

MELT or SURFACE: WILL the EAST EUROPEAN (POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE) CULTURES be INCLUDED In or EXCLUDED From the EVOLVING EUROPEAN COMMISSION CULTURE?

Individuals enter professional life as adults when the bulk of their values are already firmly in place, and “no amount of professional training in later life can take away the deep-seated assumptions of childhood” (Raymond Cohen quoted in Avruch 1998, p. 46). Most of these values and assumptions are rooted in one’s **national culture**, which can be defined as those elements of culture acquired through growing up in a particular country. “Although there are those who would resist theories of cultural or national relativism, the great weight of evidence, including everyday observation, indicates that national culture has a significant effect on the outlook, perceptions, and behavior of individuals” (Hambrick et al. 1998, p. 182). As national cultures are shaped through the particular histories of countries, fundamental changes in these values and therefore in the differences between national cultures within a short time period are modest (Hofstede 1991, p. 136).

As any individual, European Commission officials are also products of their own culture through the lens of which they perceive the world and others. In turn, these cultural orientations influence their behavior within the Commission. After all, the Commission is a multinational organization where the national cultures of each member-state meet and collide on a day-to-day basis through its officials.

There is, however, a perception of anarchy involved when different systems meet (McDonald 2000, p. 66). To deal with this anarchy, officials tend to make assumptions about each other that actually emphasize such differences (Page 1997, p. 87). These involve national stereotyping among a significant proportion of officials (Michelmann 1978, p. 494). It can be argued that these perceptions and stereotypes do not play any role in the administration of the Commission, as officials will socialize into the professional culture of the institution. They will adapt to their professional identity and work together with their colleagues for the common goals of ‘the House’, as officials refer to the Commission. Yet Liesbet Hooghe’s study on the top Commission officials’ views on the role of nationality within the organization concluded that the socialization capacity of the Commission is limited: “To the extent that length of service in the Commission matters, it encourages officials to be responsive to nationality. Presumably, most officials have learned that it is difficult to get things done if one ignores national

sensitivities” (Hooghe 1999, p. 412). The convergence that results from a common professional experience does reduce national identification to a certain extent and brings distance to relations with the native state (Bellier 1995, p. 60), but individuals are still conscious of their differences and sensitivities (Abélès and Bellier 1996, p. 435).

The effect of cultural diversity demonstrates itself in various ways, from the lofty to the mundane. The different administrative cultures are even marked in the way notes are written and information conveyed or held (Stevens and Stevens 2001, p. 177). As a result, cultural differences affect management styles, argues Richard Hay; referring to the inhibition many officials feel due to their uncertainty about whether their colleagues of different nationalities share an identical approach to issues such as authority and discipline (Page 1997, p. 19).

In this paper, I will first focus on the current issues related to culture and cultural differences in the Commission. By demonstrating how sticky national cultures in the Commission and East European context are, I will argue that the magnitude cultural differences between the current and new EU members will affect and might change the administrative culture of the Commission. To demonstrate how this might occur, I will analyze three probable scenarios that might occur in the enlarged Commission.

Culture of the European Commission: United, divided, or a constant clash?

Many Commission officials agreed that Cresson¹ had been victim of an ‘Anglo-Saxon political crusade’ and deplored the way the ‘Germans had joined the northerners in a Protestant crusade against the Southern culture of state administration’. As Cresson declared, much to the embarrassment of her colleagues, she was guilty of no behavior that is not standard in the French administrative culture’ (Bremner quoted in Shore 2000, p. 202).

The European Commission has been largely organized according to the French civil service. The cabinet system, the hierarchical grading and titles, the formal procedures behind approval signatures, the recruitment procedures, and the documentation system are all basically French. The long predominance of French administrative style and practices and a mentality which looks to French culture and

¹ It will be recalled that Edith Cresson was the French Commissioner responsible for Science, Research, and Development under the Jacques Santer Commission (1995-1999), who was accused of cases of favoritism involving the appointment of several associates to well-paid positions in the Commission.

administrative norms as the unstated model of public administration thus marks the Commission bureaucracy (Stevens and Stevens 2001, p. 32).

