denotes that SNEs have a strong “cosmopolitan” Commission loyalty towards the *whole* organisation, and that they act on written or unwritten mandates issued by the Commission politico-administrative leadership. Departmental behaviour is guided by administrative rules and procedures codified in the portfolios assigned to SNEs. Finally, epistemic behaviour is guided by professional expertise and the educational background of the SNEs, loosely knit to fixed mandates from the Commission leadership. The behavioural and role dynamics evoked by SNEs is empirically measured by considering their contact patterns, their emphasis on proposals, statements and arguments from different institutions, their loyalties, and their feeling of allegiances.

Whereas previous studies has primarily studied permanent Commission full-timers (top and medium rank officials as well as Commissioners),<sup>ii</sup> this study unpacks one under-researched laboratory of the Commission: SNEs. SNEs are one under-research segment of the Commission that may serve as a critical case of Commission autonomy. SNEs are recruited to the Commission on short term contracts (maximum four years), they

remain paid by their home government (but get additional allowances from the Commission to pay for additional living costs), and the majority foresee a return to past positions in domestic ministries or agencies when their temporary contracts come to an end (CLEMAD 2003). Arguably, these officials are less likely to act autonomously vis-à-vis their member-state than permanent Commission officials. Our claim is therefore: If SNEs do in fact evoke supranational, departmental and/or epistemic behavioural and role dynamics during their short Commission career, this may serve as a critical test of Commission autonomy.

The argument is presented as follows: the next section suggest an organisation approach to organisational autonomy. This perspective suggests that the autonomy of the Commission is considerably affected by the organisational composition of the Commission. The second section presents fresh survey (N=72) and interview (N=22) data on SNEs. Next, the empirical analysis demonstrates that the Commission blends departmental, epistemic and supranational behavioural dynamics, thereby largely safeguarding the behavioural autonomy of the Commission. The analysis also reveals that in order to understand Commission *autonomy*, the organisational *anatomy* of the Commission has to be carefully considered. A note of caution must, however, be exercised: Due to the limited size of the data as well as the overly Scandinavian bias of the samples, conclusions are drawn with caution. Nevertheless, the empirical observations presented are the only available observations on temporary Commission officials at present, thus rendering the observations vital. The data presented also represents a crucial test of Commission autonomy, thus rendering small N studies analytically significant.

## **The Anatomy of Autonomy: An organisational Approach**

Lipsky (1980: 19) claimed that bureaucratic autonomy is driven by actors' conspicuous desire for maximising their own autonomy. It is argued here that bureaucratic

autonomy is organisationally contingent. It is the formal rules established in a bureaucracy that regulate, constitute and construct the decision-making behaviour and role perceptions evoked by civil servants, ultimately advancing bureaucratic autonomy (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 3). The organisational approach outlined here claims that the behavioural autonomy of SNEs is considerably affected by the organisational structures embedding them. The following four organisational factors are discussed below: (i) the organisational composition of the Commission, (ii) degrees of organisational compatibility across levels of governance, (iii) recruitment procedures of SNEs, and (iv) socialisation dynamics within the Commission. Arguably, the tension between contending behavioural and role dynamics reflects the formal organisation of executive institutions. Accordingly, “organization is itself a mobilization of bias in preparation for action” (Schattschneider 1975: 30).

Civil servants live with a constant overload of potential and inconsistent information that may be attended to at decision situations. Formal organisations guide the decision-making behaviour of civil servants due to the computational limitations and the need for selective search among the latter. Organisations provide collective order out of cognitive disorders by creating local rationalities among the organisational members (March and Shapira 1992). Formal organisations are systematic devices for simplifying, classifying, routinising, directing and sequencing information towards particular decision situations (Schattschneider 1975: 58). Formal organisations “are collections of structures, rules and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life” guiding officials to systematically de/emphasise certain aspects of organisational realities (March and Olsen 2006: 4). The limited cognitive capacities of civil servants are systematised by vertical and horizontal specialisation of formal organisations. By specialising organisations, each civil servant is assigned a formal role that specifies what problems, solutions and consequences s/he should de/emphasise (Egeberg 1999). Organisational specialisation leads to local rationalities and local and routinised learning cycles among the incumbents (Haas 2004: 587; Olsen 2005: 12). Moreover, organisational specialisation renders mid-level bureaucrats identifying with

organisational sub-goals (Cox 1969: 212). Derived from this organisational approach, the following sub-sections suggest four independent variables that systematically affect behavioural autonomy.

