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Geographical imbalance among EU officials is deepening: measures required both from the Member States and the EU

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Several EU Member States, in particular the Nordic countries, Ireland, the Netherlands and Germany, are becoming increasingly underrepresented in the civil service of the European Union. In Sweden's and Finland's case, underrepresentation will accelerate due to the projected retirement outflow exceeding manyfold the number of incoming staff. Geographical imbalance concerns a growing number of Member States, and to be rectified, will require measures both at the national level and from the EU institutions. Member States' EU careers promotion measures alone cannot correct the deepening geographical imbalance, which may contribute to a legitimacy deficit for the EU, and turn a personnel issue into a more political one.

Objectives and method of the study

The present study analyses, firstly, the statistics and figures on geographical balance of staff in the EU civil service. Secondly, it analyses and compares the kinds of measures different Member States implement to promote their citizens' careers in the EU, and thirdly, assesses the effectiveness of these measures. The study also seeks to map the structures and resources to implement the different promotion activities in the reference countries. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Romania were selected as reference countries to compare to Finland.

The study draws its facts and figures from various sources, comprising EU's Personnel Selection Office EPSO's competition statistics, institutions' personnel statistics and HR strategies, Member States' EU career strategies as well as government programmes. The empirical part of the study consists of semi-structured interviews with reference country representatives (n=17), Finnish experts and management (n=31) and a survey among Finnish Universities' Career Counselors (n=18). The study also utilised the results of a Government Trainee Survey conducted by the Finnish Ministry of Finance (n=1040).

This Policy Brief summarises the main study findings. The English version differs from the Policy Brief in Finnish in that it focuses on the findings which are relevant to the other Member States and to the EU institutions. The Finnish language version of the Policy Brief, published together with the final report, concentrated on the results and recommendations that are specific to Finland.

The authors are grateful to the reference countries' administrations and the European institutions for the many insightful discussions and for their cooperative participation in the study. We hope that the study will prove useful to the various contributors to the building of a geographically balanced and professional EU civil service.

Geographical imbalance between nationalities is deepening

European Union's staff has continued to grow in numbers due to enlargements, expanded tasks and establishment of new EU agencies. At the same time, differences in the shares of the Member States' citizens working in the institutions and agencies have grown. In particular, several Northern European countries, including Finland, are becoming increasingly underrepresented with regards to the number of citizens working in EU institutions in relation to the population¹.

European Commission assesses the geographical balance of AD staff using specific guiding rates. Guiding rates are based on the Member States' population, the number of Members of the European Parliament and the number of votes in the Council. The guiding rate is a concrete recruitment target in the Commission, aiming to build a geographically balanced personnel structure. The Commission considers that a significant imbalance is observed when the share of nationals among staff is lower than 80 % of the guiding rate.

This Policy Brief provides, following the institutions' reporting practice, two different views on the Commission's AD officials statistics. It reports figures both on all AD officials as well as non-linguistic AD officials. The first is useful to get a general perspective, but the latter is more important regarding geographical balance².

¹ The general way of looking at possible under- and/or over-representation is based on the relative share of the citizens of each Member State among the citizens of all EU Member States.

² The Commission Report on geographical balance argues, "The objective of a balanced national representation of staff cannot be pursued in the same way in linguistic services and non-linguistic services ---- Applying the "guiding rates" [...] to linguistic services is neither meaningful nor desirable" (COM(2018) 377 final/2, p. 6).

