

# The Compound Machinery of Government: The Case of Seconded Officials in the European Commission<sup>1</sup>

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*This article explores the compound machinery of government. Attention is directed towards decision-making within the core executive of the European Union – the European Commission. The article studies seconded national civil servants (SNEs) hired on short-term contracts. The analysis benefits from an original and rich body of surveys and interview data derived from current and former SNEs. The decision-making dynamics of SNEs are shown to contain a compound mix of departmental, epistemic, and supranational dynamics. This study clearly demonstrates that the socializing power of the Commission is conditional and only partly sustained when SNEs exit the Commission. Any long-lasting effect of socialization within EU's executive machinery of government is largely absent. The compound decision-making dynamics of SNEs are explained by (i) the organizational affiliations of SNEs, (ii) the formal organization of the Commission apparatus, and (iii) only partly by processes of re-socialization of SNEs within the Commission.*

## Introduction

This article explores the compound machinery of government. Profound transformation of government(s) is caused by the multi-level integration of government sub-units in Europe whereby “previously separate units [turn] into components of a coherent system” of executive government (Deutsch 1968: 158). Increasing interaction and interdependence between the European Commission (Commission) and domestic administrations creates different mixes of executive decision-making dynamics at both levels (Egeberg 2006; March and Olsen 2006). Governments make increasingly complex trade-offs in order to solve, buffer, and rebalance these dynamics (Kettl 2002: 153; Van den Berg and Toonen 2007). This article analyzes one essential part of government transformation – that is the compound nature of decision-making within the core executive of the European Union (EU) – the Commission.

This study has three ambitions: First, a conceptual taxonomy is outlined that suggests four generic dynamics that compete for attention in everyday Commission decision-making. Arguably, decision-making in the Commission oscillates between supranational, intergovernmental, departmental, and epistemic dynamics. This fourfold taxonomy is subsequently transposed into a corresponding conceptual map of the decision-making behavior, roles, and loyalties available to individual Commission officials. Secondly, an institutional approach is outlined to account for conditions under which each of these dynamics is applied by Commission officials. Finally, the article offers an empirical analysis that demonstrates the compound nature of decision-making at the actor-level among temporary Commission officials. This analysis benefits from an original and rich body of three tightly coordinated

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surveys (N = 169) and interview studies (N = 50) among *current* and *former* temporary Commission officials (see below).

The Commission occupies a pivotal role as the core executive EU institution with key initiating powers, resources, and capacities. However, beyond single-case studies there is a surprising dearth of theoretically informed empirical studies of the Commission (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Gehring 2003; Gould and Kelman 1970; Johnston 2005; Rochester 1989). A crucial test of Commission decision-making is the extent to which the Commission manages to weaken intergovernmental behavioral dynamics among individual officials and incite them to supranational, departmental, and epistemic behavior. This study examines these processes in one under-researched group – the *seconded national civil servants* hired on short-term contracts (SNEs in Commission phraseology) (Trondal 2004).

The High Authority of 1952 was largely staffed by SNEs from the member-state governments. The intention of its first President, Jean Monnet, was that the High Authority should rely on a seconded, flexible staff of top experts (Duchêne 1994: 240). However, SNEs have never dominated the Commission staff, but their number has steadily increased during the 1990s (particularly under the Delors Commission) to 1132 in the present Commission (Statistical Bulletin of Commission Staff 01/2007). SNEs are recruited to the Commission on short term contracts lasting up to four years. Although SNEs are typically seconded from the administrations (national, regional, or local) of EU member-states, the Commission also recruits experts from non-member-states (e.g. Norway), private sector, and from other international organizations.

SNEs are particularly interesting because they have a double allegiance at the outset between their home organization (who continues to pay their salaries) and the Commission under which they have to serve loyally. SNEs are obliged to behave solely in the interests of the Commission and not to accept any instructions or duties from their home government. Moreover, SNEs do not have the authority to represent the Commission externally or to enter into any commitments on behalf of the Commission.<sup>2</sup> This double role is further exacerbated by the fact that the whole secondment system is based on the assumption that SNEs return to their home organization after the termination of their secondment contract (Trondal 2004).

The dependent variable of this study is the actual decision-making dynamics evoked by SNEs. Arguably, SNEs are pulled between (at least) four behavioral dynamics – intergovernmental, supranational, departmental, and epistemic. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that these dynamics always materialize in actors' behavior. However, they serve as cognitive and normative frames for action rendering it more likely than not that particular decision-making dynamics are associated with certain behavioral patterns (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981: 86; Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen 2001: 250). Whereas intergovernmental behavior upholds territorial preferences, concerns, roles, and loyalties, the latter three dynamics severely weaken the extent to which SNEs represent their home government. Supranational behavior denotes that SNEs have a strong overall Commission loyalty and act on mandates issued by the Commission's politico-administrative leadership. Departmental behavior is guided by administrative rules and procedures codified in the portfolios assigned to SNEs. Finally, epistemic

behavior is guided by professional expertise and the educational background of the SNEs, loosely knit to fixed mandates from the Commission *and* the member-states.

