

Networking in Brussels

Nationality over a glass of wine

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Abstract

This article provides an insight into the Brussels informal networking scene by providing empirical evidence on the networks of European Commission officials. It is argued that Commission officials tend to separate work and private contacts and that nationality rather forms a bonding factor for leisure purposes.

Introduction

You should go [to] whatever restaurant here in the neighbourhood of Rond Point Schuman.... It's full with Commission people meeting lobbyists and Parliamentarians and whatever. It's a huge informal world here huh? Everyone knows everyone.... Phone calls, visit to a restaurant, sports clubs, informal dinners in the evening... That's the world. (Official #76)

To those doing business in Brussels with the institutions of the European Union (EU), the image sketched above will sound familiar. Brussels is famous as a networking city, where work does not seem to stop during lunch time, after work or in the weekends as officials of EU institutions, MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) and lobbyists meet each other on informal occasions. This informal networking circuit renders the boundaries between the professional and private lives fluid and is assumed to influence policy-making indirectly. Such informal meetings potentially lead to some colleagues becoming friends, a factor which is related to the fact that these international professionals are also expatriates.

Even though Brussels is a highly international environment, it has been argued that nationality forms an important basis for building informal networks in and around the EU institutions (Michelmann, 1978; Abélès, Bellier and McDonald, 1993; Peterson, 1995; Egeberg, 1996; Hooghe, 1999; Shore, 2000; Hooghe, 2001; Nugent, 2001; Christiansen, Føllesdal and Piattoni, 2003; Laffan, 2004). The phenomenon of national networks has been linked to the ease of establishing communication and connection resulting from sharing a culture. As such, common nationality is believed to lower “the threshold for instrumental as well as social connections” (Hooghe, 2001, p. 169).

Do these images of networks in Brussels reflect the reality? *To what extent do the work and private networks of EU officials overlap and is nationality an axis around which the informal networks in Brussels turn?* These are the questions this article aims to answer by focusing on the case of European Commission officials. As the supranational and independent organ of the EU with the role of safeguarding the European interest, the European Commission is in a precarious position in terms of questions involving neutrality and transparency. Even though the evidence has mostly been circumstantial and not clearly delimited, it has been suggested that the Commission is not immune to informal national

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networks. Hooghe (2001, p. 189), for example, has argued that national networks constitute valuable resources for Commission officials in gathering support for their next career move, mobilising scarce information in a difficult dossier and finding a sounding board for sensitive proposals. If Commission officials would have an informal network circuit which is shaped by national affinities, this would support the claims in the literature that business gets done “behind closed doors” where the formal supranational rules of the game might be broken by the private bonds formed around nationality.

To explore the networking behaviour of Commission officials, I first present quantitative data on how European Commission officials build and maintain their informal professional networks. Subsequently, I rely extensively on qualitative survey and observation data to explain what purposes the networking occasions outside work serve in Brussels. Focusing in particular on the national links and activities, I argue in this article that Commission officials tend to separate work and private contacts and that nationality rather forms a bonding factor for leisure purposes.

I. Deconstructing and Studying Networks in the Commission

My analysis of networks in the Commission builds on organisational network theory and insights from the empirical literature on the Commission. In this section I summarise the main theoretical assumptions derived from the body of existing literature. This is followed by an introduction of the empirical data used for this study.

Theoretical Background

Networks are “structures of interrelations between individuals and/or organisations, who engage in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions” (Soeters, 1993, p. 643). Such contacts grow out of personal relationships that develop through frequent interaction and breed on trust built on frank exchanges of information (idem). Networks may be formed through old-boy networks and other friendship groups, the golf club, chance contacts, formal meetings within an organisation, informal meetings such as lunches and receptions and institutionalised exchanges such as meetings of professional groups and associations (Morgan, 1986, p. 174). Networks are not only to a great extent invisible, but communication links generally tend to be self-reinforcing (March and Simon, 1958, pp. 167-8, Zenger and Lawrence 1989: 357). When a particular channel is frequently used for one purpose, it is more likely to be used also for other unrelated purposes (March and Simon, 1958, pp. 167-8).

Especially non-work-related conversations influence the ease of work-related conversations (Zenger and Lawrence, 1989, p. 357). As Rob Cross and Andrew Parker (2004, pp. 95-6) observed, “Almost universally, people reported that their most valued information relationships had connected on issues outside work and this process was then identified as a major milestone in the development of the relationship.” Due to this characteristic of networks, patterns of work transactions within and between organisations may depart from what might be expected from a purely rational economic perspective because people are likely to favour their family and friends with timely information, recommendations, interesting projects and other career-building opportunities (Kilduff and Tsai, 2005, p. 26).

However interlinked the work-related and non-work-related contacts may be, the various types of networks need to be differentiated in order to be able to unveil networking patterns. Elsewhere the networks of European Commission officials have been classified as (Suvarierol, 2007; Suvarierol, 2008):

- 1) ***Task-related formal networks*** – obligatory contacts required by the official’s task description (i.e. dossier)
- 2) ***Task-related informal networks*** – non-obligatory contacts used to obtain information or advice for conducting tasks
- 3) ***Career networks*** – contacts maintained for one’s own career advancement

4) *Leisure networks* – contacts during social activities and gatherings outside working hours that are unrelated to work.