### *The organisational composition of the Commission*

Political orders are hybrids and inconsistent collections “of institutions that fit more or less into a coherent system” (Ansell 2004: 234; March and Olsen 2006: 8). Organisations tend to accumulate conflicting organisational principles through horizontal and vertical specialisation (Olsen 2005). When specialising formal organisations horizontally, two conventional principles have been suggested by Luther Gulick (1937). First, formal organisations may be specialised by the major *purpose* served – like research, health, food safety, etc. This principle of organisation tends to activate patterns of co-operation and conflicts among incumbents along sectoral (departmental) cleavages (Egeberg 2006). Co-ordination and contact patterns tend to be channelled *within* departmental portfolios rather than between them. Arguably, organisation by major purpose served is likely to bias decision-making dynamics towards a departmental logic where preferences, contact patterns, roles and loyalties are directed towards portfolios, DGs and units. This mode of horizontal specialisation results in less than adequate horizontal co-ordination *across* departmental units and better co-ordination *within* units (Ansell 2004: 237). The Commission DG and unit structure is a prominent example of this horizontal principle of specialisation (Egeberg and Trondal 1999). The Commission is a horizontally pillarised system of government specialised by purpose and with fairly weak organisational capabilities for horizontal co-ordination at the top through Presidential command (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2005).

A second principle of horizontal specialisation present within the Commission is the principle of the major *process* utilised – like administration, legal service, personnel services, etc. (Gulick 1937). This horizontal principle encourages the horizontal integration of functional departments and the disintegration of the major purposes served. Within the Commission the internal services like Legal Service and DG for



Translation illustrates the process principle. Arguably, organisation by major process is conducive to departmental and epistemic behaviour among the incumbents. The Commission is primarily organised horizontally by purpose, only secondary by function (Egeberg and Trondal 1999).

However, the Commission also embodies a territorial principle of organisation as well as a party political component. First, territorial concerns are embedded into the Commission services by the recruitment of *de facto* national officials (which is particularly evident in the case of SNEs), notably among Administrators, Cabinets and Commissioners. Secondly, a party political component is organised into the College, particularly because Commissioners have become increasingly political heavyweights and because of the creeping parliamentarisation of the College (MacMullen 1997; Nugent 2006). However, Egeberg (2006: 36) argues that “territorial components in the organisation have continuously been weakened”, and the party political component are non-existing at the level of SNEs.

In sum, the Commission is a ‘multi-organisation’ horizontally specialised primarily according to two conventional principles of organisation (Christiansen 1997), contributing to “sending ambivalent signals to Commission officials” (Hooghe 1997: 105). During the contract period, the Commission serves as their primary organisational affiliation, rendering them particularly sensitive to the multiple organisational signals and selections provided by the Commission organisation. Hence, the horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration by purpose and process is conducive to autonomisation of the behavioural dynamics of SNEs (departmental and epistemic behaviour).

### ***Organisational compatibility***

Behavioural and role autonomy among SNEs is arguably also strengthened by some degrees of organisational incompatibility between the domestic ministries and agencies from which SNEs originate, and the Commission. Organisational incompatibility

creates mutual insulations of actors and organisations, thereby establishing organisational boundaries that support organisational autonomy. One impact of organisational incompatibility is behavioural and role autonomy. This novelty argument claims that organisational incompatibility establishes autonomous cognitive scripts and codes of appropriate behaviour in different organisations (Cosser 1975). Due to organisational incompatibilities, the territorially specialised Council of Ministers has for example left less impact on domestic sector ministries than on domestic foreign ministries (Larsson and Trondal 2005). Hence, when officials – like SNEs – enter a new organisational location (notably the Commission) that is highly incompatible to the previous organisation (notably domestic ministries), they are challenged to change behavioural and role dynamics accordingly (Hooghe 2005). Arguably, SNEs who receive portfolios within the Commission that depart significantly from previous domestic portfolios are likely to experience a cognitive challenge towards shifting behaviour and role.