TABLE 1  
**Four ideal-typical decision-making dynamics**

<i>The intergovernmental SNE</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loyalty to the nation-state and the home government</li> <li>- Mandated by domestic government institutions</li> <li>- Guided by domestic preferences and concerns</li> <li>- Diplomatic code of conduct</li> </ul>
<i>The supranational SNE</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loyalty to the EU as a whole</li> <li>- Mandated by the Commission leadership</li> <li>- Preferences for “the common good”</li> <li>- Community codes of conduct</li> </ul>
<i>The departmental SNE</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loyalty towards own portfolio</li> <li>- Mandated by department and unit rules</li> <li>- Guided by departmental preferences and concerns</li> <li>- Departmental codes of conduct</li> </ul>
<i>The epistemic SNE</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discipline loyalty</li> <li>- Professional discretion and room of maneuver</li> <li>- Guided by professional preferences and considerations</li> <li>- Professional codes of conduct</li> </ul>

An institutional approach is outlined suggesting conditions under which each of the above dynamics are applied by SNEs. It is argued that decision-making dynamics may be accounted for by considering,

- (i) The organizational affiliations of SNEs
- (ii) The formal organization of the Commission apparatus
- (iii) Processes of socialization of SNEs within the Commission

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines an institutional approach, from which three independent variables are derived. The next section presents the methodology, the survey, and the interview data underpinning the analysis. The following section presents the main findings on Commission SNEs. This presentation systematically compares *current* and *former* SNEs.

The data demonstrate that the decision-making behavior deployed by SNEs contain a compound mix of departmental, epistemic, and supranational components. The intergovernmental dynamic is shown to be much less significant. Essentially, when comparing current and former SNEs, loyalties towards particular EU institutions do vary considerably among these officials. The study demonstrates that overall system loyalties towards the EU as a whole seem to be rather sticky and is strong both among current and former SNEs. However, the socializing power of the Commission is conditional and only partially sustained when SNEs exit the Commission. The “temporal identity” of SNEs as an ‘EU civil servant’ is dependent on their primary institutional embeddedness within the Commission (Gravier 2007: 24). This study thus demonstrates that the Commission’s secondment system does

not create enduring supranational loyalties. Still, the study underscores the *de facto* autonomy of SNEs vis-à-vis the member-states while working at the Commission, acting largely as “isolated nomads” (Gravier 2007: 19). The decision-making dynamics among SNEs reported here are also supported in recent research on permanent Commission officials (Trondal et al. 2008). Thus, the compound nature of Commission decision-making is indeed a generic trait of the Commission machinery.

### **An Institutional Approach**

Students of international executive institutions (IEIs) tend to adopt neo-liberalist and realist approaches and apply principal-agent theory to understand the baseline dynamics of IEIs (Hasenclever et al. 1996). Basically, rationalist accounts focus on patterns of cooperation and conflict among states and see IEIs as vehicles for maximizing state preferences and for lowering transaction costs. Recent studies of IEIs have made a combined ‘institutionalist and constructivist turn’ and rediscovered questions of actor socialization, complex learning, and cognitive framing of norms and rules (Checkel 2005; Trondal et al. 2005). IEIs are pictured as more than empty vessels and neutral arenas in which state representatives gather. An equivalent rediscovery of institutions was made in the field of organization theory over twenty years ago (March and Olsen 1984). The independent variables outlined beneath benefit from this organizational and institutional school of thought. One additional criterion for selecting the independent variables is how successfully they have survived past empirical tests.

Most scholars treat institutionalist and social constructivist approaches separately (e.g. Wiener and Diez 2004). However, the institutionalist – social constructivist divide is narrower than often assumed (Trondal 2001). Both sociological institutionalism and middle-range social constructivist accounts emphasize some common independent variables (notably the re-socialization of actors) as well as fairly similar dependent variables (identity and role shift among individual actors). However, whereas middle-range social constructivist scholarship tend to under-theorize the *organizational* context within which social interaction occurs, institutional and organization theory approaches tend to neglect aspects of social interaction (e.g. Checkel 2005; Egeberg 2006; March and Olsen 2006). By applying so-called “both/and” theorizing, the institutional approach suggested here combines micro-mechanisms from both institutional and social constructivist scholarship.

Civil servants live with a constant overload of inconsistent concerns that call for attention in decision situations. Under these conditions, formal and informal institutions guide the decision-making behavior of civil servants due to the computational limitations of human-beings (Simon 1997) and as a response to internalized rules and practices embedded in formal rules (March and Olsen 2006). Formal organizations “are collections of structures, rules, and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life” (March and Olsen 2006: 4). Accordingly, to Schattschneider (1975: 30) “organization is itself a mobilization of bias in preparation for action”. Institutions are systematic devices for simplifying, classifying, routinizing, directing, and sequencing information towards

particular decision situations (Schattschneider 1975: 58). Causal mechanisms that connect institutions and actor behavior are logics of appropriateness, deliberative rationalism, incentive systems, and bounded rationality (Rhodes et al. 2006). For example, the limited cognitive capacities of civil servants are systematized by the specialization of formal organizations into units and divisions. By specializing formal organizations each civil servant is assigned a portfolio of problems, solutions, and consequences to which s/he directs systematic attention (Egeberg 2006). Organizational specialization leads to local rationalities and routinized learning cycles among the incumbents (Olsen 2006). The logic of appropriateness also guides officials to decision-making behavior deemed appropriate by internalized perceptions of proper conduct (March and Olsen 2006). Moreover, actors are often embedded within multiple organizations, so that each actor receives multiple and often ambiguous cues for appropriate action.

