'Making the Grade, Keeping the Gate': The Recruitment of Member-State Diplomats to the European External Action Service (EEAS)

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Summary

In 2010, the European Union agreed that one third of the European External Action Service (EEAS) staff at (Administrator-) AD-level shall be made up of temporarily assigned member-state diplomats by mid-2013; the other two thirds being transferred from the (Union) Council Secretariat and the European Commission (Commission). Drawing on a dataset of 29 semi-structured interviews with expert officials or coordinators of the temporary assignment of member-state diplomats to the EEAS collected between March 2011 and February 2012, this policy brief analyses the early stage of the recruitment of member-states diplomats to the new service. It demonstrates that the European External Action Service has managed to establish a firm control over the recruitment process, which overall has been largely informed by Commission hiring rules and practices thus far. Consequently, this has also brought up new aspects with regard to the hiring procedures of diplomats, such as technical expertise and management skills that have not necessarily been at the core of diplomatic training and education.

Introduction

Debates about the need for an EU foreign service have been circulating for quite some time. Yet, the institutional design of such service was only negotiated after the Lisbon Treaty had been ratified. During these negotiations involving the HR/VP Baroness Ashton, the European Commission (Commission), the (Union) Council, the member-states and the European Parliament (EP), staffing and personnel issues were one of the most difficult subjects on the table. For instance, the design of the organigramme was strategically avoided for both political and legal reasons, and did not even feature in the agreement formalised by the EP's Plenary on 8 July 2010 (e.g., Art. 4 and 5 of the Formal Agreement of July 2010, European Parliament (2010)). One of the reasons behind this omission was the overt ambitions regarding posts and positions in the EEAS displayed by all member-states during the negotiations, which made the organigramme politically divisive (see Murdoch 2012a).

This directly raises the question of how member-states translate such ambitions into policies and strategies concerning the staffing of the EEAS; in particular with regard to member-state officials, who are set to make up 33 per cent of EEAS AD-level staff by mid-2013 (European Council and European Parliament 2010). Furthermore, from the perspective of organisational theory, the process of recruitment of EEAS staff is important for several reasons:

Firstly, it is very likely that the initial hires will yield greater influence on the future shape, work routines and *esprit de corps* of the new service than the subsequent ones. Organisational structures are often shaped by the time organisations are founded. Throughout history organisations are likely to store their own organisational birth-marks (Stinchcombe 1965: 153). *Secondly*, the demographic profile of officials is likely to shape basic features of their decision-making behaviour (see Meier and Nigro 1976); it is precisely for this reason that it is important to know how the demographic profile of government institutions comes about. *Thirdly*, according to the theory of representative bureaucracy, the discretion of officials is (or should be) at least partly circumscribed by the interests of the respective societal groups from which bureaucrats originate (see Wise 2003), which is of particular importance in the case of national diplomats temporarily assigned to the EEAS. *Finally*, and most significantly, analysing the recruitment process and procedures within the EEAS provides important information about the extent to which EEAS' capacities in foreign relations, a policy field historically marked by national control and a lack of EU capacity, remain at arm's length from the Council and member-states' influence.

In order to understand the process of assigning national bureaucrats to the EEAS, we draw on a dataset consisting of 29 semi-structured interviews with expert officials or coordinators of the temporary assignment of member-state diplomats to the EEAS, collected between March 2011 and February 2012 (see Murdoch, Trondal and Gänzle 2012). The interviews included coordinators from all 27 member-states as well as the EEAS, and were conducted during, and specifically concentrated on, the first (January-March 2010) and second (starting Summer 2010) major hiring rounds (or 'rotations') for the EU delegations and EEAS Headquarters in Brussels that were open to member-state officials. These rotations were organised in a period of rapid institutional change, which is important for theoretical reasons since it allows us to analyse the recruitment of personnel during the formative stages of a new institution.

The data suggest that the EEAS has, for the time being, acquired extensive independence when it comes to the recruitment of EEAS personnel during the first hiring rounds and that this is predominantly facilitated by two conditions: *First*, by the supply of administrative capacities and practices at EU level, and *second* by pre-existing organisational traditions, practices and formats, notably within the Commission, but also the member-states themselves.