In this study organisational incompatibility is measured by the extent to which SNEs have incompatible portfolios, or perceptions thereof, between their current Commission position and their previous positions in domestic ministries and agencies. For example, SNEs entering the Commission for the first time are likely to discover non-compatible working environments (March 1994: 70). The physical structure of the Commission building, the presence of blue flag with the golden stars together with the member-state flags may strengthen perceptions of novelty and organisational incompatibility (Egeberg 2006). Arguably, the sheer perception of organisational incompatibility is arguably conducive to the emergence of a supranational behavioural and role dynamic among SNEs. By contrast, SNEs are more likely to experience compatible working environments between the Commission units they are affiliated to and domestic ministries. Organisational compatibility at unit level is likely to support departmental and epistemic behavioural and role dynamics (see above).

## *Recruitment procedures*

The autonomy of organisations may be greatly affected by the procedures applied to recruit staff. Different procedures for recruitment tend to bring in different people and keep them more or less autonomous vis-à-vis past constituencies (Cox 1969; Mouritzen 1990: 39). Basically, recruitment may be based on a merit principle, as in most Western democracies, or on a quota principle or other systems of patronage or parachutage, as in the top echelon of the American civil service (Ingraham 1995: 9). Whereas the merit principle recruits permanent civil servants on the basis of competence and past achievements, the quota principle typically recruits officials on more temporary contracts on the basis of, for example, professional, sectoral or territorial mandates (Bekke and van der Meer 2000: 281–282; Ingraham 1995: xix). SNEs are not recruited to the Commission through the open competition process to vacancies based on a written test, but in a more opaque process described by Stevens and Stevens (2001: 87) as a “submarine approach” or as an entry in the back door to the Commission services. In the Commission, the initiatives to launch vacancies and the final selection of relevant candidates to SNE contracts are co-ordinated by the Director or Head of Unit in the relevant Commission DG (EEA 2002: 4). Moreover, it is the Commission that determines the job description for each SNEs (administered by DG ADMIN), based on initial information from the member-states about particular preferences among particular SNEs (EEA 2002: 4). The vast majority of SNEs seem to be recruited on the initiative of Commission DGs as well as on the basis of personal initiatives by individual SNEs (Statskontoret, 2001:17: 34). Arguably, because the “submarine” procedure for recruitment of SNEs is heavily governed by the separate DGs, it is conducive to departmental behaviour among the SNEs.

## *Socialisation dynamics*

Finally, a vast literature reveals that the impact of *pre*-socialisation of actors is modified by organisational *re*-socialisation (e.g. Checkel 2005). National officials entering the Commission are subject to an organisational “exposure effect” (Johnston 2005: 1039) that may contribute to such re-socialisation. Socialisation processes are conducive to

‘autonomisation’ of the socialisees because the socialisator educates, indoctrinates, teaches or diffuses his norms and ideas to the socialisee. Socialisation is a dynamic process whereby individuals are induced into the norms and rules of a given community. By this process individuals come to internalise the norms, rules and interests of the community (Checkel 2005). The socialisation argument claims that behavioural autonomy is conditioned by enduring experiences with institutions, accompanying perceptions of in/appropriate behaviour (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 14). The potential for socialisation to occur is assumed positively related to the *duration* and the *intensity* of interaction amongst the organisational members. Chief to the neo-functional approach, the potential for re-socialisation to occur (‘shift of loyalty towards a new centre’) is assumed positively related to the duration and the intensity of interaction among actors (Checkel 2005; Haas 1958: 16). This claim rests on socialisation theory that emphasises a positive relationship between the intensity of participation within a collective group and the extent to which members of this group develop perceptions of group belongingness and an *esprit de corps*. Intensive in-group contact and interaction is conducive to the emergence of relative stable social, normative and strategic networks that provide autonomous impact on the participants’ perceptions of strategic and appropriate behaviour (Atkinson and Coleman 1992: 161; Börzel 1998: 259; Hay and Richards 2000; Knox, Savage and Harvey 2006: 120). Often, such networks resemble ‘ego-networks’ “between a given individual and his or her ‘alters’” (Knox, Savage and Harvey 2006: 118). The network literature suggests that networks are transformative entities that considerably bias the behaviour of the participants (Börzel 1998: 258; Windhoff-Héritier 1993). The Commission has also been pictured as a network organisation that integrates and re-socialise civil servants across levels of governance (Metcalf 1996). However, as an explanatory tool-kit, network approaches have to be supplemented by more generic causal mechanisms, such as socialisation mechanisms (see above) (Marin and Mayntz 1991: 44).