The following independent variables will be derived from this institutional approach: (i) organizational affiliations, (ii) the formal organizational composition of institutions, and (iii) processes of socialization within institutions.

**(i) Organizational Affiliations.** The first independent variable considered is the characteristics of the relationships that may develop *between* organizations. This study stresses the fact that the Commission serves as part of complex webs of organizations, notably networks with member-state bureaucracies. Commission SNEs typically have multiple institutional affiliations – both nationally and internationally – that pose multiple cognitive frames, incentives, and norms of appropriate conduct. The bounded rationality of humans reduces their capacity to attend to more than one organization at a time (Simon 1997: 288). The logic of primacy implies that primary institutional affiliations of civil servants affect their behavioral patterns more extensively than secondary affiliations (Egeberg 2006). Hence, there is a hierarchy of organizational memberships present (Flora 1999: 35). The demands that these affiliations pose may conflict, thereby inducing role and behavioral conflicts among the officials. Arguably, primary institutions create salient behavior and roles whereas secondary institutions create less salient repertoires of behavior for actors (Ashford and Mael 2004: 141).

The SNE contracts prescribe that SNEs have their primary institutional affiliation inside the Commission. They are expected to transfer their organizational affiliation from the domestic government to the Commission for a short time period. Assuming that the behavior of SNEs does conform to this prescription, they are likely to be more supranationally than intergovernmentally oriented while seconded to the Commission. However, former SNEs who have returned to their home government are expected to transfer their primary organizational affiliations back to their member-state administration and are subsequently likely to become more intergovernmentally oriented. Hence, the supranational orientation is not likely to be sustained when SNEs leave the Commission after the contract expires.

**(ii) The Organizational 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). Political orders consist of formal organizations that are partial systems incorporated into larger systems. Formal organizations tend

to accumulate conflicting organizational principles through horizontal and vertical specialization. Conflicting organizational codes tend to give conflicting cues for appropriate conduct (Barnard 1968: 278). When specializing formal organizations horizontally, two conventional principles have been suggested by Luther Gulick (1937). First, formal organizations may be specialized by the major *purpose* served – like research, health, food safety, etc. This principle of organization tends to activate patterns of cooperation and conflicts among incumbents along sectoral (departmental) cleavages (Egeberg 2006). Behavioral patterns and loyalties tend to be channeled *within* departmental portfolios rather than across them.

Arguably, organization 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. Organizations specialized by purpose also tend to create organizational loyalties towards units and divisions rather than towards the whole organization at large. The Commission DG and unit structure is a prominent example of this horizontal principle of specialization. The Commission is a horizontally pillarized system of government specialized by purpose and with fairly weak organizational capabilities for horizontal coordination at the top through presidential command (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2005).<sup>3</sup>

A second principle of horizontal specialization present within the Commission is the principle of the major *process* utilized – like administration, legal services, personnel services, etc. (Gulick 1937). This principle of organization, however, is secondary to the principle of purpose outlined above. The process principle encourages the horizontal integration of functional departments and the disintegration of the major purposes served. Within the Commission the internal services like the Legal Service and the DG for Translation illustrate the process principle. Arguably, organization by major process is conducive to departmental and epistemic behavior among the incumbents.

The Commission also embodies a territorial principle of organization as well as a party political component. Territorial concerns are embedded into the Commission by the recruitment of ‘national officials’ (which is particularly evident in the case of SNEs), notably among Administrators, Cabinets, and Commissioners. Secondly, a party political component is organized into the College, particularly because Commissioners have become increasingly political heavyweights and because of the creeping parliamentarization of the College (MacMullen 1997; Nugent 2006).

In sum, the Commission is a ‘multi-organization’ horizontally specialized according to two main principles of organization (Christiansen 1997), contributing to “sending ambivalent signals to Commission officials” (Hooghe 1997: 105). During the contract period, the Commission serves as the primary organizational affiliation of SNEs, rendering them particularly sensitive to the multiple organizational signals and selections provided by the Commission. The horizontal specialization of the Commission administration by purpose and process is conducive the enactment of departmental and epistemic behavioral dynamics among SNEs.

**(iii) Processes of Socialization within the Commission.** A vast literature reveals that the impact of pre-socialization on actors’ roles and identities is modified by

organizational re-socialization (e.g. Checkel 2005). National officials entering the Commission are subject to an organizational “exposure effect” upon arrival (Johnston 2005: 1039) that may contribute to re-socialization. Socialization is a dynamic process whereby individuals are inducted into the norms and rules of a given community. Departing from this simplistic assumption, our argument is that, when “members of one polity serve as participants in the political processes of another” (Rosenau 1969: 46), as when domestic officials work as SNEs in the Commission, *the length and intensity of participation in the Commission* may affect the extent to which supranational role perceptions are evoked among the officials. Apart from being formal members of Commission, protracted and intensive interaction and participation within this institution is conducive to the evocation of supranational role perceptions amongst the officials. Haas (1958) assumed that participants become ‘locked in’ and socialized by the sheer intensity of interaction. Central to the neo-functional approach, the potential for re-socialization to occur (‘shift of loyalty towards a new center’) is assumed to be positively related to the *duration* and the *intensity* of interaction among actors (Haas 1958: 16). This claim rests on socialization theory which foresees 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*. Protracted and intensive actor interaction is conducive to internalization of the norms and rules of the community (Checkel 2005). Hence, the socializing experience within the Commission is to some extent likely to increase SNEs loyalties towards the EU system. However, the short SNE contracts make profound re-socialization less likely.