The focus of this article is primarily on **leisure networks** and the task-related informal networks to the extent that they overlap with the leisure networks.¹ The analysis of the leisure networks aims to demonstrate how Commission officials deal with their professional and private identities and roles as they work and live in the Euro-city Brussels.

In a classical diplomatic setting where ‘national civil servants abroad’ work with others of the same nationality defending the interests of their country, the boundaries between work and private may be more clear-cut. Diplomats in embassies and consulates work predominantly in their own language; colleagues share the same culture and speak the same language; and there is constant contact with the home country. The social contacts outside work may be with the national group living in that particular city (or country), with diplomats from other countries or in the rare case with the local population. In any case, since diplomats are typically sent to another location after four-five years, these leisure networks tend to be of a more temporary or loose character.

In this sense, Brussels constitutes a different international scene. The EU institutions are multinational. One seldom works in one’s own language; the colleagues are of multiple nationalities, cultures and languages; and the contacts at work are highly international. In contrast to the classical diplomatic setting, nationality forms less of an immediate anchor – one has to more actively build a network of compatriots if one wishes to have the opportunity to be in the social company of individuals of the same national background. The other factor that differentiates Eurocrats from diplomats is the fact that they are permanent – they are set out to stay in Brussels until the end of their career, which forms an incentive to build long-lasting friendship ties outside of work. Arguably, the incentive to build a national network of friends may also be higher for Eurocrats since they miss out on the comfort of sharing a common culture and language at work.

As it has been already suggested at the beginning of this article, “The display of official and private identities is especially important in Brussels, where the non-official world is very much involved with the institutional arena. Receptions, clubs or meeting over cocktails are considered by actors as key elements in their insertion into Europe as well as for the circulation of professional information” (Bellier, 2000, p. 62). Yet, the empirical evidence on the leisure networks of EU officials has so far been rather few and patchy (Michelmann, 1978; Abélès *et al.*, 1993; Hooghe, 1999; Hooghe, 2001; Shore, 2000; Cailliez, 2004; De Gruyter, 2006). This article aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Methodological Choices

To find out the extent to which the task-related and leisure networks of Commission officials overlap, I rely on quantitative and qualitative empirical data gathered from 82 interviews with Administrator level (A-level)² Commission officials between April-June 2005. To get the most interesting results with this number of informants, the study was limited to one policy area.³ In the European Commission, the Directorates-General (DGs) stand for the component units with their own goals, cultures, working methods and approaches to policy (Peters, 1992, p. 107; Cini, 2000, p. 76). Four DGs belonging to the ‘Social Regulation’⁴ family have been

¹ The task-related informal networks and leisure networks are also referred to in this article as professional and private networks respectively.

² The new EU staff regulations adopted in 2004 have changed the names of these officials to Administrator (AD). Yet, at the time of the study Commission officials themselves still used the term ‘A-level’. That is why this term is employed in this article.

³ As a trade-off for the generalisability of the results, I concentrated on attaining as valid results as possible for the practically set sample size limit of 120. With small samples, it is important to limit the variation within the sample by introducing some control variables. Since there was no information available beforehand on the individual-level variables, I could only control for the organisational factors. Given that the Commission is functionally organised in terms of policy areas, limiting the population to one policy type controls a part of the variation.

⁴ I rely on the classification Hooghe (2001) uses to group the DGs of the Commission into six policy areas: Administration, External Affairs, Market-Oriented, Social Regulation, Supply Side and Provision.

included in the sample: Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; Environment; Health and Consumer Protection; Justice, Freedom and Security.

On the whole, regulatory DGs are theoretically interesting since the EU is considered to be a “regulatory polity” (Majone, 1996) which makes ‘Social Regulation DGs’ a plausible choice. At the time of sampling, this group of DGs employed a total of 1100 A-level officials, more or less equally distributed across the DGs. This was an important factor in terms of distributing respondent burden across DGs. A proportionate number of individuals were randomly selected⁵ within each DG in order to guarantee an appropriate representation of each DG, as well as to spread the time costs across DGs. The resulting overall response rate (out of 118 officials⁶) was 69%, which is considered to be a very good response rate (Babbie, 1992, p. 267).

In the structured part of the interviews, officials were asked to choose three most important A-level Commission officials, whom they contacted regularly for information or advice, specifying that this does not necessarily involve the officials they have to contact due to their task description and obligations. As such, the task-related informal networks have been singled out to account for the self-reinforcing character of networks. These are the type of contacts where the formal task obligations and non-work-related social contacts are likely to merge. To find out the networking patterns, the closed questions on the networks focused on the attributes of and the relationship with these three people, including how they first met, how they communicate and what type of information they exchange.

To explore the dynamics of the leisure networks of Commission officials, particularly in terms of the extent to which these are shaped by nationality, I rely on the qualitative accounts of the 82 interviewed Commission officials in response to the open-ended questions addressed to the officials. These questions dealt with the issue of networks in a broader framework and generated a rich deposit of native explanations and the reasoning underlying these arguments. Since the same open questions were addressed to all the interviewed officials, it was easy to compare the answers and derive patterns out of this data as well. I use this material in the following manner:

- to demonstrate repetitive answers in which case the officials who referred to the same terms and concepts are specified
- to pay tribute to the officials who used a particular formulation which was representative of a pattern
- to give remarkable illustrations of phenomena by directly citing officials.⁷

The third method I use in this study is participant observation, conducted during a five-month traineeship at the Commission DG Health and Consumer Affairs between October 2005-February 2006. A thorough understanding of the human beings who are the subjects of the study and the context in which they operate can only be partly obtained through face-to-face interviews. To complete the task of understanding Commission officials, I directly participated in and observed their daily working life through an internship at the Commission. By being directly exposed to the life of the subjects and listening to their narrative accounts, I could validate and complement my explanation of the networks and the role of nationality. I use evidence from my observation period in the following ways:

- to support the patterns that evolved out of the interviews with real-life examples
- to explain the patterns that occurred in the interviews
- to provide insider insights and meanings with regard to the daily working life of a Commission official.