Abélès and Bellier (1996, p. 433) refer to the historical origins of the institution and argue that the French and Germans (walking together for the first time in history) have designed a statute which balanced the two cultures and produced an organizational framework based on the hierarchical spirit that they both share. This *modus operandi* has been modified through the enlargements of the EU. The British and Danish have introduced a ‘managerial culture’ and a team spirit. Yet, there is a fundamental tension between the traditional **French** administrative methods characterized by a highly politicized senior management closely linked to the party in power, the powerful cabinet system, and the tendency to use information as a constituent element of a bureaucratic and political power base on the one hand, and the tradition of human resource management common in the **Anglo-Saxon** tradition, typified by civil service neutrality, the formal absence of nepotism, a high degree of delegation and the principle of sharing information with colleagues on the other (Spence 1997, p. 97).

The tension between different systems is placed by some authors within a broader framework, namely the **North-South division** (Egeberg 1996; Beyers and Dierickx 1997, 1998; Mc Donald 2000):

NORTH	SOUTH
Austria	Belgium
Britain	France
Denmark	Greece
Finland	Italy
Germany	Portugal
Ireland	Spain
Luxembourg	
Netherlands	
Sweden	

The European Commission is formally structured according to the Weberian-ideal type bureaucratic model, according to which merit shapes personnel selection and task organization and legal-rational criteria guide policy-making. Culturally, Northerners are taken to be more well-adapted to the rational, impersonal Weberian forms of bureaucracy, whereas Southerners tend to be more collectivistic and perceive themselves as members of groups transcending the boundaries of formal organizations (Egeberg

1996, p. 727; McDonald 2000, pp. 67-68). The interaction between these two value systems is bound to have concrete consequences on the functioning of the Commission.

The functions and tasks of the Commission necessitate that Commissioners and Commission officials fulfill the roles of technocrat, diplomat, and politician depending on the context (Joana and Smith 2002). Therefore, the administrative and political culture to which an official is socialized into in her/his country of origin is a significant factor that influences an official's behavior in the Commission. In this sense, too, there is a clear difference between the officials of Northern and Southern European countries. A good example is the weight of civil society actors in political processes.² While the government has a strong role in South Europe, there is a tradition of working together with other actors such as NGOs in North Europe. This is reflected in how Commission officials deal with civil society actors. The rules of the Commission as to the involvement of NGOs are obeyed, but what matters is how each official works with the input. For example, a French official also has to meet with NGOs, but since he is socialized into the culture of seeing the views of the government as the most important, he does not take the NGOs as seriously as an official from North Europe, for whom NGOs are an inherent part of the political process.

Understandably, each nationality has an interest in introducing working methods to the European Commission administration, which it is accustomed to and which it sees as efficient (Abélès and Bellier 1996, p. 434). That is why the European bureaucracy has evolved through the enlargements of the EU. Cris Shore (2000, p. 172) describes this process as different national administrative traditions having 'rubbed off' on each other in a complementary and cumulative fashion, the 'best' features of each national civil service having been synthesized and incorporated within a uniquely 'European' model of public administration. Even though several cultural traits within this model can be traced back to the administrative traditions of the member states, a distinguishable "**Eurocrat culture**" seems to be slowly emerging (Egeberg 2002, p. 21).

Other authors reject this conclusion. Mazey and Richardson (1996, p. 418) assert that the European Commission has not acquired a coherent operational or bureaucratic style as a multinational bureaucracy. Yet again, Page (1997, p. 136) dismisses the accounts that interpret the fact that its members come from different parts of the EU, with different administrative and political cultures, as some sort of basic lack of cohesion or an incompatibility between people operating with different national styles. As for the

² I owe this example to my interview (The Hague, 28 January 2004) with a Dutch Official who has previously worked for the Commission.

insiders of the House, “The word ‘cosmopolitan’ [is] the adjective most frequently used by EU staff when describing what they [feel] to be the most positive feature of the Commission’s organizational culture. By this term, staff generally refers to the ‘multilingual’ and ‘multinational’ character of the EU, which they tend to perceive as a cultural ‘melting pot’ of the different national traditions” (Shore 2000, p. 153).

If the Commission culture were to be characterized with one phrase, it would be that it is “a culture of **compromise**”. Compromises are sought out in many (if not all) domains. Working under the same roof with diverse cultures has meant a search for solutions that take into account the cultural or political sensitivities of all those involved, so that everyone could live with the outcome or decision. This approach is visible both in the internal organization of the Commission and its policy-making processes. Even issues that might appear trivial, such as meeting times or the ways to address colleagues, have been arranged so as to accommodate Northern and Southern cultures: There are no meetings before 9 o’clock and after 5 o’clock; officials tend to call each other by their first name but use the “vous/Sie/u” form while speaking languages that allow this differentiation.³ When it comes to an essential issue as policy-making, the culture of compromise translates itself into an orientation toward consensus-seeking. Votes are almost never taken. Instead, everyone is expected to adapt a flexible approach, so that the outcome can incorporate elements of all concerned. Sticking to one’s viewpoint, by contrast, is not an accepted way of working in the Commission.⁴

Politico-administrative Culture in Eastern Europe: Communist Legacy?