Finally, SNEs who re-enter their home organization after their SNE contract expires may retain some supranational loyalty towards the EU system. Re-socialization within the Commission would arguably make it more difficult for former SNEs to smoothly re-enter their home organizations afterwards (as they are formally expected to), thus increasing the likelihood that former SNEs will not continue their careers within a home government, but elsewhere. However, the rather short period of stay at the Commission make SNEs less subject to Commission socialization than permanent Commission officials.

## Data and Methods

Empirical research on temporary government officials is rare. This study draws on three separate but synchronized studies of Commission SNEs. The first study consists mainly of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian SNEs (Trondal 2006). Based on similar methodology, this first study was replicated twice on SNEs from the Netherlands. This replication applied the same survey questions and interview guide as in the original study on Nordic SNEs. Hence, this article relies on three surveys (N=169) and three in-depth qualitative interview studies (N=50) on SNEs. The mean response rate in the surveys is 73 percent. Although the survey covers only a small proportion of Commission SNEs, the institutional approach outlined above does not predict significant variation in decision-making dynamics between SNEs of different national origins.

There exists no available, updated, or complete list of Commission SNEs. The observations reported below are based on survey and interview data among three *selected* samples. The first sample resulted from a shortlist provided by CLENAD<sup>4</sup> and the EFTA Secretariat of 125 SNEs from the EU member-states Denmark and Sweden and the EEA countries Norway and Iceland. The reason for constructing this first sample with the help of the EFTA Secretariat and CLENAD is that they provided lists of SNEs which were not available elsewhere. The survey data on overly Nordic SNEs were collected through a postal inquiry in 2004. After three rounds of reminders the final sample totals 72, giving a response rate of 58 percent. These reminders were administered by post, e-mail, and phone. The final response rate is moderate compared to surveys in domestic central administrations, but higher than recent studies of the Commission (e.g. Hooghe 2005). This sample of Nordic SNEs covers officials from 15 Commission DGs<sup>5</sup>, two EU member countries, and two EEA countries.<sup>6</sup> This survey is supplemented by in-depth interviews among a sub-sample of Swedish and Norwegian SNEs. 22 interviews were conducted in the winter 2004-2005 on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide. Each interview lasted about one hour and was tape recorded.

The second and third survey samples are composed of 90 Dutch SNEs in 24 Commission DGs<sup>7</sup> divided into two groups: one group of officials who are *currently* working as SNE at the Commission and one group of *former* SNEs who were seconded between 2001 and 2005.<sup>8</sup> Survey and interview data were collected for both groups of respondents. The survey and interview questions have been adapted from the first SNE study, thereby sharing a similar methodological platform. The whole population of *current* Dutch SNEs received a questionnaire (62 in total)<sup>9</sup>, out of which 46 responded, resulting in a 74 percent response rate. This makes our data on current Dutch SNEs highly representative and reliable. Supplementary interviews were conducted with eight of these officials.

Due to the absence of complete records, the group of *former* SNEs was reached using a snowballing method. Out of a total population of 91 former SNEs, we were able to contact 51 SNEs who filled in the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 86 percent. Snowballing does not pose problems for interpreting the results since we only report frequencies in the analysis. Moreover, 20 interviews were conducted with this group of respondents.

This empirical record represents the most extensive study on seconded officials in the Commission to date and also one of the very few studies of government officials changing posts and organizational allegiances (see also Abrams and Randsley de Moura 2001; Trondal 2007; Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen 2001; Wessels 1998). In the following empirical analysis, survey data on *current* Nordic SNEs is labeled '*Data 1*', the survey data on *current* Dutch SNEs is labeled '*Data 2*', and the survey data on *former* Dutch SNEs is labeled '*Data 3*'.

TABLE 2  
**Survey Samples and Response Rates**

	<b>Samples</b>	<b>Response rates</b>
Data 1	72	58 %
Data 2	46	74 %



Data 3	51	86 %
Total	169	73 % (mean)

The item non-response rate was fairly low for the surveys in total, the poorest item scoring 58 respondents. The survey questions have been streamlined to enable comparison between the three data sets. The former SNEs ('Data 3') have been asked questions regarding their secondment period and their current functions to enable cross-time comparisons. The cross-time comparisons should be read with caution; however, since the responses to survey questions with regard to the secondment period of former SNEs rely on their memory. An inevitable problem connected to research that relies on respondents' memories, is the potential deficiency of the accuracy of the respondents' input. Another caveat is the danger that respondents may portray themselves in a most favorable way. One potential implication thereof is that the role of SNEs as member-state representatives may be underreported in the data. Moreover, supranational behavioral dynamics among SNEs may also partly reflect a self-selection effect. According to Edward Page (1997: 60), SNEs generally have contacts with the Commission prior to entering it. Frequently, they "indicate a wish to spend three years in Brussels" (Page 1997: 60). This indicates that the supranational dynamic may partly reflect processes of pre-socialization outside as well as re-socialization inside the Commission. Finally, we do not propose to 'test' the four dynamics outlined above in a rigorous manner. They serve more as "searchlights for illuminating empirical patterns in our data" (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981: 20).