The observations are weaved into my storyline.

⁵ Proportionate stratified sampling results in more precise survey estimates by reducing sampling error (Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld and Booth-Kewley, 1997, pp. 58-9).

⁶ Two out of the 120 of the sampled officials were later excluded and not recontacted after the first letter asking for an interview when it became clear that they were not A-level officials.

⁷ I remain faithful to the words of the Commission officials and do not correct for language mistakes unless it is necessary for understanding the interview excerpt. It should be kept in mind that English is not the native language of most of the interviewed officials.

II. Professional Networking Outside Work(ing Hours)?

To reveal the extent to which the professional and private networks of Commission officials overlap, I first present quantitative data on how officials maintain and build their task-related informal networks. Subsequently, I rely on qualitative survey and observation data to explain what purposes the outside work occasions in Brussels serve.

Do the Professional and Leisure Networks Overlap?

Do Commission officials indeed meet their task-related contact persons in the Commission over lunch, after working hours or in the weekend at the sports club? To find out whether the informal, “behind-closed-doors” image of Brussels networks is a myth or reality, the officials were asked where they physically meet their contact persons. They could name three places or occasions and Table 1 displays the frequencies of the first named venue, i.e. the most frequently used meeting venue.

Table 1: Meeting Venues

Type of Venue	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Professional (Commission-related)</i>		
Office	146	60.6%
Meeting	51	22.2%
TOTAL	177	82.8%
<i>Social occasion during working hours</i>		
Lunch	14	5.8%
Hallway/coffee	2	0.8%
TOTAL	16	6.6%
<i>Social occasion outside working hours</i>		
After work	8	3.3%
Weekends	1	0.4%
TOTAL	9	3.7%
Do not physically meet	19	7.9%
	N=241	

Table 1 clearly shows that if there are any closed doors behind which Commission officials are networking, those doors are within the Commission buildings. Namely, 82.8% of the contacts occur either in the office of the official or the contact person and around meetings (before or after). The notorious lunches, receptions and other private occasions (e.g. at the golf, tennis or squash club) make up for a mere 10.3% of the contacts.

How can we explain these findings? Let us take the example of the legendary “Brussels lunch circuit”: the restaurants around the Schuman Area and Place du Luxembourg⁸ are full with officials from EU institutions between 1 and 3 p.m. (De Gruyter, 2006, p. 24). Half jokingly, half seriously, a Commission official explains: “This is a big lunch city. Everybody has lunch. (*Laughs*) Deals get done over lunch. (*Laughs*) ... This is a city of compromises, so networks help compromises.” (Official #69) Such “half-social, half-professional” occasions (Official #33) may potentially constitute a grey area:

Well, let’s say you can meet someone over lunch and the idea is 80% private. It’s fun. But you can also combine it with a question, just to get an update let’s say on what’s going on.... That

⁸ These are where most of the Commission’s DGs are situated. Remarkably, these two areas are deserted after the after-work drinks during the Happy Hour.

happens. I wouldn't consider it professional. It's not file-related. Does it help? Well yes and no, the problem being that this file and a lot of others are quite specific files. (Official #82)

The utility of a social contact for a Commission official's work is mainly conditioned by the an official's area of expertise which is defined by her/his file (*dossier*) and DG. Commission officials are specialised in files which in some cases require very specific technical or scientific expertise. The significance of expertise is a reflection of the sectoral organisation of the European Commission, whereby commonalities or differences are marked by the policy area and DG belonging.⁹

This does not imply, however, that the files and DGs of officials are fixed: "Because each time you are doing legislation, you change your file. So of course, the people who are important are not exactly necessarily the same. So that's why your files need to be your networks. "(Official #119) In this sense, "EU networks" on the whole tend to be flexible, pragmatic and temporary. They come and go depending on the policy issue at hand.

For the work-relevant or related networks, it's very easy I think in Brussels to establish the right contacts and to get in touch with people. I mean, to give you just an example, when you have a proposal that is currently in Council or Parliament for negotiations, then you have constant contact with the institutions. And then you get to know the assistants, you get to know the secretarial staff in both institutions and so on and so forth. And immediately you're probably joining ... a small meeting with these people or if they're going out for a drink... They tell you of a party or network, you go... But then if you don't have that proposal anymore, then you know it just disappears again because you have no need, for work reasons, and then it's purely social reasons why you keep up a network. And then you work on other issues and then you basically create the other contacts as you go on. And everybody is keen in Brussels to communicate and to help out, so I don't have a personal feeling that I have to actively keep up a certain network so [that] I can survive with my work. I think that goes with the job (Official #55).

It is rather professional networking as usual: you make and use your contacts to conduct your tasks and to achieve your objectives (Official #72). However, this does not exclude the possibility that the friendships that may grow out of these contacts may outlive a particular policy proposal. But on the whole, Commission officials make a clear differentiation between their professional and leisure networks.

