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Configurations and circulations of administrative elites in the EU institutional field: an analysis of Permanent representations, commissioners' cabinets and directors-general

Leopold RINGUENET,
Mateo LORGUILLOUS & Charles IDRISSI

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Editorial Team Didier Georgakakis and Marie Acabo
Dijver 11, B-8000 Bruges, Belgium
email didier.georgakakis@coleurope.eu | *website* www.coleurope.eu/ideas

Summary

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of the structuring, differentiation, and mobility patterns within the European administrative elite, focusing on two key fractions of the Eurocratic field (Georgakakis, Rowell, 2013): senior officials embedded in the European Commission (commissioners' cabinets and directors-general) and national civil servants operating through Permanent Representations. Drawing on a unique dataset of 302 profiles (223 reconstructed in full) and ten semi-structured interviews, the study combines quantitative profiling with qualitative insights to capture the logics of academic and professional distinction underpinning these trajectories.

Three main contributions frame this work. First, it provides an updated mapping of top European administrative careers following the formation of the 2024–2029 Commission, addressing the empirical gap in a field where existing studies are often dated. Second, it moves beyond the analysis of isolated fractions by adopting a comparative perspective that reveals both homologies and enduring divides between national and supranational elites. Third, it introduces a refined operationalization of four indicators (educational background, academic excellence, professional experience, and degree of internationalization) allowing for a nuanced reading of capital accumulation in the European institutional space.

Findings highlight an initial homogeneity of academic excellence across both fractions, underpinned by extended studies in law, political science, and economics. However, career logics diverge sharply thereafter. Permanent Representations exhibit a hierarchical "*cursus honorum*," privileging cumulative experience and gradual integration, whereas cabinets function as accelerators of political capital — though not without risks of stalled progression. Beyond these aggregate patterns, one of the most significant findings of this study is the identification of both classic and singular trajectories within the Eurocratic field. To precise our results, we have built an *ad hoc* and purposely colorful typology (see in the text for details), leading to the following picture. While many careers follow expected paths of gradual advancement, others embody atypical strategies, ranging from "*political gamblers*" who leverage partisan networks, to "*great diplomats*" capitalizing on symbolic prestige, "*Icarus*" profiles marked by rapid ascent followed by decline, and "*masochists*" who persist through structurally adverse positions. These outlier patterns illuminate the interplay between institutional opportunity, individual agency, and contingent political circumstances.

By exposing the interaction between explicit rules, informal norms, and differentiated forms of capital, this article contributes to the sociology of European institutions and to broader debates on elite reproduction and transnational careers. It invites further reflection on the permeability (or enduring rigidity) of boundaries within the Eurocratic field.

The construction of European administrative elites and the structuring of their career trajectories are central to understanding the Union's institutional dynamics and the distribution of power within its governance architecture. They also represent a vast corpus, recently synthesized by Georgakakis et Westlake (Georgakakis & Westlake, 2025). This working paper explores these dynamics through a comparative analysis of two major fractions of the Eurocratic field: on the one hand, the actors at the core of the supranational machinery (members of commissioners' cabinets and directors-general within the European Commission) and, on the other, the national civil servants who represent their states in Brussels through the Permanent Representations.

While both groups occupy positions of strategic influence and share certain markers of distinction, they are traditionally portrayed as belonging to separate, even impermeable, career spaces. Such a division raises crucial questions about the conditions under which these elites are formed, the logics that govern their advancement, and the extent to which this apparent boundary is, in fact, maintained or contested. By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how institutionalized career structures shape not only the trajectories of individuals but also the balance of power and the modes of decision-making at the heart of the European Union.

This study builds on the growing body of literature in the sociology of European institutions, and more specifically on research that has focused on the professional trajectories, forms of capital, and structuring mechanisms within the European administrative field. While numerous works have examined particular fractions of Eurocratic elites, few have attempted a comparative analysis of their internal dynamics and interrelations (see however Georgakakis & Bordier, 2025). Our research contributes to this literature by contrasting two main components of the European politico-administrative elite: the national civil servants operating within the Permanent Representations, and the senior European officials embedded in the Commission through cabinets and directorates-general.

The work of sociologist Sébastien Michon provides a foundational entry point for understanding careers in the European Parliament. In particular, his 2008 article and his 2014 book explore how parliamentary assistants, often overlooked actors, can serve as springboards to longer-term European careers (Michon, 2008; 2014). His findings have informed our thinking on the mechanisms of professional legitimization that operate within seemingly peripheral but in fact highly strategic institutional spaces, such as commissioners' cabinets.