In sum, the length of stay at the Commission – or the individual seniority of SNEs – may foster a slow re-socialisation of SNEs towards supranational behaviour (Trondal,

2004). Hence, behavioural and role autonomy is fostered by the sheer quantity and quality of actor–interaction inside the Commission apparatus. Ultimately, such actor–interaction contributes to the surfacing of tight networks inside the Commission rather insulated from external influence.

## Data and method

There exists no available, updated or complete list of Commission SNEs. The observations reported below are based on a survey and interview study among a *selected* sample of SNEs. The initial sample of 125 SNEs resulted from a short-list of SNEs provided by CLENAD<sup>iii</sup> and the EFTA Secretariat. The reason for using the EFTA Secretariat is that it provides updated online lists of SNEs from the EEA countries Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein. The survey data was collected through a postal inquiry conducted in 2004. After three rounds of reminders the final sample totals 72, giving a response rate of 58 percent. This response rate is low compared to surveys in domestic central administrations, but higher than recent studies of the Commission (e.g. Hooghe 2005). The final sample covers SNEs from 15 Commission DGs<sup>iv</sup>, five EU member–countries and two EEA countries.<sup>v</sup> This sample is unfortunately strongly biased towards the Nordic countries but it suffices for analytical purposes. The survey is supplemented by in–depth interviews among a sub–sample of SNEs. 22 interviews were conducted in the winter 2004 – 2005 on the basis of a semi–structured interview–guide. The next section is illustrated with direct quotations from the transcribed interviews.

The survey and interview data are based on a systematic selection procedure. This procedure does not allow for empirical generalisations. Still, “[s]mall Ns *can* yield big conclusions” (Andersen 2003: 3 – original emphasis). One road to empirical generalisations is by reference to other empirical studies that support or reject our findings (see the conclusion). In addition, our empirical observations are interpreted by reference to the organisational approach outlined above. However, the low number of respondents implies that the conclusions are indeed suggestive. Finally, Commission

autonomy is assessed on the basis of self reports. Studying perceived autonomy is based on a “reputational approach” (Jacobsen 2007). Hence, without the ability to study the ‘objective’ autonomy of organisations, we are left studying how actors perceive the autonomy of organisations. A final caveat is warranted: It is a potential danger that respondents may portray themselves in a most favourable way. One potential implication thereof is that the role of SNEs as member-state representatives may be under-reported in the data, and thus that the reported Commission autonomy is overstated.

## **The autonomy of SNEs**

A considerable part of the output crafted by the Commission is initiated, drafted and put on the agenda at the administrative level. Hence, to understand Commission decision-making one has to unpack the decision-making behaviour and role perceptions evoked by Commission Administrators, including SNEs. Of the Commission workforce of about 7 400 full-time policy-making Administrators (Hooghe and Nugent 2006: 159), some 1000 officials are seconded on temporary posts (Trondal 2004). For example, the build-up of the EU Foreign Service is staffed both by EU officials and seconded member-state officials. Outside the Commission, government officials at the member-state level are also increasingly hired on temporary posts, rendering their perceived organisational memberships vague, unstable and ambiguous (Bartel and Dutton 2001: 116; Hall 2002). Compatible with the wishes of Jean Monnet when staffing the High Authority, temporary officials provide the Commission with additional expertise, supply learning across levels of government, secure the Commission with a more flexible workforce hired through a fast-track recruitment system (see below), and offer national officials with added EU experiences.

The behavioural patterns of SNEs may be measured by considering their contact patterns (Table 1), their emphasis on proposals, statements and arguments from different institutions (Table 2), their loyalties (Table 3), and their feeling of allegiances (Table 4).

It is important to remember, however, that there may be a difference between the frequency of contacts and the importance or weight attached to these contacts.