As the manifestations of the continuing clash between Northern and Southern cultures in the Commission show, national cultures remain embedded in individuals, even after years of working in the Commission. This renders the analysis of politico-administrative cultures in Eastern Europe essential.

Verheijen *et. al.* conclude their comparative study *Civil Service Systems in Central and Eastern Europe* (1999) with a rather pessimistic note: “Indeed, in spite of some radical changes over the past decade in the organizational structure, ideological orientation of the administrative apparatus in many former ‘communist bloc’ countries, as well as in the legal environment in which it functions, little has changed in its methods, style of work, bureaucratic attitude and behavior, dominating informal rules and goals and the extent of

³ Interview with a British official, European Commission, Brussels, 9 December 2003.

⁴ Interview with a Belgian official, European Commission, Brussels, 12 January 2004.

real accountability and efficiency” (p. 10). The communist legacy still reigns, also due to the fact that the same bureaucrats continue to occupy their public functions. And this administrative culture, Vanagunas claims, bears no resemblance to administrations of democracies (Vanagunas 1999, p. 224).

Plausibly, most of these “old” bureaucrats have management positions by virtue of their experience and seniority. This makes cultural change all the more problematic, since “the occupants of [such] positions do not only exert major influences on the policy-making process by virtue of their decisions and non-decisions, they also transmit the culture and values of the organization to those who work for them because they are often directly in charge of a large number of employees and are responsible for socializing them in the organization” (Schröter and Röber 1997, p. 112). The politico-administrative culture is thus carried on to the new generation of civil servants.

Civil servants under the Soviet Union trained in a system of centralization and subordination which demanded unconditional obedience to civil servants of a higher level and to the Communist party (Vanags and Balanoff 1999, p. 272). Studying the Latvian public administration, Vanags and Balanoff argue that these principles still dominate and that many officials still do not have an understanding of modern management techniques, market economy, and/or democratic principles (ibid.). Jasaitis argues that old traditions and practices are difficult to change, and that political and personal considerations overrule rational-decision making processes involving strategic alternatives and cost-benefit analysis in Lithuania (Jasaitis 1999, p. 312).

In their article, “Regime change and administrative culture. Role understandings and political attitudes of top bureaucrats from East and West Berlin.”, Schröter and Röber (1997) demonstrate how difficult transition from authoritarian rule can be in terms of overcoming old ways of thinking by comparing civil servants from East and West Germany. These authors have concluded that the hopes for a modern hybrid-type system of public administration brought about by the successful integration of the Eastern and Western administrative cultures did not materialize (Schröter and Röber 1997, p. 127). Furthermore, “the peculiar East/West mixture of staff members has in some cases led to administrative behavior deviating from long-established Western practice” (ibid.).

Administering an Enlarged Commission

Administrative cultures are embedded in wider societal cultures which results in

differences in political and organizational values even among states with comparable political and economic systems (Schröter and Röber 1997, p. 127). As the studies of Verheijen *et. al.* and Schröter and Röber have demonstrated, the salience and magnitude of cultural differences can be particularly significant between Eastern transitional societies and West Europe. This might be problematic for the EU administration, especially for the Commission.

The upcoming enlargement stands as a challenge, as new officials from the candidate countries will join the Commission by May 2004. There is now a sense of curiosity mixed with unease, as officials realize that this enlargement will not be slow and painless like the last rounds of enlargement. There is more difference and more unknown.⁵

There are three likely consequences of the influx of new officials:

- 1- There will be a division between cultures: North-South-East or East-West.
- 2- The new members will be included within the existing North-South division.
- 3- The Commission will build a European administrative culture of its own.

SCENARIO 1: Division and/or Exclusion

The current division between the Northern and Southern cultures is an example of how cultural differences *surface* when they come into close/daily contact. Since the magnitude of cultural differences, particularly politico-administratively, are even more pronounced, this scenario is quite likely.