Do Professional Networks Grow out of Leisure Networks?

The finding that most of the informal networking between Commission officials occurs within the Commission buildings might seem obvious given the fact that it is their working environment. Yet, for the outside world, this internal networking is invisible, whereas the lunches and receptions are in the spotlight, a factor which probably explains the fame of the informal networking scene in Brussels. What purposes do these outside work occasions in Brussels serve? How does the life of Commission officials look like outside the Commission buildings? And why do national networks appear to form focal points in this international networking scene? Whilst describing this leisure network scene in Brussels, I focus in particular on the national social gatherings in order to analyse the functions of national networks outside working hours in the Commission.

A major factor that breeds the image of national networks is related to how Brussels is organised as a networking scene. The Permanent Representations (PermReps) of Member States in Brussels are the one of the most active actors in organising events for gathering their officials in the EU institutions. They are considered to be the "ringleaders" of national networks in Brussels (Peterson, 1995, p. 75). Other national actors such as the Commissioner of a Member State and their Cabinet are also assumed to be a part of this network (Officials #12, #13, #69, #106). Indeed, all officials, whether they participated in them or not, referred to or showed the invitations for receptions or conferences their Permanent Representations

⁹ Previous research has also shown that the DG attachment is central important for understanding the organisational behaviour of Commission officials (Cram, 1994; Cini, 1996; Cini, 2000; Egeberg, 1996; Egeberg, 2004b; Egeberg, 2006c; Suvarierol, 2007; Suvarierol, 2008).

were organising. In this respect, all the PermReps are organised more or less in the same way (Official #88).

These PermRep receptions on national holidays or at Christmas provide an opportunity “to say hello to the ambassador” and speak briefly with other compatriots who work in Brussels (Officials #20, #53). These events are usually annual massive social gatherings.

It is an occasion to meet some French people or to discover that there are French people you know who are also there. Each year there is a party where I say ‘Oh, you are also in Brussels?’ And there are also a lot of people you know already since there are several hundred people who come to these parties. But it is social and mundane. [Author’s translation] (Official #91)

They’re just receptions, just standing and blah-blahing. And at times, they have certain discussions on certain subjects. But ... again, [it’s] drinking together and blah-blahing, it’s always the case. (Official #38)

The level of activity seems to vary per Member State, but A-level officials are normally on the distribution list of the PermReps through which they remain informed about the organised activities and get invitations for them. There are also thematic events with presentations or speeches on a given topic where only officials from related DGs are invited (Officials #7, #38, #91).

Moreover, these networks are not limited to Commission officials. Officials of other EU institutions, lobbyists, NATO officials or businessmen may also be involved in these national activities. In this sense, we can rather refer to such networks as the Brussels network of each Member State. Regional networks are also a good example of sub-national networks, in which case the Regional Representations in Brussels take on the role of organising events. Especially for large nationalities, size makes it impossible to contain the whole national group in one network. That is why large nationalities tend to form sub-networks (Officials #16, #17, #81, #91, #92, #99, #115). In particular the Catalan and Bavarian networks have been mentioned by respondents as strong sub-national networks.

This type of informal networks may equally be of a multinational character. The most notorious example is the so-called “Bruges mafia” (Official #82). The College of Europe in Bruges¹⁰ does not only educate young ambitious European minds but also provides an opportunity to form close friendships and lay the foundations of a multinational Brussels network for many prospective EU officials.

For newly arrived Commission officials who do not already have a friendship network in Brussels, however, national networks may offer a smooth insertion to their new environment. They are not only new to their jobs but also to the city and the country. Being an expatriate means facing practical problems such as accommodation and it is “more relaxed” to talk about such problems with a fellow compatriot (Official #52).

Officials also tend to rely more on their compatriots when they begin to work for the Commission in order to become comfortable within the organisational structures and the formal and informal rules related to the functioning of the Commission (Official #16, #19). These socialisation-to-the-Commission networks need not be mono-national though (Official #19). The new Member State officials, for example, have a regional network (Officials #13, #42, #87).

People from the new Member States who came mostly last year, ten new Member States, they all came at around the same time. So they were a quite large body of people who arrived with the same kind of problems at the same time and to some extent similar backgrounds. Different countries, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, they all have a little bit the same background. So they may have formed some kind of a network of their own.... I see that they talk to each other much more because they probably feel more comfortable talking to somebody who has the same level of knowledge. They’re not going to feel that they are ignorant because they will talk to somebody who also started at the same time. (Official #13)

A Czech official explains:

We have lunch, either just between two of us or we meet six to ten people together, and we use this to see each other and to stay part of the scene, including the work, but everybody has different tasks here, so ... sometimes we are discussing some problems but more or less in an

¹⁰ Bruges houses the first College of Europe. The second one is situated in Natolin (Poland).

interpersonal level, like if you have a difficult colleague, how to deal with such a person; if you want a new file, how to change this file. And also there are new people coming from my Member State now and they know that I'm here, so I have some guidance for them for everything, including how to set a new home.... But I think at the same time ... it is much more easier for the officials coming from the new Member States to associate with others from the new Member States. It is easier to have this network apart than to insert to the old networks.... When I [follow a] training [course], I see only or mainly people from the new Member States, so you create the network with the people who are available. (Official #42)

As the example of East European officials shows, for a newcomer it might be simply easier to set up a network with newcomers who are all more or less in the same age group and the same situation of settling down at a new place and job.