Table 1. Number of AD Officials in the European Commission by Member State: current situation (31.12.2022) vs guiding rate

	Member State	DK	SE	DE	NL	IE	AT	FR	FI	ES	RO	BE	EU27
	Guiding rate (GR), %	1,8	2,7	13,8	3,9	1,6	2,6	11,6	1,8	8,9	4,5	3,1	100
All AD officials	AD5-8	47	31	314	75	46	66	367	34	369	309	284	3882
	AD9-16	105	212	733	233	112	164	757	192	619	281	744	7257
	Managers	32	32	213	51	32	41	190	38	117	52	134	1454
	Total	184	275	1260	359	190	271	1314	264	1105	642	1162	12593
	AD5-8 (% of GR)	67	30	59	50	74	65	81	49	107	177	236	-
	AD9-16 (% of GR)	80	108	73	82	96	87	90	147	96	86	331	-
	Managers (% of GR)	122	82	106	90	138	108	113	145	90	79	297	-
	Total (% of GR)	81	81	73	73	94	83	90	116	99	113	298	-
Non-linguist AD officials	AD5-8	18	26	285	70	30	63	358	21	349	292	258	3396
	AD9-16	86	166	659	207	98	158	699	138	556	231	661	6210
	Managers	32	32	213	51	32	41	190	38	117	52	134	1454
	Total	136	224	1157	328	160	262	1247	197	1022	575	1053	11060
	AD5-8 (% of GR)	29	28	61	53	55	71	91	34	115	191	245	-
	AD9-16 (% of GR)	77	99	77	85	99	98	97	123	101	83	343	-
	Managers (% of GR)	122	82	106	90	138	108	113	145	90	79	297	-
	Total (% of GR)	68	75	76	76	90	91	97	99	104	116	307	-

Guiding rates are defined in the REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL pursuant to Article 27 of the Staff Regulations of Officials and to Article 12 of the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union (Geographical balance), 7.9.2018, COM(2018) 377 final/2.

The number of AD officials is based on information given by the European Commission 12.4.2023 (WK 4740/2023 INIT).

Special attention should be paid to category AD5-8, which reflects the share of recently recruited AD staff. Over time, AD officials advance in their careers and move on to higher pay grades and managerial functions. However, if this category is underrepresented, the following categories will also be underrepresented later. Category AD5-8 is of particular importance because its impact lasts for decades to come. Here, only four Member States reach or exceed their guiding rate (BE, RO, ES; FR is somewhat below its GR but above the 80 % threshold).

The remaining seven countries in the study fail to meet their guiding rates. Here, the Nordic States in particular perform very badly (SE 28 %, DK 29 %, FI 34 %), which indicates severe underrepresentation in the future. For example, the number of Finnish EU officials recruited between 2015 and 2021 amounts to only a half of what would be required to maintain the geographical balance among the new recruits. As can be discerned from Table 2, these concerns are not without merit.

Retirements pose a challenge for many Member States. At the current rate, the European Commission will lose almost 30 % of its officials from the Nordic countries, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, between 2022–2027. The situation is likely to deteriorate even further, as the Finns' and Swedes' retirements are expected to continue in the early 2030s³. Also Ireland and the Netherlands suffer severely due to the structural change caused by retirements.

In addition to permanent AD posts, the Commission employs staff in various temporary positions. The distribution of the temporary and contractual posts reflects the situation of permanent posts: underrepresented Member States are also underrepresented in the Temporary Agent and Contract Agent categories. Encouragingly, Commission's Blue Book traineeship program is fairly well balanced, with the exception of Germany and Austria being slightly below 80 % of their guiding rates. In the case of Seconded National Experts, where Member States pay the salaries and often also the allowances, underrepresented Member States, Denmark and Ireland at the top of the list, employ most of the staff in these positions, as a measure to compensate for their underrepresentation in the permanent AD5-9 staff category. The situation is depicted in Table 3.

³ It should be noted here that Commission estimates that the reference countries' departures are approx. 25 % higher than retirements. People leave service for other reasons such as long-term leave on personal grounds, transfer to another institution, resignations and death. Presuming 2/3 of departures comprises leave of absences and internal mobility, it can be estimated that overall departure figures are 8 % higher than retirement figures indicate, and therefore % change is likely bigger as well (cf. Final Report, p. 33).