**Table 1: Percent of SNEs who have the following contact patterns (percent).<sup>\*,1)</sup>**

<b>1) Intergovernmental contacts:</b>	
- with the government of their country of origin	9
- with the governments of other countries	14
<b>2) Supranational contacts:</b>	
- with the Commissioner (and Cabinet) of their DG	5
- with Commissioners of other DGs	5
- with the Council of Ministers	6
- with the European Parliament	2
<b>3) Departmental contacts:</b>	
- with the Director General of their DG	3
- with the Director of their Directorate	18
- with colleagues within their Unit	97
- with colleagues within other units in their DG	56
- with colleagues in other DGs	27
<b>4) Epistemic contacts:</b>	
- with individuals <i>inside</i> the Commission whom they respect for their expertise	36
- with individuals <i>outside</i> the Commission whom they respect for their expertise	27
- with the Commission expert committees	22
- with universities or research institutions	25
<b>Mean N</b>	100 (67)

*\*) Original question: "How frequently do you have contacts and meetings with the following during a typical week?"*

*1) The variables listed include officials having contacts fairly often, or very often with the respective institutions. This dichotomy builds from the following five-point scale: very often (value 1), fairly often (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly seldom (value 4), and very seldom (value 5).*

SNEs rank their contact patterns as follows: departmental contacts (mean=40 percent), epistemic contacts (mean=28 percent), intergovernmental contacts (mean=12 percent), and supranational contacts (mean=5 percent). First, *departmental contacts* are primarily directed within SNEs' own Unit and DG, and more towards fellow colleagues horizontally than with the administrative leadership vertically. Hence, we see a significant impact of the horizontal specialisation of the Commission with respect to the decision-making behaviour of the staff. According to one SNE, "within my Unit, there are waterproof borders between our dossiers" (interview – author's translation). Inter-DG contacts are directed *within* dossiers rather than across dossiers (interviews). The

interviews, however, reveal that SNEs have frequent contact with their Head of Unit. The Head of Unit is pictured as a central gate-keeper inside the Commission hierarchy (interviews). “The thing most SNEs comment on is how important the hierarchy in the Commission is” (CLENAD 2002: 43). According to one SNE, “I have had four Heads of Unit, and the working procedures have changed each time” (interview – author’s translation). Supporting these observations, our data also reveals that the majority of SNEs strongly agree on the following statement: “I have clear rules about what to do in my position” (55 per cent). Similarly, the vast majority of SNEs do not enjoy much behavioural discretion in their positions (25 per cent).<sup>vi</sup> However, departmental contacts may also reflect the departmentalised recruitment practices of SNEs into the Commission (the “submarine procedure”). Our survey data reveals that the majority of the SNEs are recruited from domestic agencies and ministries that correspond closely to their current Commission portfolio.

The *epistemic contacts* evoked by SNEs are primarily directed towards experts inside and outside the Commission, towards universities and research institutions as well as towards Commission expert committees. The fairly weak epistemic contact patterns, as compared to the departmental contact patterns, may reflect the fact that SNEs are recruited outside the ordinary competitive track. The *supranational contacts* reported are weak, even when compared to the intergovernmental contacts.

Finally, *intergovernmental contacts* are few and they are mainly directed towards the governments of other countries rather than towards the government of their country of origin. Most SNEs report that their home ministry or agency seldom initiates contacts towards them and that they are forgotten by their home administration (interview). According to one SNE, “I have very little contact with my ministry back home, almost nothing” (interview – author’s translation). The following phrase seems to cover the impression of most SNEs: “Out of sight, out of mind” (CLENAD 2003: 26; Statskontoret 2001:17: 11).<sup>vii</sup> SNEs receive “very little feedback from capitals ... and ... in general they had expected to be in closer contact with their employer” (EFTA



Secretariat 2000: 2). Some SNEs report a preference for more intensive contacts with their member-state ministries than offered by these ministries (The Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2004; interviews). One reason for this lack of contact from the home administration may be due to a lack of domestic strategy on SNEs. For example, the Swedish Government admit lacking a central strategy on SNEs and they have rather poor central co-ordination of how Swedish SNEs should be recruited and utilised by the Swedish Government (Statskontoret 2001:17: 9; The Government Offices of Sweden 2002: 14).<sup>viii</sup> These observations reflect the *primacy* of the Commission for SNEs and the *de facto* autonomy of SNEs vis-à-vis their home governments. Finally, the SNEs were also asked with whom they mostly interact outside office – own nationals or people with other national origins. 78 per cent report interacting *fairly often or more* with people with other national origins, whereas 47 per cent report interacting *fairly often or more* with own nationals. Hence, SNEs have a stronger non-intergovernmental contact pattern outside office than they have at office. This may illustrate the impact of the organisational corpus of the Commission services as regards the behavioural autonomy of SNEs.