### **The Compound Nature of Commission Decision-Making**

A considerable part of the output crafted by the Commission is initiated, drafted, and put on the agenda at the administrative level. To understand Commission decision-making one has to unpack the behavioral dynamics among Commission Administrators, including SNEs. The Commission employs 11 263 full-time permanent policy-making Administrators, and 1132 officials are seconded on temporary posts (Statistical Bulletin on Commission Staff 01/2007). Outside the Commission, government officials at the member-state level are also increasingly hired on temporary posts, rendering their perceived organizational memberships vague, unstable, and ambiguous (Bartel and Dutton 2001: 116; Hall 2002). 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, and offer national officials with added EU experience. According to one current Dutch SNE,

*"SNEs bring an external perspective to the Commission, a new zest. [The Commission] no longer thinks that the concours is the only right way of recruiting people or that candidates, who passed the concours are better than civil servants from the member-states. [The Commission] can thus continue to build bridges to the member-states. At the end of the day, both sides profit because [the SNE system] brings in fresh knowledge. It is a link that provides much better insights. [The Commission] draws in people with a very different experience"* (Interview).

SNEs make decisions within the Commission almost on the same footing as permanent Commission Administrators. SNEs typically work at the ‘A-level’<sup>10</sup> in the Commission but always below the head of unit level. They are recruited to the Commission to supplement DGs with much needed expert knowledge.

As Commission policy-makers, SNEs are subject to the everyday balancing acts between competing concerns, interests, and institutions. Table 3 displays the distribution of contact patterns evoked by current and former Commission SNEs.

TABLE 3

**How frequently do you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following during a typical week in your *current* function? (percentage)\***

	Data 1	Data 2	Data 3
<b><i>Four ideal-typical contact patterns:</i></b>			
<b><i>1) Intergovernmental contacts:</i></b>			
- with ministries in country of origin working within <i>other</i> policy areas than current portfolio	5	5	40
- with ministries of other members-states working within <i>other</i> policy areas than current portfolio	4	2	3
- with the EU Permanent Representation of country of origin	--	18	20
- with the EU Permanent Representation of other member-states	--	7	2
<b><i>2) Supranational contacts:</i></b>			
- with other EU institutions than the Commission	8	30	10
- with other international organizations	18	25	10
<b><i>3) Departmental contacts:</i></b>			
- with colleagues in other DGs (current SNEs) / in the Commission (former SNEs)	27	67	22
- with ministries in country of origin working <i>within</i> similar portfolio	6	51	73
- with ministries in other member-states working <i>within</i> similar portfolio	29	28	17
<b><i>4) Epistemic contacts:</i></b>			
- with business representatives in country of origin**	19	13	32
- with business representatives in other member-states	--	16	12
- with NGO representatives in country of origin	--	7	8
- with NGO representatives in other member-states	--	7	0
- with universities or research institutes in country of origin***	25	9	12
- with universities or research institutes in other member-states	--	11	5
<b><i>Mean N</i></b>	100 (67)	100 (44)	100 (40)

\* The percentages listed are the sum of the percentage of officials who have daily or weekly contacts with the respective actors. This dichotomy builds from the following five-point scale: daily (value 5), weekly (value 4), monthly (value 3), yearly (value 2), and less than one per year (value 1).

\*\* The questionnaire in 'Data 1' did not separate between EU-level business and industry and national business and industry.

\*\*\* The questionnaire in 'Data 1' did not separate between universities or research institutes of country of origin vs. from other member-states.

Table 3 clearly reveals two main patterns: First, departmental contact patterns are by far the most frequent contact pattern among both current and former SNEs. This observation may be explained by the horizontal specialization (ii) of the Commission services (with respect to current SNEs) as well as domestic administrations (with respect to former SNEs). These observations illustrate that departmental contact patterns among SNEs profoundly reflect the Commission's formal organizational structure. Moreover, Table 3 demonstrates that organizational affiliation (i) with the Commission "matters" with respect to the distribution of intergovernmental and supranational contacts. Former Dutch SNEs have far more intergovernmental contacts than current SNEs. We also see that current SNEs have much stronger supranational contact patterns than former SNEs. These observations clearly show that the Commission is a primary organizational affiliation (i) for SNEs.

Many former SNEs report in interviews that the drop in supranational contacts after exiting the Commission is dramatic and that this is an important "missed opportunity" for their home organizations. However, some former SNEs seem to maintain contacts towards the Commission. According to one former Dutch SNE,

*"I do still have a lot of contacts from the period of my secondment. And I do use these contacts, but that is mainly through informal channels. I have reasonably often contacts with my former [Commission] colleagues from other member states"* (Interview).