It is difficult to foresee how the new dividing lines will be formed. The Eastern dimension could be added to the current North-South division to create a tri-cultural organization. This would be the optimistic outcome of the enlargement of the European cultural zone.

⁵ The cases of Cyprus and Malta are apart, since both are former British colonies and thus have historically adopted the British administrative model.

NORTH	SOUTH	EAST
Austria	Belgium	Czech Republic
Denmark	Cyprus	Estonia
Finland	France	Hungary
Germany	Greece	Latvia
Ireland	Italy	Lithuania
Luxembourg	Malta	Poland
Netherlands	Portugal	Slovakia
Slovenia ⁶	Spain	
Sweden		
United Kingdom		

If it appears, however, that the cultural gap between the current and new members is significantly large, then the North-South division might become trivial so as to eventually disappear. In this case, the new line would be East-West. This would rather create the old division in Europe, but this time within the EU. The East-West division might tend to be *exclusionary* towards the East/West since it would have been formed by erasing the North-South division and (re)creating the Eastern/Western “others”.

EAST	WEST
Czech Republic	Austria
Estonia	Belgium
Hungary	Cyprus
Latvia	Denmark
Lithuania	Finland
Poland	France
Slovakia	Germany
	Greece
	Ireland
	Italy
	Luxembourg
	Malta
	Netherlands
	Portugal
	Slovenia
	Spain
	Sweden
	United Kingdom

SCENARIO 2: Inclusion in the Current Division

As officials are used to classifying cultural differences in terms of North-South, they might first tend to place the newcomers into these categories. The newcomers might

⁶ I am thankful to my Slovenian colleagues Tina Ferle and Manca Setinc for correcting my error as to the categorization of Slovenia during my presentation in Dubrovnik.

also be inclined to integrate into current categories, as this would reinforce their “European” identity. This would be an *inclusive* approach, which would be feasible only if East European officials are not perceived to be so different as to form a distinct group. By the same token, the East European officials would need to feel a part of the current culture in order not to distinguish themselves as a separate culture.

NORTH	SOUTH
Austria	Belgium
Czech Republic	Cyprus
Denmark	France
Estonia	Greece
Finland	Italy
Germany	Malta
Hungary	Poland
Ireland	Portugal
Latvia	Spain
Lithuania	
Luxembourg	
Netherlands	
Slovakia	
Slovenia	
Sweden	
United Kingdom	

SCENASRIO 3: A New Commission Culture

This scenario is not really a separate category as the Commission, as every organization, has elements of a common culture. Historically, this culture has evolved through the enlargements of the EU. Plausibly, the new members will also introduce their own methods and practices. The Eastern politico-administrative culture would then *melt* into the current European amalgam.

The ongoing debate on reform in the Commission focuses on bringing more transparency and openness. This tendency is bound to get stronger as more officials with diverse cultural backgrounds will necessitate clearer rules and procedures in order to avoid misunderstandings. One can even argue that the goal of the reform of the Commission is to establish a common ground on which to work on and to which everyone should adapt.⁷ As such, the reform process can be seen as an effort to lay the foundations of a Commission culture. As it stands now, it seems like the new members

⁷ Interview with a former Commission official, The Hague, 28 January 2004.

will have to adapt to the rules of the game, which are in any case presented as being a result of globalization and public management reform trends.

Perhaps the most important question is whether the enlargement will put the Commission *culture of compromise* at stake. Quantitatively, consensus-seeking and taking every national sensitivity will become difficult and time-consuming, if not impossible. Qualitatively, the compromise culture requires a flexible attitude. There have been signs that, for example, Polish officials seem to be rather inflexible.⁸ If inflexible officials are not eventually socialized into the compromise culture, consensus-seeking might increasingly diminish to lead to majority voting. Decision-making in the Commission would then become more like that in the European Council.

Conclusion: What can be done? Some Policy Recommendations

There is no “should” when it comes to how the culture will shape in the enlarged Commission. As cultural interaction is a dynamic process, it will take form and change as the Commission evolves in the upcoming years. Yet, it is obvious that the need for implementing the reforms aiming at more transparency and openness will obviously be greater with more cultures working together. Clearer rules and procedures will definitely make officials’ work easier. Officials will indeed have to adapt to each other’s cultures and habits, but at least they will have a firm common ground to rely on. However, if the culture of compromise in the Commission would dilute and give way to power games based on national interests, this would undermine the supranational premises of the Commission as an organization.

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⁸ Interview with a Belgian official, European Commission, Brussels, 12 January 2004.

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