The overly Scandinavian bias in our sample, however, may potentially skew our observations. Some Scandinavian SNEs report that French SNEs have a stronger intergovernmental contact patterns than other SNEs: “France use the French SNEs to the maximum. They are consulted directly by the French Government” (interview – author’s translation). Similarly, a study by the Swedish government agency *Statskontoret* (2001:17) indicates that the British and Dutch governments use their SNEs instrumentally to influence the Commission. In stark contrast to the non-existing Swedish SNE policy (see above), the British SNE policy is both explicitly stated and highly co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office (Statskontoret 2001:17: 51).

In sum, Table 1 demonstrates that the contact patterns evoked by SNEs seem fairly autonomous (departmental and epistemic).

Table 2 illustrates those proposals, statements and arguments emphasised by SNEs.

**Table 2: Percent of SNEs who emphasise proposals, statements and arguments from the following institutions (percent).<sup>\*,1)</sup>**

<b>1) Intergovernmental considerations:</b>	
- from the government of their country of origin	14
- from the government of other countries	15
<b>2) Supranational considerations:</b>	
- from the Commissioner (and the Cabinet) of their DG	76
- from Commissioners of other DGs	43
- from the Council of Ministers	48
- from the European Parliament	39
<b>3) Departmental considerations:</b>	
- from the Director General of their DG	75
- from the Director of their Directorate	87
- from their own Unit	99
- from other units within their DG	81
- from other DGs	63
<b>4) Epistemic considerations:</b>	
- from individuals <i>inside</i> the Commission whom they respect for their expertise	72
- from individuals <i>outside</i> the Commission whom they respect for their expertise	62
- from Commission expert committees	43
- from universities or research institutions	32
<b>Mean N:</b>	100 (62)

*\*) Original question: “When working as a seconded national expert in the Commission, how much consideration do you put on proposals, statements and arguments from the following?”*

*1) The variables listed include officials emphasising proposals, statements and arguments from the respective institutions fairly much, or very much. This dichotomy builds from the following five-point scale: very much (value 1), fairly much (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly little (value 4), and very little (value 5).*

The considerations emphasised by SNEs are ranked as follows: Departmental considerations (mean=81 percent), supranational considerations (mean=52 percent), epistemic considerations (mean=52 percent), and intergovernmental considerations (mean=15 percent). *Departmental considerations* are primarily directed towards SNEs’ own Unit, own DG and other DGs (ranked by importance). Hence, the inter-DG friction often referred to in the literature (e.g. Cini 1996: 153; Smith 2003: 140) is indeed observed among SNEs. According to one SNE, “I would say that the level of conflict between DGs is higher than between ministries at home” (interview – author’s translation). *Supranational considerations* are mainly directed towards the Commissioner (and Cabinets) of their DG. Hence, SNEs have a priority profile that is strongly affected

by the horizontal specialisation of the DGs, also with respect to their supranational behaviour. *Epistemic considerations* are primarily directed towards individual experts inside and outside the Commission. Finally, *intergovernmental considerations* are weak and equally distributed towards their own government and towards the government of other countries. Similarly, a vast majority of national government officials attending EU committees perceive Commission officials as mainly independent of particular national interests (Egeberg, Schaefer and Trondal 2003: 34).

In sum, Table 2 demonstrates that the considerations emphasised by SNEs are fairly autonomous (departmental, supranational and epistemic).

Table 3 reveals the relative importance of intergovernmental, supranational, departmental and epistemic loyalties among SNEs.

**Table 3: Percent of SNEs emphasising the following four loyalties (absolute numbers in parantheses)\***

	<i>Fairly much or very much</i>	<i>Both/and</i>	<i>Fairly little or very little</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Intergovernmental loyalty:</b> - Loyalty towards the member-states as a group	47	30	23	100 (66)
<b>Supranational loyalty:</b> - Loyalty towards the Commission as a whole	65	15	20	100 (66)
<b>Departmental loyalty:</b> - Loyalty towards the Director General of their own DG	66	16	18	100 (67)
- Loyalty towards the Director of their own Directorate	78	12	10	100 (68)
- Neutral enforcement of decisions and established regulations within the Commission	75	22	3	100 (64)
<b>Epistemic loyalty:</b> - Professional neutrality within their own position	88	9	3	100 (65)

\* Original question: "How much emphasis do you generally put on the following considerations?"