Table 3 reveals that *intergovernmental contacts* are few and mainly directed towards the governments of other countries rather than towards the government of their country of origin (see also Trondal 2006). Many returned SNEs report that while they were seconded, their home organization did not seek contact with them. Most SNEs report that their home ministry or agency seldom initiates contacts (Interview). According to one current Norwegian SNE, *"I have very little contact with my ministry back home, almost nothing"* (Interview). *"I only get information [from my home administration] if I ask for it"* (CLENAD 2003: 21). Most contacts between SNEs and the home administration was initiated by the SNEs, partly to allow the organization to benefit from the experience they were gaining, partly in order not to be forgotten and thus hoping to boost their career opportunities upon return (Interviews). According to one former Dutch SNE,

*"During my secondment I had quite some contact with my colleagues at home at my own initiative. I also sent out a newsletter to my own unit and to my own department, to keep people in The Hague up to date with what I was doing in Brussels. I also went regularly to return-home days in The Hague. Nonetheless, at the senior/management level there was little attention for what I was doing in Brussels"* (Interview).

Another former Dutch SNE reports that,

*"At one point I knew my boss was going to visit someone at the DG that I was working at. Nonetheless, it did not occur to him to stop by at my room and to enquire what I was doing there and how I was performing"* (Interview).

The following phrase seems to cover the impression of most SNEs: “Out of sight, out of mind” (CLENAD 2003: 26; Statskontoret 2001:17: 11). 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 (Interviews). These observations reflect the primacy of the Commission (i) for SNEs and the *de facto* autonomy of SNEs vis-à-vis their home governments. One reason for this lack of contact initiated by the home administration may be the lack of a domestic strategy on SNEs. For example, the Swedish Government admit lacking an overall strategy on SNEs and that they have a rather poor central coordination of how Swedish SNEs should be recruited and utilized by the Swedish Government (Statskontoret 2001:17: 9; The Government Offices of Sweden 2002: 14).<sup>11</sup>

Table 4 applies a “reputational approach” to assess decision-making dynamics in the Commission (Jacobsen 2007). The Table demonstrates the extent to which SNEs are perceived to act like independent experts and/or like member-state representatives.

TABLE 4

**To what extent do you think that SNEs act as ‘independent experts’ or as ‘member-state representatives’? (percentage)\***

	◀-----▶			
	Independent expert	Both/and	member-state representative	N
<b>Data 1</b>	74	20	6	100 (67)
<b>Data 2</b>	94	4	2	100 (46)
<b>Data 3</b>	86	7	7	100 (43)

\* Original Scale: Value 1 = Independent expert – Value 7=Member-State representative

Table 4 clearly confirms that most SNEs perceive themselves as independent experts while working in the Commission. The variations in the Table are marginal. However, some member-state representation also seems to occur among SNEs, particularly among Nordic SNEs (Data 1). In both ‘Data 2’ and ‘Data 3’ the overwhelming majority of respondents view themselves as independent experts and only a minority see themselves as member-state representatives. According to one former Dutch SNE,

*“As SNE one should be neutral, so you cannot privilege your own member-state. Some SNEs do trespass this boundary. I knew a Dutch SNE who did that and I addressed him about it. He admitted to the things I said. Sometimes documents from my department in The Netherlands arrived at my desk and I had to assess them. I always took a critical look at such documents because I knew it would increase their chances for success. However, my colleagues at home were by no means appreciative of my critical attitude. But I actually did them a favor, because some documents that they submitted were just not in order and without my interference they would not even have been taken into consideration by the Commission. I really saved my department at home from making big blunders” (Interview).*

Another former Dutch SNE reports that,

*“I was an independent expert, but I was also used by my head of unit at the Commission to leak information to my Dutch organization” (Interview).*

One explanation for the enactment of a member-state role among SNEs may be due to instructions from their home government. Over the years, Dutch SNEs have increasingly been exposed to domestic guidance and instruction. Moreover, it appears that views regarding the appropriateness of national interest representation also play a role in this respect. These views are at least partially shaped during SNEs pre-socialization within their national administrations. As a former Commissioner also noted: “To be fair, one must start by accepting that we all bring with ourselves a baggage of preconceived ideas outlooks and prejudices, many of them of a specific national nature.” (Quoted in Page 1997: 115).

Testimony of the cross-national variation on these views is given by the fact that several Dutch SNEs claim that France makes significantly more strategic use of their SNEs. Some Scandinavian SNEs also report that French SNEs tend to have a stronger intergovernmental role than other SNEs: *“France uses the French SNEs to the maximum. They are consulted directly by the French Government”* (Interview). Similarly, a study by the Swedish government agency *Statskontoret* (2001:17) indicates that the British government uses 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 coordinated by the Cabinet Office (*Statskontoret* 2001:17: 51). These observations may reflect the degree to which national governments have developed a policy regarding the coordination of SNE activities. However, according to one former Dutch SNE,

*“The Netherlands is a member-state that does not make much use of these possibilities. In the Netherlands lobbying is frowned upon. This is in great contrast with the French who very effectively make use of their nationals within the Commission. ... [T]he French, but also the Irish have a good grip on their fonctionnaires within the Commission, and those states are thus ensured that their interests within the EU are permanently being served at a variety of different levels. The Netherlands appears to have ethical objections against such a strategy. In my case civil servants of my home department were told to avoid me if they were in Brussels because otherwise, there would be a danger that I would pass on classified information from within the Commission. For ethical reasons people in The Hague choose to remain ignorant about what is happening in Brussels”* (Interview).

