



# ***The Denationalisation of the Cabinets in the European Commission***

## ***A research note***

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## **Abstract**

The *cabinets* of the European Commission are seen to play a crucial role in the policy-making process. So far, however, they have in many respects remained 'black boxes'. In this paper we 'unpack' the demographic composition in terms of nationality of the three latest commissions' *cabinets*. The standard portrayal of *cabinets* has been that of national enclaves and points of access. Reforms during the period have required a more multi-national composition. Our study shows that not only have the new rules been implemented: the new formal requirements have become over-fulfilled, and increasingly so. In 2004 96% of the *cabinets* contained more nationalities than formally prescribed and 57% of the personnel were non-compatriots of their respective commissioners. Based on studies of comparable phenomena, it is reason to believe that decomposition of a particular demographical cluster within an organisational unit reduces the impact of such demographical factors on officials' decision behaviour.

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## Introduction

The main executive body of the European Union (EU), the European Commission, shares some key characteristics with national ministerial organisation: It consists of a sectorally and functionally arranged bureaucracy with most of the staff having permanent positions and a college of temporary executive politicians in charge of their respective portfolios at the top. Each of these politicians, the commissioners, disposes over a group of advisers who are hired and fired at their discretion. As the name indicates, these groups called *cabinets* were originally modelled on parts of French ministerial organisation. While units in the Commission administration in general have been multi-nationally composed, *cabinets* have historically mainly been filled with compatriots of the respective commissioners. Thus, *cabinets* have often been portrayed as obvious points of access for national interests within an institution that is supposed to be supranational in character. However, in this paper we demonstrate that a considerable amount of de-nationalisation has in fact taken place from 1999 until now: One thing is that rules have required a more multi-national composition of *cabinets* than before. We find, however, that the number of nationalities represented in *cabinets* exceeds the number formally required, and increasingly so. Such over-fulfilment happens in the *cabinets* of commissioners from old member states as well as from new member states. At the start of the Barroso Commission (2004) those *cabinet* members sharing the nationality of their commissioner were for the first time in a minority.

The purpose of this paper is to present systematic data on the demographic composition of the *cabinets* as regards national background, covering the Santer, Prodi and Barroso Commissions. As far as we know this has not been done before and it might justify the highly descriptive character of this research note. As a background, we start by presenting a short overview of the role of commissioners' *cabinets* in the decision-making process and of the reforms that have been adopted in order to constrain the role of the national factor in *cabinets'* work. Then we clarify how the data were collected before showing the results in the subsequent section. Although we do not have observations on behavioural consequences of the demographic changes that have taken place, we shortly discuss on a theoretical ground the potential behavioural implications in a separate section before we reach the conclusion. Thus, although the reform and recruitment processes themselves might deserve scholarly attention, these are not the topic of this paper.

## The role of commissioners' *cabinets*

Like a minister's group of political advisers, a commissioner's *cabinet* is there in order to increase the capacity of the executive politician at the top in his or her dealing with the various tasks assigned to this position. Thus, *cabinet* members see to that political signals are transmitted to the Commission services and that policy proposals coming up from the same services are adequately considered at the political level. They write speeches, deal with lobbyists and may step in when the commissioner is hindered from attending meetings etc. Due to the Commission's principle of collegial responsibility, a commissioner's *cabinet* is thought to play a crucial role in monitoring the activities taking place within the portfolios of other commissioners (Nugent 2001; Spence 2006). The coordinating role of the *cabinets* seems to have become even more significant after the 2004 enlargement of the EU: the current size of the college has led to less time available pr. agenda topic at the weekly meetings, thus pressing resolution downwards to *cabinets* (and below) (Kurpas et al. 2008).

In the early days of the Commission, *cabinets* were, with few exceptions, staffed with compatriots of the respective commissioners (Bitsch 2007). Spence (2006: 66) reports that the governments of France and the UK drew up a list of civil service candidates for *cabinet* posts with their respective commissioners. Posts additional to the ones funded by the Commission could be funded by the country from which a commissioner originated. No surprise then that *cabinets* historically have been portrayed as national enclaves (Michelmann 1978), or as being apparently sensitive to national interests (Spence 1994: 107-8; Cini 1996: 111-15). Highly indicative is the fact that *cabinets* were referred to as for example the 'German' or the 'French' *cabinet* (Eppink 2007: 121). Liaison with national governments seems to have been one of their key tasks (Spence 2006).