SNEs have several representational roles to play because they are partly embedded into the Commission and partly into the domestic administration from which they originate. One effect thereof is that SNEs evoke multiple loyalties (Table 3). One important observation is that the loyalty patterns revealed above are fairly autonomous. The two loyalties evoked most strongly by SNEs are epistemic and departmental. Hence, as expected, SNEs who are positioned in medium rank positions in the Commission hierarchy attach stronger loyalty towards their own DG and profession than towards the Commission as a whole. Cini (1997: 86) also finds that “institutional identification being with the DG rather than with the Commission as a whole”. Moreover, SNEs also activate fairly strong supranational loyalties. This observation challenges previous studies of SNEs that underscore their national loyalties (Coombes 1970; Smith 1973; Smith 2001). Also, the study of Hooghe (2005) found significant inroad of supranational loyalty among top Commission officials. Similarly, Shore (2000) demonstrates that a strong sense of community emerge even among new recruits to permanent posts. Hence, the observations reported in Table 3 support the picture of SNEs as having a fairly high level of behavioural and role autonomy.

Finally, a bivariate correlation analysis (Pearson’s R) reveals positive correlations between intergovernmental loyalties on the one hand and departmental loyalties (.27★) and epistemic loyalties (.25★) on the other. Hence, the role perceptions evoked by SNEs are partly complementary. Our data demonstrate that SNEs rarely feel a conflict of loyalty between different constituencies, concerns and role ideals. SNEs tend to manage multiple roles (cf. Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 12). One SNE argue that, “my loyalty lies here with the Commission” (interview – author’s translation). Yet, many SNEs also agree to the dictum, “I think in my heart I still represent my self” (interview – author’s translation). Hence, the assumed loyalty conflict between domestic and supranational constituencies is challenged.

**Table 4: Percent of SNEs feeling an allegiance (identify or feel responsible to) towards the following (absolute numbers in parentheses)\***

	<i>Fairly strongly or very strongly</i>	<i>Both/and</i>	<i>Fairly weakly or very weakly</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Intergovernmental allegiance:</b> - Towards the government of their own country	5	19	77	100 (65)
<b>Supranational allegiance:</b> - Towards the EU system as a whole	63	23	14	100 (64)
- Towards the Commission as a whole	69	22	9	100 (67)
<b>Departmental allegiance:</b> - Towards their own DG	84	9	7	100 (68)
- Towards their own Unit	84	10	6	100 (68)
<b>Epistemic allegiance:</b> - Towards their own professional (educational) background and expertise	76	16	8	100 (67)

\* Original question: "When working as a seconded national expert in the Commission, whom of the following do you feel an allegiance to (identify or feel responsible to)?"

Table 4 confirms the above observations: The allegiances emphasised by SNEs are highly autonomous, and they are ranked as follows: departmental allegiances, epistemic allegiances, supranational allegiances, and intergovernmental allegiances. Importantly, supranational allegiances rank significantly higher than intergovernmental allegiances. As expected, SNEs evoke stronger allegiances towards their DG, Unit and professional background than towards the EU and the Commission as wholes. Moreover, a bivariate correlation analysis (Pearson's R) reveals strong positive correlations between allegiances towards the EU system and the Commission (.70\*\*), allegiances between the Commission and the DG in which the SNEs are affiliated (.37\*\*), and allegiances between the DG level and the Unit level (.63\*\*).

Hence, the SNEs studied tend to develop multiple allegiances within the Commission. According to one SNE:

I travel around as a representative for the Commission and speak on behalf of the Commission in mass media. I have a stronger responsibility for external contacts in the Commission than home in the ministry (Interview, author's translation).