The fact that Commission officials are expatriates has furthermore consequences for their social activities. Most officials have to build a network from zero when they arrive in Brussels and receptions or parties can be instrumental in meeting new people.

There are lots of receptions in Brussels ... where you can meet people. Then, you can be at a friend's place who will introduce you to another friend and since everyone eventually works more or less around this Commission bubble, you can meet people who at one point enlarge your circle of acquaintances.... [Author's translation] (Official #17)

These chance meetings at parties may be useful in the long-run: "Brussels is rather a small place. Socially it means you meet friends of friends and it might turn out that it's the person you will be working with." (Official #74) These accounts suggest that social occasions outside work do lead to meeting other Commission officials. As such, they do lay the basis for a 'potential' network.

The question is: to what extent are these contacts activated for work? Do these people encountered at parties become contact persons? To find out the extent to which the professional and private networks of Commission officials overlap, I also asked them to indicate where they met their contact persons for the first time.

Table 2: First Point of Contact

Type of Contact	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Professional (Commission-related)</i>		
Same DG/unit	127	52.7%
Meeting	68	28.2%
Previous DG/unit	17	7.1%
Training/Concours preparation	4	1.7%
Through colleagues	2	0.8%
TOTAL	218	90.5%
<i>Previous work/education</i>		
Education	2	0.8%
EU traineeship	1	0.4%
Previous work in Member State	9	3.7%
TOTAL	12	4.9%
<i>Social</i>		
Social gathering in Brussels	3	1.2%
Through friends	1	0.4%
Through partner	1	0.4%
Through children	2	0.8%
TOTAL	7	2.8%
Other	4	1.7%
	N=241	

As Table 2 demonstrates, various social occasions outside of work have led to meeting a mere 2.8% of the named contact persons. By contrast, 90.5% of the contact persons were encountered initially within the Commission through work, meetings, training sessions and courses.

It is thus rare that a person met by chance at a party is activated for task-related purposes. “I built my networks inside [the Commission]. For your issue, you identify people who are dealing with it. Then, you do not have to do much. It becomes straightforward after a while. I rarely meet people through social events. I have a specialised field.” (Official #105) To become a professional contact, the contact person has to be working in the same policy field. To illustrate, let us take as an example the answer category ‘I met this contact person through my children’. Indeed, Commission officials meet other parents at the European School.¹¹ One of the two officials who had met one of her contact persons via the school of her children explained: “So my network here [consists] of colleagues that I deal with for work-related purposes and I would say purely. I mean it’s a coincidence that there’s somebody I knew from outside, but that’s very coincidental. She got employed two weeks after me here.” (Official #35) Two other parents confirmed her story by acknowledging that whether other parents at the European School become contact persons at work depends on the file an official is responsible for (Officials #75, #110). As this example confirms, even though the chance certainly exists that officials met through social occasions outside work might be useful at one point of the career of a Commission official, it hardly ever happens as the data show.

III. The Role of Nationality in Leisure Networks

Having established that Commission officials separate their work and leisure contacts, it is worthwhile to look further into the dynamics of their leisure networks. What drives their leisure network? To what extent does nationality form a bond in the leisure networks? The following sections aim to answer these questions whilst describing Brussels as an expatriate scene.

Eurocrat Life in Brussels

During the breaks within working hours, Commission officials usually tend to socialise with their unit colleagues and/or compatriots. Whilst having coffee with colleagues from the unit, the subject often revolves around different national traditions. As such, speaking of different countries and cultures forms a bond between the officials. Anthropologist Stacia E. Zabusky observed the same phenomenon at the European agency ESTEC:

People, in exchanging information about national and cultural differences, came to share the same general, if superficial, knowledge about each other, incorporating it into their own expertise, as it were, on ‘nationalities’.... In a sense, it was not so much the contrasts which emerged as significant, but instead the experience of talking together about the same things which was the pre-eminent experience of such conversations ‘about’ nationality. Furthermore, people were acutely aware that these kinds of conversations never happened ‘at home’, where everyone was ‘the same’. (Zabusky, 2000, p. 194)

The recent or planned trips of officials either to their home country or to other places in the world are also a favourite conversation topic. Officials typically give each other tips and share their travelling experiences. Such cultural exchanges and travelling form a crucial part of the life styles of Commission officials, who frequently go for small trips in the weekend. Some officials also have partners in another country where they go to spend the weekend with (Officials #53, #116).

¹¹ These are the schools where the children of the officials of EU institutions can obtain their primary and high school education free of charge.

Anyone who has experienced Brussels on a Friday afternoon or Monday morning will notice officials with trolleys heading towards or coming back from their weekend destination. No wonder a common Brussels joke is: ‘The best thing about Brussels is that you can get out of it easily’. Officials have a double relationship with Brussels as a city. On the one hand, they enjoy the fact that it is so cosmopolitan (Cailliez, 2004, p. 63; De Gruyter, 2006, p. 42). It is easy to integrate in the expatriate circles since this multinational society is open for meeting new people (De Gruyter, 2006). On the other hand, some officials never feel at home in Brussels since it is merely a city where they work, where they find themselves temporarily (Cailliez, 2004). If the EU institutions were situated in another city, they would not live in Brussels (De Gruyter, 2006, p. 12).