Administrative capacities and pre-existing organisational formats for recruitment to the EEAS

Perceived prevalence of Commission capacities and approach to recruitment
One of the first observations often mentioned by our interviewees when discussing the organisational architecture of EEAS' recruitment of member-state officials is how strongly it builds on pre-existing procedures and processes employed within the Commission. This empirical finding is most relevant for the first hiring round for member-state officials in January-March 2010. It was effectively organised by opening the Commission's internal rotation system "for the first time also to candidates from the two other sources (Council Secretariat General, member-states)" (European Union 2010: 2).[i] Although this was no longer the case in the second hiring round starting in the summer of 2010, many of the Commission's procedures for recruitment were retained at this point. For instance, the EEAS' HR directorate continued to impose upon applicants the Commission style of composing and preparing the application dossiers and pre-selected the candidates according to the Commission's point system (essentially translating the candidate's CV into a numerical score depending on the requirements of the job opening). Moreover, no vacancies were advertised for positions within the EEAS' HR directorate, such that the same "people who were managing for the Commission, its human resources for delegations abroad" (*Interviews 11, 19*)[ii] remained in charge of EEAS' recruitment. All in all, it was a system "fundamentally geared towards continuation as a Commission body" (*Interview 11*), thus suggesting that the organisation of the recruitment was profoundly shaped by pre-existing organisational forms within the Commission.

The EEAS administration as agenda-setter

The EEAS acted as a very strict agenda-setter in both the timing of application deadlines (with often very short application windows) and the provision of candidates' information relative to the sequencing of interviews. Information often reached member-states' representatives in the (pre)selection panels only a few days before the recruitment committee meeting. Such tight control over the agenda, and the apparent strategic use thereof, by the EEAS obviously has a vast impact on member-states' "capacities for action" (Crozier and Friedberg 1980: 42). Moreover, by limiting the number of vacancy calls "in the central office, where (…) policy decisions are made" (*Interview 27*) and excluding positions related to the HR directorate, the EEAS not only illustrated its independence in deciding about the recruitment process, but simultaneously signalled its desire to remain independent also in its future decision-making behaviour (see Meier and Nigro 1976; Wise 2003).

Big states versus small states – new states versus old states

The administrative capacities of the Commission in the recruitment process of EEAS personnel correspondingly weaken small member-states with few administrative capacities. These effectively are forced to rely on individuals themselves to make a good application, since they lack the ability to provide a broad-based support structure – as occurs in various larger member-states. While such organisational "copy-paste" (*Interviews 7, 15, 19*) from already existing formats can be explained by the urgency with which these procedures were put together, the EEAS appears to also have taken a number of strategic decisions in its recruitment procedures to retain a strong position relative to the member-states. For example, while information about the application process and recruitment outcomes is critical for member-states to optimise their approach and strategy towards vacancy calls in the EEAS, such information was generally deemed by member-states to be "not moving freely" (*Interview 20,* and noted by most respondents). For instance, prior to the first hiring round, member-states "were not at all aware of the selection procedures and methods the EEAS was going to adopt" (*Interview 19*) and felt that this "leaves our applicants unprepared for the interview, for the whole procedure" (*Interview 29*). Similarly, information about the reasons behind an applicant's failure to be (pre-)selected could often only be obtained by personally contacting the EEAS: "it was not systematic" (*Interview 20, also Interview 26*). Although such informational

breakdowns might be expected given that the EEAS initially had to rely on relatively few people and operate in a completely new institutional structure, member-states often had the impression that "there was a resistance by the EEAS to share certain kinds of information" (*Interview 21*). Evidently, with the EEAS able to "control the flow of information" within and between institutions (Farrell and Héritier 2004: 1188), it was able to retain a powerful position *vis-à-vis* the member-states.

Direct submission of 'lettres de candidature' to the EEAS

The individual applications had to be submitted directly to the EEAS, not via the member-states' administrations. Even though member-states' Ministries of Foreign Affairs are required to provide a letter confirming the candidate's 'diplomatic credentials', which might open for the possibility of pre-selecting potential candidates by member-states, this direct application system clearly implies that member-state governments would be bypassed: "If you apply an open approach, you cannot really control or steer" (*Interview 4*). Consequently, it effectively curtails the potential influence of member-states on the proceedings.

Composition of (pre-)selection panels

Finally, the EEAS decides upon the composition of the (pre-)selection panels. To the extent that representatives from member-state governments are included in those panels (which is not the case, for instance, in the panels for heads of division; *Interview 19*), the EEAS appears to consistently place them into, at best, a minority position. For example, in the Consultative Committee on Appointments (CCA), which appoints the Heads of Mission as well as posts starting at the Director level within the EEAS Headquarters, the member-states have two representatives out of six members (the remaining four members coming from EEAS (2), Council (1) and Commission (1)) – with decisions requiring a two thirds majority. Moreover, unlike for the representatives from the EU institutions in the CCA, for the representatives of member-states "it functions on the rotation basis, so (…) there's not really a consistency and coherence on who is representing" (*Interview 11; also Interviews 4, 14*). This is, however, already an improvement since no representation was awarded to member-states during the first hiring round (which initiated repeated interventions by several member-states including Austria, Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom) (Assemblée Nationale, 29/09/2010), nor was such participation even

considered when Baroness Ashton first set up the CCA.[iii] Even so, requests for a more equal say were ignored by the EEAS: "probably the one single change which was *not* incorporated was precisely more participation" (*Interview 4*).