Another SNE argue that “[w]e do not think according to nationality here. That is irrelevant. Nationality is only interesting over a cup of coffee” (interview, author's translation).<sup>ix</sup>

## Conclusion

The ambition of this study has been to reassess the factual behavioural autonomy of the Commission, as well as organisational conditions thereof. It is argued that SNEs serve as a critical case of Commission autonomy due to their fairly ambiguous affiliation towards the Commission. Empirically, the study demonstrates that the behavioural and role dynamics of SNEs blends departmental, epistemic and supranational dynamics. Moreover, these behavioural and role dynamics support the factual autonomy of the Commission. The suspicion early voiced by Coombes (1970) that SNEs are highly conscious of their national background is thus challenged by this study. A long lived assumption in the literature has been that the “secondment system would tend to produce an unmanageable cacophony” of officials loyal to the national civil service (Cox 1969: 208). For example, the Spierenburg Report § 110) argued that, “...[t]he Commission should ensure that the use made of national experts does not rise significantly above its present level, or again the risk is run of distorting the European character of the administration”. This article severely challenges such claims. Moreover, as a least likely case of Commission autonomy, this study serves as a robust test thereof. However, it is argued here that a possible decline of the powers of the Commission vis-à-vis other EU institutions (Kassim and Menon 2004) may potentially go together with increased Commission autonomy vis-à-vis the member-states.

It is also argued that Commission *autonomy* is considerably conditioned by the organisational *anatomy* of the Commission organisation. The independent variables considered are the following four: (i) the organisational composition of the Commission services, (ii) organisational incompatibilities across levels of governance, (iii) recruitment procedures of Commission officials through a so-called “submarine” approach, and (iv) socialisation dynamics inside the Commission. The empirical observations presented merely *illustrate* that the behavioural and role dynamics of SNEs are indeed affected by these organisational factors. For example, the contact patterns and institutional allegiances among SNEs strongly echo the organisational boundaries of the Commission DGs and units (i). Secondly, the supranational loyalties and allegiances evoked by SNEs reflect both the organisational incompatibilities experienced among SNEs across levels of government (ii), and processes of re-socialisation inside the Commission (iv). Finally, the departmental contact patterns observed reflect the departmentalised recruitment practices of SNEs to the Commission (the “submarine procedure”). The data reveals that the majority of the SNEs are recruited from domestic agencies and ministries that correspond closely to their current Commission portfolio. Moreover, the fairly weak epistemic contact patterns, as compared to the strong departmental contact patterns, may reflect the fact that SNEs are recruited outside the ordinary competitive track.

Hence, the autonomy of the Commission seems to be organisationally contingent and not only subject to what Lipsky (1980:19) calls actors’ conspicuous desire for autonomy. One implication of our findings is that Commission autonomy is sensitive to reforms of the Commission apparatus. Reforms such as the new rules for horizontal mobility of Commission officials, reforms of the DG and Unit structure, and increased focus on meritocracy in promoting staff are likely to impact on Commission autonomy. According to the organisational approach outlined here, bureaucratic autonomy is indeed contingent on the organisational embeddedness of the bureaucrats. A final note of caution must, however, be repeated: Due to the limited size as well as the overly Scandinavian bias in the data, conclusions should be drawn with caution. Nevertheless,

the empirical observations presented are the only available observations on temporary Commission officials at present, thus rendering the observations vital. The data presented also represents a crucial test of Commission autonomy, thus rendering this small N study analytically significant.



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## *Endnotes*

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<sup>ii</sup> One clear exception to this is the studies of Commission expert committees, mainly staffed with part-time participating member-state officials (e.g. Egebeg, Schaefer and Trondal 2003).

<sup>iii</sup> CLENAD is the staff organisation for SNEs in the Commission.

<sup>iv</sup> The DGs covered by the study are: DG Education and Culture, DG Employment and Social Affairs, DG Enterprise, DG Environment, DG Energy and Transport, Eurostat, DG Fisheries, DG Health and Consumer Affairs, DG Information Society, DG Research, DG Taxation and Customs Union, DG Economic and Financial Affairs, DG Trade, DG Competition, and DG Development.

<sup>v</sup> EU member-states covered: Sweden (N=37), Denmark (N=3), Ireland (N=2), Germany (N=4) and France (N=1). EEA countries covered: Norway (N=20) and Iceland (N=2). Three respondents did not report their country of origin.

<sup>vi</sup> These numbers are not reported in Table 1

<sup>vii</sup> Similar observations are done in the Council of Europe (MacMullen 2004: 418).

<sup>viii</sup> Some times SNEs are recruited from national agencies without the knowledge of the ministry (Statskontoret 2001:17: 27).

<sup>ix</sup> SNEs also have a supranational allegiance when measured as follows: “I put forward proposals I think is in the best interests of the member-states as a group” (73 percent strongly agree), and “I put forward proposals I think is in the best interest of the EU” (87 percent strongly agree).