EU officials typically live in an expatriate network which is a parallel world with its own shared values, problems, concerns and conversation topics (*idem*). The officials who have any ties with Belgian society or the Belgian people are a minority (e.g. those married to Belgians). No wonder Commission officials joke amongst themselves, “How many Belgians do you know?” (Cailliez, 2004, p. 83). Indeed, Belgian society and EU officials live side by side but in separate worlds, a phenomenon which is exacerbated by the fact that the Belgian society is not particularly open towards this expatriate community (Abéles *et al.*, 1993; Shore, 2000; Cailliez, 2004).

In some aspects Brussels is organised to facilitate the life of expatriates, where each national community has its infrastructures to feel at home, from supermarkets selling local products to churches and theatre groups (Cailliez, 2004, p. 51). Especially in neighbourhoods where the European Schools are situated, there are “EU ghettos” where officials from a certain nationality tend to live, e.g. the Swedes in Waterloo (Official #59). Such facilities mean that if they chose to, officials could build their whole social life with their compatriots:

[My wife and I], we try to have friends outside [the French community] as much as possible.

You can just meet with compatriots in Brussels, if you want, you can live in a neighbourhood where there are more people of your country, always invite them, return to the country often.

There are people who live a bit like that, a bit offshore. [Author’s translation] (Official #91)

Yet other officials might choose to avoid their own nationality (Official #3). After a hard day or week at work at the Commission, some do not socialise with Commission colleagues at all after work or in the weekends:

Normally, we work from 9 o’clock in the morning until late at night, so we really don’t have time for social contacts. For lunch maybe, but you don’t want to see the same people also after the work. You have enough probably seeing all day and working all day, so... (Official #71)

My idea is that for discussing about ... work ... the best place is here. During the weekend or after ... work, maybe it’s better to go to the Bois de la Cambre for resting a little bit... Considering that this job is eight, nine, ten hours per day, the working environment is the most important for our life. Because ... I leave at 8.30 in the morning and I come back at 7 o’clock in the night. The time for me and for my personal and social life is quite limited. Considering that I have a family and wife.... We have just the weekend for resting a little bit. But during the weekend it is my opinion that everybody is quite isolated.... My idea is, I was five days, eight to ten hours per day with these people and during the weekend I don’t want to stay with them. I prefer to do something different. (Official #108)

Moreover, Commission officials are a highly cosmopolitan crowd: 69.1% of the interviewed officials have lived abroad before coming to Brussels to work for the European Commission, for an average of 2.3 years. For 46.3% of them, this experience abroad has also involved their studies. Furthermore, 8.5% have grown up in a multinational family and 38.3% have partners of another nationality. Especially these officials with a strong international background have a mixture of multinational and national network of friends.

Well, due to my experience here in the Commission and before, [I am] always in an international environment. [If] you’re here as a seconded national expert from Germany or Turkey whatever, you come with your family or your family comes with you, then you’re from your own nationality and you tend to stick to your own nationality. If you have been abroad in other countries, all alone and far away, let’s say you’ve been to France and to Switzerland whatever, always quite near here to this. Let’s say you have relations, friends who you have studied with all over the world, you are already different from the typical national and therefore

you are more open-minded. You're not ... only ... in that national circle. You have more circles, but you can't be intensive in all these circles. That's ... why this interest is a little bit less since your activities and partnerships ... are from different nations. (Official #82)

As these accounts demonstrate, how Commission officials spend their leisure time after work and how they form their leisure networks is a matter of choice, family circumstances and background. It is not as if all Commission officials are running from reception to reception on a regular basis.

Sticking to Pieces from Home

Even though Commission officials enjoy the unique multicultural context they find themselves in (Official #10), having coffee, lunch or an after-work drink with a compatriot is often a welcome break – a break from the constant shift between languages, a break from having to explain national idiosyncrasies. “You switch constantly between English and French, so you need to relax during the breaks! You enjoy this time when you don't need to make an effort.” (Official #92)

Outside working hours, officials of the same nationality tend to maintain contacts in smaller groups or on an individual basis for non-instrumental reasons. Even though these gatherings are primarily of a social nature, officials admit that they cannot avoid work topics. However, if the conversations are related to work, it is usually not on the content of their work but on the Commission or on EU politics in general (Officials #9, #69, #71). “National networks, yes, there are certain things where the senior British staff talk to each other about. Who's going to get the job in London? ... What's going to happen in the referendum? You know, the British things.” (Official #69)

Commission officials usually follow news and discussions in their policy area across the Member States, on the EU and on national politics. A-level officials are expected to follow the news in their home countries. At the weekly unit meetings, for example, officials usually intervene to give extra insight on the general or issue-specific political discussions in their country of origin. Other compatriot officials in the Commission can also be helpful in keeping up to date on the national front.

Whereas language is not an issue in work contacts (Suvarierol 2007: 96-104), officials might prefer to speak their own language (and/or another foreign language in which they feel comfortable speaking) in their private time.

Sometimes it's very nice to sit down with a beer and speak your own language. (Official #9)

When you go for coffee or lunch, you group by nationality to speak your own language. At work, it's less obvious. (Official #119)

Leisure networks are thus more susceptible to being shaped by language (Official #29).

Even if I speak French, for my sort of social life I'm more comfortable in English, so I know English, Irish [and] Dutch, [etc.] ... because [we] have the same ... language group. But I know less Italians or French. (Official #74)

Language is quite important. You meet socially with people of your nationality. This is typically Brussels, especially for the Italians and Spanish. Communication with your own nationality is easier. Since I speak Spanish, I also have a lot of contacts with the Spanish. (Official #75)

The often cited cultural differences between the North and South Europeans (Abélès *et al.*, 1993; Hofstede, 1994; Egeberg, 1996; Beyers and Dierickx, 1997; Beyers and Dierickx, 1998; McDonald, 2000) seem to be also rather more important for the leisure networks than for the professional networks.

