By Rodrigo Ballester

This article examines the underrepresentation of Poland and Hungary in the EU civil service, highlighting both EU-wide and domestic factors. It underscores the need for an impartial and representative EU HR system and offers recommendations, including enforcing geographical balance especially in senior roles, preventing politicization, and reforming the concours system, to address this disparity.

Introduction

The balanced representation of every European Union (EU) nationality in the European civil service is a matter of significant concern, as it touches upon the principles of fairness and geographical balance that underpin the European project. Twenty years after the 2004 enlargement, many “new” Member States, certainly Poland and Hungary, remain underrepresented within the EU civil service, especially among top jobs, while other countries are overrepresented. This does not only questions the equitable distribution of influence but also challenges the commitment to collaboration within the EU’s civil service and the fair representation of the cultural and political diversity of every Member State. In this context, it is vital to analyze the causes of this disparity (be them national or European) and explore strategies to increase the presence of Polish and Hungarian officials in the EU civil service. This paper will assess the current state of representation, identify challenges faced by Polish and Hungarian candidates, and propose recommendations for improving their representation.

The Strategic Importance of Human Resources in EU Institutions

Human Resources (HR) within EU institutions is not just a neutral recruitment process, but a strategic factor determining the composition and, consequently, the effectiveness, the political orientation and the cultural diversity of the European civil service. The Statut des Fonctionnaires[1] (Staff Regulations), the foundational legal framework governing the rights, duties, and conditions of EU officials, is designed to ensure (among other aspects) a merit-based and transparent recruitment process and the impartiality of EU civil servants. However, while these regulations set high standards for professionalism, they fall short in addressing the need for greater representation from underrepresented Member States. As a result, particularly in higher positions, there is room for political influence, ignorance of geographic balance and even outright abuses. This underrepresentation evokes concerns about

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the fair distribution of influence among Member States and challenges the EU's commitment to a broad and balanced representation within its civil service[2].

Despite the comprehensive nature of the Statut des Fonctionnaires, challenges persist in achieving a truly representative civil service across all EU institutions, particularly in the most relevant and highest-ranking positions within the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), and the Council of the EU (CoEU). For instance, in the European Commission, high-level appointments—such as Directors-Generals, Deputy Directors-Generals, and Directors—are ultimately decided by the President's cabinet and are heavily influenced by the support and lobbying of national governments. They are therefore, to a large extent, of a political nature. These key positions are disproportionately filled by individuals from Western and Northern European countries. This, combined with the permanent nature and associated privileges of these roles, has led to the emergence of a European Mandarin[3] class that consolidates influence and perpetuates regional, if not ideological, dominance within the EU's upper echelons. Senior management, in administration grades AD 16, AD 15, and AD 14[4], oversee major departments and play critical roles in policy formulation and implementation. As a result, the perspectives and contributions of Central and Eastern European member states, including Poland and Hungary, are marginalized from the leadership strata of EU institutions.

These high-ranking positions wield considerable authority, exerting influence through both their official roles and informally cultivated networks, which can often lead to abuses. More critically, the centralization of nominations within the President's cabinet, particularly in the hands of the head of cabinet, grants excessive power that can result in arbitrariness. A notable example of such abuse is Martin Selmayr, who, after serving as Commissioner Viviane Reding's Head of Cabinet and Chief of Staff to Jean-Claude Juncker, controversially "appointed himself" Secretary-General of the European Commission in 2018[5]. In fact, a brazen instance of rule-bending, Selmayr was first appointed Deputy Secretary-General in a College meeting and then, just minutes later, promoted to Secretary-General[6], catching all the Commissioners by surprise. This appointment faced severe criticism from the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, and the European Parliament, and sparked accusations of nepotism.

His appointment also elicited concerns about a German-dominated EU executive[7] advancing national interests. It is worth mentioning that the strategic position of

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Head of Cabinet to the President of the Commission has been held by German nationals since 2009: Johannes Leitenberger served from 2010 to 2014 under the Barroso II Commission, Martin Selmayr from 2014 to 2019, and, currently, Bjorn Seibert since 2019—and likely until 2029. This pattern highlights the influence of countries with stronger historical ties and networks in the West over decision-making processes, while underscoring the significance of the EU's HR policies, especially concerning senior appointments, in shaping power dynamics and the distribution of influence across the Union. This imbalance warrants a closer look at how these dynamics impact Member States like Poland and Hungary, where low senior management representation in the EU civil service raises questions about equity and fairness within the institutional framework.