Table 2. Number of AD Officials in the European Commission by Member State (estimate based on Commission's forecast, April 2023)

	Nordic Countries										
Member State	DK	SE	FI	IE	NL	DE	BE	AT	FR	ES	RO
AD applications 2015-2021 (avg)	364	503	659	639	1195	3265	5575	876	4924	8293	5036
AD reserve lists 2015-2021 (avg)	1,7	2,9	3,4	3,7	8,0	33,1	31,7	8,0	46,9	58,0	21,0
Baseline (% of guiding rate)	-75	-73	-51	-40	-47	-38	+164	-20	+4	+68	+21
AD officials 31.12.2022	184	275	264	190	359	1260	1162	271	1314	1105	642
AD retirements 2023-2027	47	73	67	50	83	249	228	53	183	184	10
AD recruitments 2023-2027	5	9	10	11	24	99	95	24	141	174	63
AD officials 1.1.2028	142	211	207	151	300	1110	1029	242	1272	1095	695
AD officials 2028 vs 2022 (% change)	-22,7%	-23,4%	-21,5%	-20,5%	-16,4%	-11,9%	-11,4%	-10,7%	-3,2%	-0,9%	+8,3%
AD officials 31.12.2022 (non-linguistic)	136	224	197	160	328	1157	1053	262	1247	1022	575
AD Officials 1.1.2028 (non-linguistic)	94	160	140	121	269	1007	920	233	1205	1012	628
AD Officials 2028 vs 2022 (% change)	-30,8%	-28,8%	-28,8%	-24,3%	-18,0%	-12,9%	-12,6%	-11,1%	-3,4%	-1,0%	+9,2%

AD applications 2015-2021 and AD reserve lists 2015-2021 are based on information given by EPSO 24.10.2022 (WK 14395/2022 INIT). Romania's figures were later updated by EPSO on 13.9.2023. Both items comprise AD generalists and AD specialists positions. An average number is given to indicate the number of applications and reserve list positions annually. Overall, EPSO received 403.603 AD generalist competition applications and 57.347 AD specialist applications for respective 1.190 and 1.518 reserve list posts.

Baseline (% of guiding rate) indicates how well the country reaches its guiding rate. For instance, Finland falls 51 % short of its recruitment target, while Romania exceeds its target by 21 %. Baseline does not take into account the effect of AD retirements.

AD officials 31.12.2022 is based on information given by the European Commission 12.4.2023 (WK 4740/2023 INIT) comprising the whole AD population and Management (AD Temporary Agents and other categories of staff excluded)

AD retirements 2023-2027, as above.

AD recruitments 2023-2027 is based on information given by EPSO 24.10.2022 (WK 14395/2022 INIT) comprising AD generalists and AD specialists reserve lists for 2015-2021. Calculation is based on technical assumption that Commission recruits 60 % of persons on the EPSO reserve lists. Annual average is used to estimate future recruitments for the next five years.

AD officials 1.1.2028 is calculated by subtracting AD retirements 2023-2027 from AD officials 31.12.2022 added by AD recruitments 2023-2027.

AD officials 2028 vs 2022 (% change) is calculated by dividing AD officials 1.1.2028 by AD officials 31.12.2022. The outcome is multiplied by 100 and subtracted by 100.

Comparisons reveal minor differences in promotion measures – and their limited impact

According to the study, the measures to promote EU careers in the reference countries do not differ much from one another. They mainly vary in terms of focus and emphasis.

The smaller Member States included in the comparison (Netherlands, Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Denmark) promote EU careers based on a strategy or action plan. The above-mentioned countries have in common a significant underrepresentation in entry-level positions (salary grades AD5-8). The strategies of Ireland, Sweden and Denmark recognize the retirement of current EU civil servants as a challenge. Concern about retirement is also present in Austria.

There are no similar strategy documents in the other reference countries. In Belgium, there seems to be no need to promote EU careers at the federal level. Spain and Romania have suffered from labour market issues and high unemployment rates for some time. In Spain, highly educated people are used to looking for jobs abroad. Romania's EU membership is still quite recent (2007). There is no need for a special strategy or measures, because the salaries of EU jobs in relation to the salary level of their own country provides strong incentives to apply for an EU career.