In the 1990s the Commission funded six members of each *cabinet* provided that at least one member was of another nationality than the commissioner. In 1999 President Prodi introduced the rule that at least three nationalities should be represented in each *cabinet*. In addition, the head of *cabinet* or the deputy head of *cabinet* should be a non-compatriot of the commissioner. The motive behind the reform was probably to circumscribe the room for national manoeuvring within the *cabinets* (Spence 2006). Probably for the same reason President Barroso decided that at least three members should be drawn from the Commission services. The Prodi initiative to down-size *cabinets* is also in line with these reforms (Spence 2006). Among others, the study by Ross had demonstrated that *cabinets*, often with a national bias, could be intervening frequently into the work of the respective services and even reaching around

and into other commissioners' *cabinets* and services (Ross 1995: 75). Capacity reduction was a way to counteract such tendencies.

## Data sources 1)

*Cabinet* personnel may shift during the term of office. Therefore, consistently throughout this study, data on the personnel's nationality are based on the *cabinets'* composition when a new Commission took office. As *cabinet* personnel count 'heads' and 'deputy heads' as well as 'members'. Secretaries and clerical staff are not included. Of the three commissions looked at in this study only the Prodi Commission published information on the national background of its *cabinet* personnel (European Commission 1999). Information on three persons were lacking, however, this was gathered by e-mailing former *cabinet* members. The Santer Commission caused the biggest challenge: The names of the relevant persons could be found in 'The European Union Encyclopaedia and Directory 1996' but information on nationality was not available. Through intense e-mailing to the Santer Commission's *cabinet* members and their secretaries, as well as tracing persons on the internet, information on the nationality of all relevant persons were collected. The informants were people who had worked closely together within the respective *cabinets*, so there is reason to believe they have reported correctly although more than a decade has passed. As regards the Barroso Commission, its 2004 composition (incl. *cabinet* composition) was available in 'EU Environment News' (2004). Information on all *cabinet* personnel's nationality was attained through e-mailing and telephoning *cabinet* members and their secretaries.

## Results

Table 1 shows the number of nationalities represented in the *cabinets* at the start of the Santer Commission: All have at least two nationalities, as prescribed by the rules, however, eight of the twenty units have more than the required number. Table 2 unveils that the reform initiated by Prodi was implemented immediately when his team took office in 1999: All *cabinets* contained at least three nationalities as laid down by the rules, and eleven of the twenty *cabinets* had even more. As in the Santer Commission, over-fulfilment took place regardless of the date of EU membership of the country from which the commissioner originated. Over-fulfilment across *cabinets'* seniority can also be observed in Table 3 where as many as 24 out of the 25 *cabinets* of the Barroso Commission (2004) consisted of more nationalities than necessary. Table 4 summarises the degree of over-fulfilment across the three Commissions and shows that this has increased rather significantly: While

40% of the *cabinets* had more nationalities represented than formally required in 1995, this holds for 55% in 1999 and for 96% in 2004.

Table 1: Commission *cabinets* 1995: Number of nationalities represented, by *cabinets'* seniority

Number of Nationalities	Cabinet's Seniority (date of origin)*			Total
	1958	1973-93	1994	
1	0	0	0	0
2	7	4	1	12
3	1	4	0	5
4	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	2	2
6	0	0	0	0
7	1	0	0	1
Total	9	8	3	20

\*) i.e. date of EU membership of the country from which the commissioner originated

Table 2: Commission *cabinets* 1999: Number of nationalities represented, by *cabinets'* seniority

Number of Nationalities	Cabinet's Seniority (date of origin)			Total
	1958	1973-93	1994	
1	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0
3	3	5	1	9
4	4	3	0	7
5	1	0	2	3
6	0	0	0	0
7	1	0	0	1
Total	9	8	3	20

Table 3: Commission *cabinets* 2004: Number of nationalities represented, by *cabinets'* seniority

Number of Nationalities	Cabinet's Seniority (date of origin)				Total
	1958	1973-93	1994	2004	
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	0	0	1
4	3	4	0	1	8
5	0	2	3	6	11
6	2	0	0	3	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 4: Percentage of *cabinets* having more nationalities represented than formally required

1995	1999	2005
40	55	96
(20)	(20)	(25)

Table 5 reveals the proportion of *cabinet* personnel having the same nationality as the commissioner across the three commissions. While in 1995 a clear majority (75%) were compatriots of their respective commissioners, the proportion had shrunk to 51% in 1999. In 2004 those compatriots found themselves in a minority position (43%). The reduction as regards compatriots has taken place at all the three position levels, but most dramatically at the level of deputy head of *cabinet* (from 75% to 16%). This radical change reflects the immediate implementation of the Prodi reform as regards the nationality of *cabinet* leaders. Clearly, however, most commissioners have preferred to appoint compatriots as heads of *cabinet*, although also this proportion has been declining over time.