Recruitment in practice

Regarding the actual recruitment practice in the EEAS, it is illustrative to account for the relative importance attached by the EEAS and member-states to certain qualities of candidates, and how this translates into EEAS' recruitment decisions. We thereby concentrate on three elements: The relative emphasis put on *merit versus nationality*, *technical expertise versus diplomatic qualifications*, and the *importance of work experience in the Brussels institutions* for candidates to EEAS posts.

First, while the EEAS favours merit over nationality, many member-states have argued that "this one third quota needs to be fulfilled proportionally by all member-states" (*Interview 29*), implying a need to have some degree of geographical balance. That is,

> from a [country] point of view, it's about trying to find a good [country national], but from the institutional point of view, it's trying to find the best person to do the job (*Interview 7; also Interview 19*).

The issue of nationality appears, however, to be treated by the EEAS as a matter of relatively minor concern. Several respondents indeed indicated that "how the panels have been working, it has been merit proof" (*Interview 7*), while geographical balance "does not seem to us to be happening right now" (*Interview 12*). Hence, even though geographical balance may signal some degree of national 'ownership' of international institutions (see above), there is little evidence of member-states' ability to impose positive weight on candidate's nationality in the recruitment process.

Second, technical expertise has been a key concern in the Commission's hiring in external relations, while diplomatic qualifications form a core requirement for member-states. These credentials, most often acquired at diplomatic academies and always following a highly competitive selection process, are often perceived as the cornerstone of the diplomatic *esprit de corps* (Hocking and Spence 2006). Following the Commission's posting practices, the EEAS has put substantial weight on candidates' technical and management expertise despite its formal requirement that

member-state candidates should have relevant 'diplomatic credentials'. As a response, several member-states allowed for a fairly broad and encompassing interpretation of 'diplomatic credentials' when issuing a letter (required by the EEAS) formally acknowledging that the applicant met this particular criterion. Such leniency in interpretation was thereby seen as a key means to satisfy a desire to "maximise our success possibility" (*Interview 19*). Evidently, a lenient translation allows sending in more applicants, which increases the chance of having at least some successful candidates. However, it might also increase member-states influence on EEAS' recruitment process *if* the EEAS conforms to this broader interpretation. Exactly such readjustment of the EEAS' application requirement occurred after the first rotation, when the 'proof of diplomatic credentials' became a requirement to submit a much more broadly defined 'letter of support' (see also Murdoch 2012b). Although this initially suggests that member-states had at least some influence on the decision-process of the EEAS, the EEAS did not communicate the exact nature of the changes in its application requirements at the time of the change, thus generating "a lot of questions all over Europe" (*Interview 20; also Interviews 3, 28*). Clearly, such ambiguity benefits the EEAS' ability to retain independence of its recruitment practice, as it keeps member-states continuously lagging one step behind: "we had to improvise because the service improvises as well a lot" (*Interview 6*).

Finally, the EEAS appears to also have stood its ground (against member-state demands) when it concerns the importance attached to work experience in the Brussels institutions. While such experience is of lesser importance to member-states – given that countries' diplomatic traditions often vary substantially from the Commission's view of external relations – "if you look at what is making the grade in the EEAS, it is clear that having served in Brussels gives you an edge" (*Interview 28*).

Member-states' strategies to cope with the recruitment to the EEAS
Still, member-states have attempted to influence the results of the recruitment process in their favour. In fact, they developed a number of different strategies with exactly this aim in mind. The most far-reaching of these consisted of "a work of diligent and smart lobbying activities" (*Interview 5; also Interviews 14, 15, 19, 28*) – although this mostly applies for postings at higher (political) levels. More conventionally, many member-states attempted to professionalise the way they

manage vacancy notices from the EEAS. Although voluntary preparatory workshops and information booklets for EEAS applicants were thereby widespread (confirmed by most interviewees), bigger member-states tended to exploit well-established routines and programmes – "our career development concept, let's say" (*Interview 27*; also Manley 2012) – while 'new' and smaller member-states often relied on more ad hoc procedures, which in many cases relied more directly on input from EEAS officials. These patterns might provide an explanation for recent views suggesting that there is a gap between old and new member-states when it comes to the rate of success in terms of bringing national officials into the EEAS. Indeed, albeit to varying degrees, new member-states are under-represented in the new Service: "Out of 134 people who applied for 10 senior management posts in Brussels, there were 34 'new' diplomats, 74 'old' ones and 26 EU officials. None of the 'new' ones got through" (Rettman 2012). Building on our interview data, the lack of well-established organisational capacities in new member-states to receive training appears to be an important factor in explaining such differences, which illustrates the effect of administrative capacity for recruitment in member-state governments.