All the underrepresented reference countries have increased the number of seconded national experts, traineeships and scholarships. These measures compensate for underrepresentation in the short term, but they are insufficient to create a lasting impact. In some cases (Sweden), meager results were obtained even if measures were intensified and resources expanded, or (Denmark) measures have taken nearly a decade to have any measurable impact. On the other hand, overrepresented countries (Belgium, Spain) actually implement less measures than the underrepresented ones.

In 2023, fifteen Member States have drafted and signed individual National Action Plans with the Commission. The plans consist of enhancing EU careers promotion measures as well as a series of soft measures that the European Commission commits to in order to facilitate the Member States' efforts. The study findings call these measures and efforts into question.

Table 3. Number of other positions in the European Commission by Member State: current situation (31.12.2022) vs. guiding rate

	SE	DK	DE	NL	FI	AT	ES	FR	RO	IE	BE	EU27
TA AD5-16	13	12	103	35	17	26	101	140	76	40	106	1288
% GR	37	52	58	70	73	78	88	94	131	194	265	-
CA FG IV	28	14	170	57	32	47	411	492	122	44	245	3320
% GR	31	23	37	44	54	54	139	128	82	83	238	100
BB	43	35	194	69	45	34	161	202	82	35	90	1806
% GR	88	108	78	98	138	72	100	96	101	121	161	
SNE	30	42	130	51	24	23	77	147	50	37	19	971
% GR	114	240	97	135	137	91	89	131	114	238	63	100

Information in Table 3 is obtained from the European Commission report 12.4.2023 (WK 4740/2023 INIT).

TA: Temporary Agents.

CA FG IV: Contract Agents, function group IV (administrative, advisory, linguistic and equivalent technical tasks).

BB: The number of Blue Book trainees for the previous 12 months.

SNE: Seconded National Experts.

Moreover, the study mentions a number of challenges at the EU level which the national measures are unable to tackle⁴. Examples of EU level challenges perceived especially in the underrepresented countries are ‘impression of high level of bureaucracy’ and ‘duration of the application process’. The ‘career path structures and incentives to apply’ are perceived as few and the ‘processes too complicated’. These common barriers to EU careers can only be solved by actions on behalf of the EU.

The overall impact the various national promotion efforts and investments produce is limited. Intensifying the measures is not likely to lead to desired results. Due to the underlying systemic and structural challenges, the underrepresented Member States’ resources have to be directed in many directions and there is no single, fast-acting measure to solve underrepresentation. The “natural” flow of people applying for EU careers is not sufficient to compensate for the reduction caused by retirements.

As could be observed from Table 2, despite the various on-going measures, geographical imbalance seems to be growing, not shrinking. National measures may bring results in the long run, but they are not effective enough to correct the deepening imbalance in the short and medium term.

Balance is crucial for legitimacy of the Union

Staff Regulations require that EU institutions recruit staff from the broadest possible geographical basis (SR Art. 27, CEOS Art. 12 and Art. 82). The legal basis has enabled the institutions to take nationality into account, even for filling specific posts where qualifications of the various applicants are substantially the same. In this context, the legislator has adopted specific regulations aiming at limiting recruitments and allowing posts to be reserved for nationals of one or more Member States, typically in the context of enlargements.⁵

Geographical balance of staff employed by EU institutions and agencies plays an important role in shaping policies that take into account the interests of the whole Union. When working for the EU institutions, people from different Member States do not represent their own country, but rather are guided by the goals and strategies of the institutions. However, all EU staff members bring along their own background and knowledge of the society, economy, operating methods and culture of their home country. In terms of EU policy making, involving the interests of the entire Union and

⁴ Chapter 4.4 in the final report (in Finnish).