In 1995 the formal rules required that each of the 20 *cabinets* should accommodate at least one not sharing the nationality of the commissioner, i.e. in total 20 of the then 152 *cabinet* personnel (i.e. 13%). The Prodi reform of 1999 claimed two non-compatriots in each *cabinet*, i.e. 40 out of the then 123 staff (i.e. 33%). Having 25 *cabinets* in 2004, 50 of the then 171 staff (i.e. 29%) should be non-compatriots. Thus, at all three points in time the actual proportions of non-compatriots very clearly exceed the formal requirements. These results are summarised in Table 6.

Table 5: Percentage of *cabinet* personnel having the same nationality as the commissioner at three points in time, by level of position

	Head of Cabinet	Deputy Head of Cabinet	Cabinet Members	Total
<b>1995</b>	95	75	71	75
	(20)	(20)	(112)	(152)
<b>1999</b>	75	15	54	51
	(20)	(20)	(83)	(123)
<b>2005</b>	68	16	43	43
	(25)	(25)	(121)	(171)

Table 6: Percentage of *cabinet* personnel being non-compatriots of their respective commissioners

	1995	1999	2005
Formel Requirements	13	33	29
Actual Proportion	25	49	57
	(152)	(123)	(171)

## Discussion

As regards the demographical composition of commissioners' *cabinets* we can ascertain that a considerable degree of denationalisation has indeed taken place since 1995. Not only have reforms aiming at a certain curtailment of the national factor been implemented in practice (something which is far from self-evident), but the formal requirements have become significantly over-fulfilled. As shown, in 2004 96% of the *cabinets* had more nationalities represented than prescribed by the rules and commissioners' non-compatriots were for the first time in a majority. Since over-fulfilment happens also in *cabinets* of commissioners originating from old member states, a reasonable interpretation could be that highly multinational compositions seem to have become the rule. Had over-fulfilment been observed only within the *cabinets* of new member states, this might have been attributed to their novelty, making them more inclined to hire experienced people from old member states or from the Commission services. If, or when (due to the Nice or Lisbon Treaties)

some member countries will lose their right to nominate a commissioner, we might expect even stronger support for multi-nationally composed *cabinets*.

As said, we have no available data on possible behavioural consequences of the demographical changes we have observed. Studies of national bureaucracies have, in general, taught us that demographic background characteristics like officials' social and geographic origin do not matter very much for officials' actual behaviour compared to factors like bureaucratic role and career, and educational background (Meier and Nigro 1976; Lægneid and Olsen 1984; Egeberg 2003). This seems to be the case also as regards the Commission services (Curtin and Egeberg 2008: 642-7; Suvarierol 2008). Hooghe (2001) observed, though, that officials' *attitudes* on broad topics like supra-nationalism and capitalism were related to their national background. Arguably, however, this finding may be quite compatible with findings showing that officials' bureaucratic role, e.g. their directorate affiliation, is important in order to explain their actual *decision behaviour* (Cram 1994; Cini 2000; Hooghe 2000, Mörth 2000). Even temporary national experts in the Commission who are paid by their home governments seem to have their primary loyalty and work orientation to their respective directorates in the Commission (Trondal et al. 2008). The sectoral and functional specialisation of the Commission is also reflected in commissioners' role behaviour which seems to be characterised by a strong (sectoral) portfolio affiliation in addition to their overall Commission role, country (national) role and party political role (Egeberg 2006).

On this background, then, we may ask whether the *cabinet* changes are primarily demographical, and whether significant *behavioural* consequences are at all imaginable? When we think that also behavioural changes are involved in this case this has to do with the former rather uniform, *clustered* composition of the *cabinets* in terms of nationality. Such clustering seems to have been a distinctive feature of the *cabinets*; not usually found within other units of the Commission. Studies of national administrations indicate that demographical background factors are somewhat more related to officials' behaviour in units which are demographically clustered and in which the assigned policy area encourages a 'representational linkage' (Selden 1997). Accordingly, when clusters become decomposed, as in our case, we expect a diminished role for background factors as regards accounting for actual decision behaviour. Arguably, the fact that a clear majority of the current *cabinet* personnel seems to have been drawn from the Commission services also may point in the direction of a more modest role for nationality (Heskestad 2008)2).