With the Southerners we can absolutely understand each other better. This is normal. We might have a two hour lunch and then stay until late at night at work. Family links are better understood. I get hysterical when I get invited for dinner at six! The North and South Europeans have separate networks. I have good Northern friends, but they can't accept a dinner invitation at 9.30. It has to do with body rhythm. I also have good contacts and friends from Malta and Cyprus. For the job it doesn't matter, but for the social yes. (Official #75)

I rather have coffee with a Spanish, Portuguese or Greek than a Swede. For work it doesn't matter. The South shares the same traditions, behaviour and food. (Official #108)

These quotes suggest that whereas the Northerners seem to be more at unease with the Southerners at work (Abélès *et al.*, 1993, p. 42; McDonald, 2000, p. 67; Suvarierol, 2007, p. 94-6), the Southerners seem to be more at unease with the Northerners outside of work.

On the whole, cultural tastes and preferences appear to be more important for the leisure networks. In this context, national contacts become ties with one's national identity and cultural background (Officials #47, #104). The strength of national ties is also a function of the distance between Belgium and the home country (Van Beurden and Wong, 2004, p. 51). The Greeks are a good example of a national group that compensates their longing for home by maintaining close friendship bonds and contacts with Greeks in the Commission and in Brussels in general. Since it is more difficult to go back to their country as often as other Member State officials may do (e.g. Dutch officials), this creates a stronger nostalgia for home.

In our free time, we would like to change some and remember our cultural roots or language.... I don't think it's the language itself, it's more the culture or it's our thoughts for our country... Because we are immigrants here also... For those who've grown up here, maybe there is no difference, but someone who came when he was 25 here and he has a past in his country, there is always a nostalgia for the country. And you have always the culture of a country. I am Greek and I will remain Greek. (Official #71)

Commission officials with children usually wish to create opportunities for their children to speak their native language. In this sense, the European Schools are the hub of contacts with parents from the same nationality whose children are in the same language division (Officials #3, #29, #81, #75, #110, #118). Being far away from home is an important factor that drives officials to other officials of their own nationality. After all, Commission officials are (almost) all expatriates in Brussels.

Being Home as a Commission Official – The Case of Belgians¹²

The networking dynamics among expatriate officials can perhaps be grasped better by looking at officials who lack these networks by virtue of being home – the Belgians. Being in their own country, they stay embedded in their usual social environment, with their Belgian family and friends. They are outside this Brussels expatriate scene since they do not have the need to socialise with other Commission officials and perhaps even less with Belgians in the Commission.

I can see a big difference.... I mean I was working in Brussels before and my family is still very close and my wife's family as well, so we still have the friends we used to have before I joined the Commission. So for us there's less of a need to establish social contacts with people within the Commission, so it's different. (Official #2)

I'm not going to break my head to have friends [in the Commission] because I don't need them.... (Official #5)

If Commission officials on the whole live in a parallel expatriate world, Belgian officials have the feeling that they live in both of these worlds: the Commission and Belgium.

I don't feel the desire to meet specifically Belgian Commission officials. When I go home and in the weekend, I have Belgian friends. I think it's nice to meet people who are not working in the Commission.... When I'm here ... [I] speak English and French and then I go home and it's like a completely different world. It's true ... and also where I live ...in Vilvoorde ... there are no Commission officials.... And they have this idea that all those from the Commission, they earn a lot of money; they are snobs. So it's very strange for me; I live ... in two worlds. (Official #59)

Whereas the Belgian officials are a part of the Belgian society and the "normal Belgian life", the non-Belgian officials are rather isolated in their own EU circle:

We are less isolated from the rest of society. I mean I go home; I don't live in Brussels. My family is not working in the European Commission. I have my family here and that makes a big difference with colleagues who go home to their wife who works in another DG. They don't have their family here. In the evening, they only talk Commission, EU. They go out with

¹² There were seven Belgians in the sample. This section integrates the accounts of all interviewed Belgian officials.

Commission and EU friends.... It's very different. It's *isolation splendide*. It's a luxury isolation.... I mean it's an isolation in the sense that not many people are really integrated here in the Belgian society. It's a world on its own. It's a big world. I mean it's thousands and thousands of people.... The vast majority to start with lives in Brussels, in the 90s communes, not outside Brussels, so they have little contact with real, with the Belgian society. They frequent colleagues and friends who also have links with the EU institutions. They often do not speak one of the languages of the country, but clearly these are well-paid people, so they have this international background. They are cultivated, ... it's not like the poor ... migrant ... in Brussels who's living in very bad conditions, who never go down in this neighbourhood or... It's an *isolation splendide*. I would say [for us Belgians] it's far more enriching. We're with one foot in and with one foot out.... They are more missing out on Belgian, normal Belgian life. They don't discover all parts of the country. (Official #76)

In this sense, one could argue that the level of separation between the work and private contacts is at its strongest for the Belgian officials.

Belgian officials are also automatically excluded from the activity scene organised by the PermReps which is typical for the other nationalities (Officials #83, #102, #115).