Cases of Poland and Hungary:

Source: European Commission & Eurostat | Illustration generated by MCC Centre for European Studies

The analysis of Polish and Hungarian representation within the European Commission reveals a significant imbalance. Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of senior management appointments in the European Commission[8]. In Figure 1, Poland is contrasted with Spain, the Netherlands, and Romania—countries of similar population sizes. Figure 2 examines Hungary alongside countries with comparable populations (Austria, Portugal, Greece, and Belgium) as well as smaller Northern and Western European nations (Denmark, Ireland, and Finland), which nevertheless exhibit higher representation in senior civil service roles.

The data reveals that despite their larger or equivalent populations, Poland and Hungary are significantly underrepresented in senior positions within the European Commission. Hungary, for instance, has only 13 appointees between ranks AD14 and AD15 – not a single appointee at AD16 –, while Poland, despite being one of the EU's most populous countries, has only 26 appointees. In stark contrast, Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands have significantly higher numbers, particularly at the AD14 level, with 76, 54, and 31 appointments respectively. This disparity points to a broader geopolitical divide, where countries traditionally seen as part of the "European core," such as Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands, are better represented. This can be attributed to their longer-standing EU membership and more established networks of influence, which facilitate smoother and more

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favorable career progression to senior roles.

From a political standpoint, the underrepresentation of Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania, contributes to a growing sense of disenfranchisement and the impression that the East-West divide is consolidated through HR processes too. This has the potential to fuel a double-standard grievances among national governments if not, arguably, among some influential circles of the public opinion. The challenges these newer – but no longer new – Member States encounter in asserting their influence within the EU's institutional framework highlight a critical area of concern for the Union's cohesion and equitable representation for which both sides can be held accountable.

Increasing Poland and Hungary's Representation

The limited presence of Poland and Hungary in the EU's civil service stems from a complex interplay of factors that must be tackled by both the EU and the respective nations. From the perspective of EU dynamics, political friction and an increasing ideological bias within the EU civil service discourages candidates who view it as politically skewed and lacking in intellectual diversity, with an overemphasis on legal, political, and economic expertise at the expense of fields like hard sciences and humanities. Moreover, "older" Member States benefit from established networks and institutional familiarity, holding a competitive advantage and exacerbating an East-West divide already compounded by perceptions of superiority. Additionally, ongoing disputes between the EU and the governments of Poland and Hungary create a less welcoming environment for potential candidates from these countries. Also, changes in the concours system, which now focus more on skills and group dynamics rather than on knowledge, add another layer of uncertainty that may discourage applicants. Finally, the long-term appeal of Brussels and Luxembourg as work locations may be diminished due to factors, including climatic conditions, language barriers, geographical distance, cultural differences, and increasing security concerns in Brussels.

However, it would be remiss to point out that the underrepresentation of Poles and Hungarians in the EU civil service cannot be attributed solely to the EU. Domestic factors also play a significant role. In both Poland and Hungary, national political polarization preventing a common coordination in Brussels and strong attachment to the homeland may contribute to a lack of enthusiasm for EU careers. Additionally, these countries could improve their efforts in promoting EU career opportunities and clearly communicating the benefits of working in EU institutions.

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This dual approach of addressing domestic attitudes and enhancing promotion strategies could certainly help increase representation from these nations.

Recommendations

To gain entry into the EU's administrative apparatus, the following recommendations are proposed:

a. Prioritize the stringent enforcement of geographical balance and representation within the EU institutions, especially for senior roles. This should be a primary focus, potentially even taking precedence over gender equality initiatives, to ensure a fair and diverse distribution of high-ranking positions across Member States.
b. Implement robust measures to prevent the politicization of senior civil service appointments. Strictly avoid nepotism and conflicts of interest to ensure that nominations are based solely on merit and professional qualifications.
c. Reform the concours system to stress knowledge and expertise over skills and personality factors, to ensure a more objective and equitable selection process.
d. Improve communication about the long-term career prospects available within EU institutions by clearly articulating the potential for career longevity and advancement in Brussels to attract and retain top talent from across the Member States.

In essence, a truly effective European Union demands that every Member State's voice is not only heard but equally represented along the hallways, in the chambers, and at the table.

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