⁵ COM(2018) 377 final, 15.6.2018, p. 1.

the acceptability of the Union, it is essential that the institutions are staffed by civil servants from all Member States as evenly as possible. Understanding of various national characteristics helps institutions to formulate better policies for all, ensuring the EU motto “united in diversity”.

The deepening staff imbalance⁶ within the EU civil service contains the risk of turning into a political issue, linked to a legitimacy deficit felt in the underrepresented Member States and the EU as a whole.

Recommendations for Finland and the EU: corrective measures needed in cliff-edge situations

The study concludes with a series of recommendations for Finland and for the EU institutions and agencies. The actions recommended for Finland emphasise that Finland should enhance its strategic and systematic approach in promoting EU careers nationally (see Table 4).

Table 4. Key recommendations for Finland

- 1) Finland should draft a national strategy for the promotion of EU careers.
- 2) Finland should intensify the coordination of the promotion of EU careers and increase its resources.
- 3) Finland should set an action plan to support the implementation of the strategy, and a communication plan directed especially at recent graduates, students and young people.
- 4) Finland should improve students' opportunities to receive EU-related teaching and training in Finland and abroad.
- 5) Finland should compensate lack of senior-level representation in EU institutions by increasing the number of SNEs and NEPTs.
- 6) Finland should continue its cooperation with other underrepresented countries to influence EU institutions to initiate special corrective measures to improve the situation of the current underrepresented countries.

⁶ Final report p. 34: If the current development continues, the number of underrepresented countries will increase from the current 12 to 19 countries (source: EU Careers. Geographical Balance 2021 update. Koen Hendrix).

Based on the statistics, geographical imbalance is a permanent or worsening phenomenon for Finland and several other Member States, unless significant corrective measures are undertaken. Active follow-up and remedial measures are needed especially from the European Commission, but also from each institution separately and from the Member States themselves.

The study clearly concludes that national measures to promote EU careers cannot resolve underrepresentation issues in the short or medium term. This conclusion provides justification for the underrepresented Member States to demand special measures from the European Union to correct the geographical imbalance.

The Commission has not yet undertaken measures to correct geographical imbalance. In its Human Resources Strategy⁷, the Commission states that it is considering taking corrective measures in accordance with the Staff Regulations for temporary and contractual staff. According to the Commission, recruiting services could favor an applicant from an underrepresented country in situations where the merits of the applicants are substantially the same. The Commission also mentions nationality-based competitions in its Human Resources Strategy. According to the Commission, country-specific competitions could be possible if geographical imbalance cannot be corrected by other means, and the competitions are compatible with Article 27 of the Staff Regulations.

The selection procedure for EU permanent officials may work under normal circumstances, but it falls short in situations of structural change. For example, in the case of EU enlargement, the demand for specific nationals is high, and the competition model is too slow to meet the demand. In this situation, the long-term practice to use nationality-based competitions is considered fully justified. However, a similar restructuring situation occurs when permanent officials, recruited during the accession, retire in large quantities over a short period of time ('cliff-edge' issue).

Also, the perceived high level of bureaucracy and complexity of the variety of EU recruitment processes, and the lack of transparency within them, at all staff categories and levels, including trainees, is a concrete obstacle for the Member States' citizens interested in EU careers. The EPSO competition model reform is a beginning, but there is further need for more simplified, understandable and accessible pathways to enter the EU civil service.

⁷ Communication to the Commission - A new Human Resources Strategy for the Commission, C(2022) 2229 final, 5 April, 2022.

Many Member States are already doing their utmost to promote EU careers nationally. The EU must acknowledge the situation, and begin to work on structural solutions to address the worsening geographical imbalance of its staff. The causes for geographical imbalance are structural in nature, and the toolbox to address them must be expanded with adequate measures. The institutions, the European Commission in particular, needs to begin implementing all the actions included in the Human Resources Strategy adopted in 2022 as soon as possible.

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Government's analysis, assessment and research activities

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