All nationalities have activities organised by their Permanent Representations. They watch football together. But not Belgians! ... I don't interact with Belgian colleagues because they're not my friends. Other nationalities know lots of people in other DGs. (Official #102)

Honestly, I do not remember any activity specifically organised for Belgian officials since I work here. Well, with us, we do not have this problem of expatriation, so perhaps we have less of a need ... for a network of activities than the people who are expatriates. Ok, it's normal: We know already the country, the languages, the habits, we do not need specific activities. [Author's translation] (Official #115)

Different from the expatriate officials, Belgian officials do not need to be integrated into Brussels or Belgium; neither do they long for their country or their native language, which, as we have seen, are important factors that shape the formation of leisure networks and lead officials to maintain contacts with their compatriots.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to explore the EU networking scene in Brussels by illustrating the major ways in which Commission officials organise their social life outside of work. As it has been demonstrated above, even though all these leisure networks and activities generate potential contact persons within the Commission, it is rare that this is actually the case since the utility of a contact person is determined by their file and policy area at that point in time.

More importantly, Commission officials make a distinction between their leisure networks on the one hand and their task-related networks on the other. It is thus important to study every type of network separately. What makes the separation between work and leisure networks even more interesting is the difference in terms of the role of nationality in shaping these networks: whereas task-related networks are not shaped by nationality (Suvarierol, 2007; Suvarierol, 2008)¹³, leisure networks are more likely to be influenced by nationality and cultural similarities. Although this forms an interesting topic for further systematic analysis, the finding that only a small minority of these leisure contacts turns into work

¹³ The weakness of nationality in shaping the task-related networks of Commission officials is explained by this author as being a result of the sectoral principle of organisation of the Commission and international socialisation of Commission officials. In line with the organisational perspective on the study of EU institutions (Egeberg, 2004b; Egeberg, 2006a; Egeberg, 2006b; Trondal 2006a; Trondal, 2006b), the author argues that Commission officials resemble their civil servant counterparts in national administrations in the sense that their departmental belonging determines their organisational behaviour (Allison, 1971; Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981; Allison and Zelikow, 1999). As such, the territorially-based Council structure primarily reflects and sustains the classical intergovernmental system, whereas the functional specialisation in the Commission focuses conflict along DG lines (Egeberg, 2004a). The Council fora remain "after all a negotiation process among nations" (Beyers and Dierckx, 1998, p. 313), whereas the Commission is where the European/supranational element visibly comes to life. Following this logic, one could expect the networks of the MEPs to coincide with the left-right political party lines since this is the main dimension of politics in the European Parliament (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006, p. 494). The qualitative accounts and the observation of the Commission officials conducted for the same research point to a powerful effect of socialisation, both as a result of self-selection (through (prior) international experience) and continuous daily exposure to a multinational environment, in reducing the relevance of nationality for the choice of contact persons.

contacts makes the significance of these networks for the organisational behaviour of Commission officials minimal.

It is interesting to note in this vein that the officials at a comparable international working environment, the European agency ESTEC, also drew a clear distinction between work and leisure contexts and the role of nationality therein (Zabusky, 2000, p. 187). The overlap between the work and leisure networks and the extent to which nationality shapes these networks seem thus to be influenced by the kind of organisation an international civil servant works for. In this sense, the social lives and the interplay between the social and professional lives of bureaucrats working for international organisations are expected to be different than diplomats working at national representations around the world. Conducting a similar study on a group of international bureaucrats working for another international organisation like the United Nations or a group of diplomats would provide fruitful cases for comparison.

The scope of this research was limited to the intra-organisational networks of Commission officials in four Commission DGs. In terms of the task-related networks and the question of the extent to which leisure networks overlap, it is important to also study the contacts with the Council Secretariat, the Permanent Representations, the European Parliament or other national and non-governmental actors in Brussels to obtain a complete view of the EU networking scene. It could well be, for example, that the work and leisure contacts of Commission officials with the outside world, namely with national authorities and interest groups, tend to overlap more or are more influenced by nationality.

Clearly, the construction of leisure networks is more of a private choice linked to the official's family circumstances. In this sense, the leisure networks of other permanent EU actors, such as lobbyists in Brussels may diverge from those of Commission officials. Even though they are also a part of the expatriate EU scene, the extent to which an individual working in the EU arena in Brussels relies on her/his national network is likely to be influenced by her/his length of stay. In this sense, diplomats such as those working for the Permanent Representations or temporary officials such as seconded national experts, for example, are typically in Brussels for a limited amount of time. This is a factor that lessens the willingness, on their part and on the part of their 'permanent counterparts', to build up and invest in a substantive leisure network in Brussels at all.

As the accounts of Belgian officials has also demonstrated, being a permanent expatriate in Brussels is a stimulating factor for social contacts with one's own nationality. Leisure networks with compatriots constitute a comfortable venue for the insertion of Commission officials to their living and working environment. A glass of wine is a great occasion to relax and share gossip with compatriots and to discuss macro issues like national politics and 'where the EU is going'. When you are homesick or just feel like speaking your own native language and make jokes in your own language, you turn to compatriot Commission officials, who are also in the same situation of having double homes. In this sense, nationality does form a bond for friendships, for some more than others. On the other hand, given the fact that Commission officials are mostly cosmopolitans, even the leisure networks are by no means purely mono-national. The case of mixed families is a telling example – How else are we to predict the leisure networks of a Dane married to an Italian to be if not by presuming they are multinational and multiregional?

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