Thus, on a theoretical ground, we can expect denationalisation of commissioners' *cabinets* to include behavioural as well as demographical changes. We found, however, that the heads of *cabinet*, although as a group also somewhat denationalised over the years, are still overwhelmingly compatriots of their respective commissioners. Since some *cabinets* tend to work in a more hierarchical way than others (Spence 2006: 63), the behavioural effect of a changing *cabinet* demography could be somewhat modified within the more hierarchical ones. One should, however, probably not overstate this point: In 'policy bureaucracies' policy proposals and considerations tend to flow upwards due to the availability of expertise and capacity at lower levels (Page and Jenkins 2005). In addition, as we have seen, most deputy heads of *cabinet* today are non-compatriots of their respective commissioners.

Our findings on denationalisation of commissioners' *cabinets* seem to fit well into a larger picture of the development of the European Commission: Over time some important ties to the institutions that erected it in the first place, namely national governments, have become diluted. At the level of the college this is visible as regards the increased role of the European Parliament in appointing the president and the other commissioners and as regards the Commission President's enhanced influence on the distribution and redistribution of portfolios among commissioners. At the level of the services it is in this respect worth noticing that the services have gained very much control over recruitment and appointment processes at all echelons of the administration (Balint et al. 2008; Curtin and Egeberg 2008). 3)

## Conclusion

The *cabinets* of European Commissioners are seen to play a crucial role in the policy-making process. So far they have to a considerable extent been 'black boxes': As far as we know, no systematic data on them have been presented. In this paper we 'unpack' the demographical composition in terms of nationality of three commissions; the Santer, Prodi and Barroso Commissions. The standard portrayal of *cabinets* has been that of national enclaves. The Prodi reform required *cabinets* to have at least three nationalities represented, and a *cabinet's* head or deputy head should be a non-compatriot of the commissioner. Still, however, compatriots of the commissioner would have been in a comfortable majority. Our study shows that not only have the new rules been implemented (something which can not be taken for granted), but the new requirements were over-fulfilled, and increasingly so. In 2004 96% of the *cabinets* contained more nationalities than formally prescribed and 57% of the personnel were non-compatriots of their respective commissioners. Also the leader level has become denationalised although this has happened

primarily at the level of the deputy head of *cabinet*. Since over-fulfilment also has taken place within the *cabinets* of commissioners originating from old member states and not only in 'new' *cabinets* that might want to draw on experienced persons from other countries, we think it is reasonable to believe that a norm on multinational recruitment has been established.

We do not have any data on the possible behavioural consequences of the observed demographical changes. However, based on studies of comparable phenomena, it is reasonable to believe that decomposition of a particular demographical cluster within an organisational unit reduces the impact of such demographical factors on officials' decision behaviour. Our findings on *cabinet* denationalisation seem to fit into a larger picture of an institution, in this case the European Commission, that over time weakens some of the constraints and control mechanisms that were originally imposed on it by those who erected it in the first place.

Three related research questions that have not been addressed in this paper might deserve future scholarly attention: First, what are the behavioural consequences, if any, of the observed demographic changes? Do *cabinets* take on new roles due to their changing composition? Second, what characterised the reform process itself; to what extent were the new rules on composition determined by the Commission leadership itself? Did outside actors, like national governments, try to intervene in the reform process? Finally, and third, how can we explain that the formal requirements as regards multinationality have been significantly over-fulfilled?

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## Notes

- 1) This paper builds on data collected by Andreas Heskestad for his master thesis (Heskestad 2008).
- 2) Based on data on 14 of the 27 *cabinets* at work in 2007, it seems as if 65% of the personnel had been recruited from the Commission services. Barroso claimed that each *cabinet* should have at least three persons recruited from the Commission services, i.e. approximately 47% of the staff. Thus, also this formal requirement has been considerably over-fulfilled (Heskestad 2008: 49).
- 3) Not all ties between the Commission and national governments have been weakened, though: The use of expert committees dominated by national officials at the policy proposal stage is widespread indeed (Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008). However, national officials on these committees are only partly perceiving themselves as government representatives (Trondal and Veggeland 2003). There are also close and direct relationships between the Commission and national agencies in the policy implementation phase, however, also at this stage national officials are only partly oriented towards their own ministries (Curtin and Egeberg 2008; Martens 2008).

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