For these SNEs, the epistemic role has been much more important than the member-state role. This observation is also supported by the fact that many SNEs consider the content of the work at the Commission as important as career considerations for being recruited to the Commission (Interviews).

SNEs testify that they are highly aware of their dual position, both as national experts and independent outsiders. However, many felt that although the Commission insists on their independence they often feel other Commission staff view them as national officials with national preferences. Some SNEs report that they have deliberately brought national problems to the table.

*“SNEs make no secret about their country of origin. You are clearly fulfilling a dual role, so you are able to bring problems or positions from your member state to the*

fore. Other fonctionnaires at the Commission also approach you to have an ‘early test’ as to whether a specific proposal would be welcomed with enthusiasm in the Netherlands or not. As an SNE you can then say: This proposal is never going to survive in the Netherlands. So, by the presence of SNEs, the policy process proceeds more smoothly and quickly because as an SNE you are well informed of the national positions” (Interview).

Finally, Table 5 reveals the distribution of loyalties emphasized by both current and former Commission SNEs.

TABLE 5  
To whom do you feel loyal to in your *current* function? (percentage)\*

	Data 1	Data 2	Data 3
<b>Four ideal-typical allegiance patterns:</b>			
<b>1) Intergovernmental loyalty towards:</b>			
- the state/administration in their country of origin	9	33	72
- the national government in their country of origin	5	13	45
- the national governments of other member-states	9	4	5
- the ministries of other member-states	11	9	7
<b>2) Supranational loyalty towards:</b>			
- the Commission as a whole	69	70	42
- the EU system as a whole	63	63	70
- other international organizations	12	33	24
<b>3) Departmental loyalty towards:</b>			
- the Unit they are working in	84	98	90
- the DG they are (current SNEs) /were (former SNEs) working in	84	96	48
- the Ministry they were (current SNEs) /are (former SNEs) working in	--	73	77
<b>4) Epistemic loyalty towards:</b>			
- their own professional community / area of expertise	77	71	81
- the requirements of their own policy sector	70	74	64
- business and industry	8	37	38
- trade unions	2	9	7
- universities and research institutes	8	28	24
<b>Mean N</b>	100 (66)	100 (46)	100 (41)

\* The percentages listed are a sum of officials who have *very strong* or *fairly strong* loyalty to the entities. This dichotomy stems from the following five-point scale: *very strong* (value 5), *fairly strong* (value 4), *average* (value 3), *fairly weak* (value 2), and *very weak* (value 1).

Table 5 demonstrates the multiple loyalties evoked by Commission SNEs. They clearly attach greatest loyalty towards the departmental level and secondly towards the supranational level. Intergovernmental loyalties are fairly weak. SNEs have multiple institutional affiliations, notably towards their primary institutions (i) (the Commission services) and their secondary institutions (their home government). Table 5 indicates that SNEs manage to live with multiple loyalties. The strong departmental loyalties among SNEs clearly reflect the horizontal specialization (ii). According to one current Dutch SNE,

*“As an SNE you always have a complicated dual position. But I for one and the people that I know found a good middle course between on the [one] hand loyalty to the Commission and on the other hand loyalty to their home country” (Interview).*

Another Dutch SNE claims that,

*“As an SNE you are loyal to the Commission. But one’s salary is paid by the Netherlands. I had no problems functioning in that dual position” (Interview).*

Hence, as expected, greatest loyalty is attached towards the immediate organizational environments, that is, the unit and DG levels in the Commission. However, a great deal of loyalty is also attached towards the corresponding domestic ministry. Secondly, Table 5 shows that current SNEs have strikingly lower levels of intergovernmental allegiance than former SNEs. These observations demonstrate the impact of organizational affiliations (i). Officials tend to attach strongest loyalty towards their primary organization. This observation is crucial since the home government pays the salaries of SNEs and expects them to return after the secondment procedure. Hence, the primary loyalty of SNEs is not directed towards their paymaster.

Finally, Table 5 shows that loyalty towards the EU system as a whole is slightly stronger among former SNEs than among current SNEs. The opposite is the case with respect to loyalty towards the Commission as a whole. In the interviews many current SNEs report that their stay with the Commission undermines their loyalty to their home organizations and greatly reinforces their loyalty to the Commission. Socialization of SNEs contributes mainly to create enduring *system loyalty* towards the EU system and only secondly to install lasting institutional loyalties towards particular EU institutions. Being socialized in the EU system seems to result in enduring loyalty towards the EU system as a whole more than towards the Commission. The secondment of domestic officials to the Commission in most cases causes them to develop a European perspective on policy problems. Many report having become more critical towards the actions and positions of their home organizations.