Conclusion

Overall, the EEAS appears to have established a firm hold over both the formal organisational architecture of the selection process, and the practical implementation thereof. As a consequence, it has been able to shield, thus far, its recruitment procedures and practices from member-states' influence. The data suggests that the EEAS treat member-states as "external counterparts", whereas member-states feel they "should be considered as full stakeholders" (*Interview 19*).

The data also shows that the recruitment practice of EEAS personnel is considerably fashioned by pre-existing organisational traditions, practices and formats. As such, it confirms theoretical predictions from organization theory, which ascribes an autonomous role for pre-existing formal structures to account for the emergence and institutionalisation of new structures, and their effects. This is particularly important during periods of rapid institutional formation – as faced by Europe at the time of the establishment of the EEAS.

Moreover, lack of time when creating new institutions makes decision-makers' 'pursuit of intelligence' *bounded* and their search for solutions *local* (March 2010: 19).

The likelihood of institutional reproduction may be particularly high in cases with few institutional 'models'. The policy brief shows empirically that member-states with strong pre-existing organisational capacities and traditions for recruitment of diplomats seem to co-ordinate the recruitment of EEAS officials more strongly than member-states with few domestic capacities and traditions for diplomatic recruitment. Similarly, the Commission's tradition of calling upon policy experts rather than diplomats is reflected in the recruitment of domestic diplomatic personnel to the EEAS as well.

Policy recommendations

Bearing in mind the findings of our research presented above and with a view to the upcoming 2013 mid-term review of the EEAS, we make the following practical proposals:

First, as it is important to ensure that the EEAS is perceived amongst both the European institutions and the member-states as a joint endeavor, it is necessary to continue the hiring of national diplomats in a way to meet the 2013 quota commitment of 33 % of EEAS positions allocated to diplomats form the member states (see also Duke, Pomorska and Vanhoonacker 2012: 7).

Second, the various stages of the hiring process – e.g. agenda-setting, timing of vacancy calls and interviews – illustrated above should be designed in a way that both parent institutions and, in particular, the member-states participate on equal footing allowing them to develop a joint responsibility and ownership.

Third, member-states should develop strategies to ensure that EEAS postings are (and remain) attractive to highly qualified personnel by guaranteeing career advancements upon return. For the time being, only very few member-states have adjusted their legal provisions for career development in order to cope with the EEAS.

Fourth, due to the special nature of the European diplomatic service, EEAS postings are different from secondments to other international organisations. Job descriptions often include management skills and competences that are outside the remit of classical diplomacy. Member-states should use the EEAS as an opportunity to rethink how national diplomacy may use experiences (to be gained) from EU

diplomacy as a template for drafting and implementing a modern, coherent an effective European diplomacy for the 21st century.

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Notes

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[i] Although the Commission had no foreign policy competencies and as such had no embassies, it maintained 'representations' in 136 countries. After the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which conferred a legal identity on the EU, these were transformed into EU 'delegations' (i.e., embassies).

[ii] The empirical analysis exploits information obtained from 29 semi-structured interviews with 31 respondents conducted, recorded and transcribed by the authors. These interviews (referred to as Interviews 1-29 to maintain confidentiality) took place between March 2011 and February 2012 either via telephone (19 interviews) or face-to-face (8 interviews), and lasted between 30 and 95 minutes. Due to time constraints, two interviewees only provided written answers to the questions in our interview guide. While anonymity was requested by all our respondents, non-response proved to be a minor concern (although we sometimes needed to repeatedly contact our targeted respondent for an appointment). To allow us to cross-validate the obtained information, respondents were not only asked to provide information about their own institution, but also about their opinions regarding the activities of other member-states and the EEAS' Human Resources directorate.

[iii] Both the characteristics of the initially proposed CCA (i.e., no member-state involvement), and the way it was brought forward (i.e., no input requested from member-states in its development), signalled that the EEAS saw the CCA as "their prerogative (…) [which] member-states should not mingle in" (*Interview 3; also Interview 19*). Interestingly, a similar approach was taken by Baroness Ashton with the introduction of new rules for the secondment of member-state officials into EEAS: "The change in secondment rules has been passed by Ms Ashton and her Headquarters, but not announced or anything" (*Interview 3*).