We also draw heavily on the work of Didier Georgakakis and Marine de Lassalle, whose 2007 article on directors-general of the European Commission introduces the concept of "*European institutional capital*" (Georgakakis and De Lassalle, 2007). Their work maps the internal structure and hierarchies of the Eurocratic field, providing a theoretical and methodological

framework that has directly shaped our indicators, particularly in relation to educational backgrounds, professional experience, and forms of capital accumulation. It has been recently actualised by a paper on the directors of administration (Bordier & Georgakakis, 2024) from which we barrow a part of our reflection on the indicators used in this study.

In analysing the Permanent Representations, the contribution of Filippa Chatzistavrou has proven essential. Her study of permanent representatives as distinct from traditional bilateral diplomats sheds light on their hybrid role at the intersection of national and European logics (Chatzistavrou, 2012). Her insights helped us refine our understanding of these officials not simply as extensions of national administrations, but as actors embedded in a European social and professional milieu with its own rules and expectations.

The work of Jean Joana and Andy Smith on commissioners' cabinets remains a key reference point for our study. Their 2002 article highlights the influence of national cultures on recruitment patterns and internal norms within cabinets (Joana & Smith, 2002). While the institutional context has evolved significantly since their publication, especially following the Treaty of Lisbon, their analysis still offers a valuable lens through which to examine the tension between political loyalty, technocratic expertise, and supranational constraints.

To complement this sociological and institutional perspective, we have also drawn on Frédéric Mérand's ethnographic study of a European commissioner's cabinet. His immersive approach allows for a detailed reading of interpersonal dynamics, micro-hierarchies, and the negotiation of legitimacy within cabinet structures (Mérand, 2021). While his conclusions are necessarily grounded in a limited empirical scope, they offer rich qualitative insights that complement our own semi-structured interviews.

Our study is further informed by contributions from political science, particularly Jeffrey Lewis' analysis of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER). His work offers a detailed account of the internal decision-making processes, procedural logic, and culture of negotiation within both COREPER I and II (Lewi's, 2021). These insights have helped us to better interpret the hierarchical career patterns we observe within the Permanent Representations, and the forms of experience that are valued across different stages of advancement.
Finally, reading historical perspectives has allowed us to situate these institutional roles within longer-term trajectories. The work of historian Laurence Badel on European diplomacy traces the evolution of diplomatic careers and the gradual transformation of the profession, through processes of technocratisation, feminization, and europeanization (Badel, 2021). Her perspective has been especially useful in contextualizing some of the symbolic and gendered dynamics we observed in our data.

Building on this existing scholarship, our study seeks to address three main gaps in the literature. First, whereas similar analyses have been conducted in national contexts, such as

Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans's work on the relationship between ministerial cabinets and senior civil service in France, no equivalent comparative study has been carried out at the European level (Eymeri-Douzans, 2003). Second, although several studies have explored individual segments of the Eurocratic elite (such as directors-general, PR diplomats, or cabinet members), none has systematically compared them, nor analysed their circulation and separation as distinct career fractions within the European field (see, however, Bordier & Georgakakis, 2025).

Third, much of the empirical literature in this area is now outdated; our data, finalized in February 2025 after the formation of the new von der Leyen II Commission, provides an updated and comprehensive mapping of current senior actors, allowing us to capture recent evolutions in recruitment, hierarchy, and mobility patterns within the EU institutional apparatus.

In this sense, our research both extends and renews the field of European administrative sociology, by combining structured quantitative profiling with qualitative interviews and by approaching the European elite not as a monolithic bloc, but as a set of differentiated, sometimes impermeable, yet interconnected trajectories.

We seek to put into perspective the genesis and structuring of an institutional capital specific to each of these fractions of the Eurocratic field. While university curricula and initial training appear to provide a shared foundation, both in terms of the duration of studies and the predominance of certain academic disciplines, career trajectories diverge markedly as soon as actors enter the professional sphere, reflecting distinct logics of recruitment, appointment, and advancement.

This observation gives rise to a series of core research questions that guide our analysis: How are these fractions constructed and differentiated within the European institutional field? What mechanisms govern access to positions of influence, and what career logics underpin progression within each fraction? To what extent do these trajectories display structural homologies[1] or, conversely, persistent dissimilarities? Finally, what accounts for the apparent rigidity of the boundary between these two career paths, and is this division as impermeable as it appears?