*“When you are here, you tend to forget the Netherlands, The Hague, where you come from. Your background is not important in your daily routine. Your first loyalty lies with the Commission” (Interview).*

Another current Dutch SNE reports that,

*“At the end of the day it is my home organization who is my employer, but I am loyal to the Commission” (Interview).*

A former Dutch SNE argues that,

*“Due to the poor guidance and the lack of contact with the Permanent Representation<sup>12</sup> the situation occurs that after three years, the SNE actually feels a stronger loyalty toward the Commission than to the national government” (Interview).*

Finally,

*“You acquire a European mindset, you learn to be sensitive to the interests of the other member states. And then you weigh all considerations to each other and decide what is best in the general European interest” (Interview).*

## Conclusions

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). The concern early voiced by Coombes (1970) that SNEs are highly conscious of their national background is challenged by this study. This study demonstrates that the decision-making dynamics applied by SNEs contain a compound mix of departmental, epistemic, and supranational behavior. The intergovernmental dynamic is shown to be much less significant. This conclusion supports recent literature that reveals that the portfolio logic is essential both at the level of Commissioners (Egeberg 2006) and among Commission officials (Hooghe 2005; Suvarierol 2007, 2008). The primacy of departmental and epistemic dynamics among SNEs reflects the primary organizational affiliations towards the Commission (i) as well as the horizontal specialization (ii) of the Commission services. Nordic SNEs, however, evoke stronger member-state roles whereas Dutch SNEs tend to enact stronger supranational contact patterns.

Moreover, considerable variation is observed between *current* and *former* SNEs in terms of their supranational loyalties. Nonetheless, former SNEs’ overall system loyalties towards the EU as a whole appear rather sticky and enduring. However, the socializing powers of the Commission is conditional and only partially sustained when SNEs exit the Commission. The “temporal identity” of SNEs as an ‘EU civil servant’ is dependent on their primary institutional embeddedness within the Commission. This study thus demonstrates that the Commission’s secondment system thus does not create enduring supranational loyalties across levels of government in Europe. The study underscores the *de facto* autonomy of SNEs vis-à-vis the member-states while working at the Commission. Finally, the observations reported here are supported in recent research on permanent Commission officials (Trondal et al. 2008). Thus, the compound nature of Commission decision-making is indeed generalizable to the Commission more broadly.

Past research suggests that supranational loyalties are contingent “on whether one is paid by ones country of origin or by the organization...” (Reinalda and Verbeek 2004: 20). SNEs are paid by their member-state while seconded to the Commission, and still they adopt supranational loyalties. Moreover, upon return to their member-state, SNEs retain a fairly strong supranational loyalty towards the EU system as a whole and less towards the Commission in particular. This observation clearly reflects conditional processes of socialization (iii) of SNEs within the Commission more than rationalist mechanisms of expected utility and anticipated returns. Upon return in the member-states, however, former SNEs shift loyalties towards the national level and their primary institutional affiliations. Any long-lasting effect of socialization within the Commission is largely absent.



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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The Commission formalized in 2004 new rules on the secondment of national experts to the Commission (Commission Decision C(2004) 577 of 27 February 2004).

<sup>3</sup> However, the current Commission is argued to have become more “presidential”, “with Mr. Barroso personally steering Brussels’ most important policy dossiers such as energy and the EU constitution” (EUobserver 2007).

<sup>4</sup> CLENAD is the staff organization for SNEs in the Commission.

<sup>5</sup> The DGs covered by this first survey are: DG Competition, DG Development, DG Education and Culture, DG Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities, DG Enterprise, DG Environment, DG Energy and Transport, DG Fisheries, DG Health and Consumer Affairs, DG Information Society and Media, DG Research, DG Taxation and Customs Union, DG Economic and Financial Affairs, DG Trade, Eurostat.

<sup>6</sup> EU member-states covered in this first survey are: Sweden (N=44), Denmark (N=3). EEA countries covered: Norway (N=20) and Iceland (N=2). Three respondents did not report their country of origin.

<sup>7</sup> The DGs covered by the surveys on Dutch SNEs are: DG Agriculture, DG Budget, DG Competition, DG Development, DG Economic and Financial Affairs, DG Education and Culture, DG Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities, DG Enlargement, DG Enterprise, DG Environment, DG Energy and Transport, DG External Relations, DG Fisheries, DG Health and Consumer Affairs, DG Information Society and Media, DG Internal Market and Services, DG Justice, Freedom, and Security, DG Research, DG Taxation and Customs Union, DG Trade, DG Transport and Energy, Eurostat, Legal Service, OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office), Secretariat General.

<sup>8</sup> One of the respondents had been seconded before this period, but given the value of gathered data the respondent has been included in the analyses.

<sup>9</sup> The survey was sent by e-mail, but the respondents were given a choice of returning the completed document per e-mail or per post.

<sup>10</sup> The new EU staff regulations adopted in 2004 have changed the names of policy officials to Administrator (AD). Yet, since Commission officials themselves still refer to the term ‘A-level’, this term will still be employed in this study.

<sup>11</sup> Some times SNEs are recruited from national agencies without the knowledge of the ministry (Statskontoret 2001:17: 27).

<sup>12</sup> The interviews with the current Dutch SNEs indicate that this situation has changed though. Since the appointment of a coordinator for the careers of Dutch officials at the Dutch Permanent Representation in Brussels, the Permanent Representation has been increasingly active in organising receptions, conferences, and the like to gather Dutch officials working in Brussels which all current SNEs interviews have reported to participate in.

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