To address our research question, namely, to understand the logics of structuring, differentiation, and circulation within the European administrative elite, we adopted a

[1] Structural homology, in Bourdieu's sense, designates the *systematic correspondence* between positions and relational oppositions structuring different social fields, such that each field reproduces analogous hierarchies of domination and subordination. Bourdieu defines it as a *"resemblance within a difference"*, meaning that fields remain autonomous yet show isomorphic relational structures grounded in the distribution of capital. This homology explains why agents occupying similar positions in different fields tend to develop congruent dispositions and interests, linking social space, field structures, and habitus.

methodology combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Our objective was twofold: to empirically document the educational and professional trajectories of high-ranking officials, and to grasp the subjective rationales underpinning their career paths.

Our study is based on a population of 302 senior officials currently holding key positions within the core institutions of the European Union. Of these, 223 complete professional profiles were reconstructed using publicly available data, distributed as follows: 72 from Permanent Representations, 112 from commissioners' cabinets, and 39 from directorates-general of the European Commission. The information was collected from LinkedIn profiles, online CVs, official institutional organograms, and national or European official journals. Furthermore, our data reflects the composition of the studied populations as of February 1, 2025, the date marking the completion of appointments in the cabinets of the new von der Leyen II Commission (2024–2029). Any subsequent changes are not included in the scope of our study.

Although LinkedIn presents inherent methodological limitations, given that the data available is curated by the individuals themselves, we treat this self-selection not as a flaw, but as analytically meaningful. From a field-theoretical perspective, such curated self-presentation provides insight into the types of capital (educational, professional, linguistic) that actors deem legitimate and valuable within the Eurocratic space. In this sense, LinkedIn profiles constitute a relevant lens through which to study symbolic hierarchies and strategies of distinction.

This quantitative corpus is complemented by ten semi-structured interviews with officials drawn from the groups under investigation. These interviews enabled us to contextualize the observable data and reconstruct the subjective logics of action, engagement, and career conversion.

The analysis of trajectories is structured around four main indicators, selected for their capacity to capture both the internal hierarchies and the structuring dynamics of the European administrative field. These indicators are informed by prior sociological work (particularly that of Georgakakis and de Lassalle, Georgakakis and Bordier, Eymeri-Douzans, and Joana and Smith) but have been adapted to fit the specificities of our empirical population and research hypotheses. Their construction reflects an ongoing methodological trade-off between empirical fidelity, analytical clarity, and comparability.

The first indicator concerns educational background. It seeks to identify typical profiles based on three variables: field of study, degree level, and geographical location of education. This criterion is central to understanding initial socialization processes, as the academic disciplines pursued help structure professional habitus and shape skill sets that are particularly valued within the field (law, political science, economics, international relations, etc.). The classification we employ builds on existing sociological typologies of European

elites, notably those developed by Georgakakis, while adapting them to the concrete cases observed in our corpus.

The second indicator addresses academic excellence. Rather than measuring excellence by the number of years spent in higher education (a useful but ultimately limited metric) we opted for a typology of higher education institutions based on their prestige and perceived strategic value. We consider that the choice of academic institutions reflects not only practical considerations (such as geographic proximity), but also strategic logic linked to signalling effects, the acquisition of competencies, and the building of networks (Angrist, Hull & Walters, 2022). Our typology distinguishes five categories of institutions: peripheral universities (PU), i.e., European universities located outside capital cities with limited international visibility; major national universities (MNU), i.e., European universities based in capital cities with strong national prestige; major European universities (MEU), defined as those ranked in the top 75 of the Times Higher Education 2025 ranking within the relevant field of study; American universities outside the Ivy League (AU); and Ivy League universities (MAU). This categorization enables us to trace upward academic mobility, internationalization strategies, and specialization patterns, especially among the most competitive profiles.

The distinction between PU and MNU in particular is sociologically meaningful, as it captures a key differentiation point in many European national contexts. While the structure of national higher education systems varies depending on levels of centralization or decentralization, the capital city tends almost universally to concentrate the most prestigious academic institutions, whether due to their historical reputation, research funding, or proximity to centres of power. As such, studying in the capital often represents a critical step of academic emancipation and upward mobility. This spatial and symbolic divide allows us to identify which individuals, after completing secondary education, succeed in accessing these nationally dominant institutions, and which remain in more regionally anchored trajectories. It is thus an important proxy for early stratification and the selective nature of elite reproduction through education.

The third indicator concerns professional experience. Understanding career dynamics within the European field requires a detailed mapping of positions held, particularly within EU institutions. We therefore adopted a fine-grained categorization of roles in the Eurocratic field (in PRs, cabinets, and DGs), clearly distinguishing between technical, political, and managerial functions. For professional experiences outside the European field (whether in national administrations, the private sector, or academia) we used a more aggregated typology, allowing us to preserve analytical coherence despite the diversity of individual paths. Here we draw clear distinctions between public and private roles, and between political and administrative positions. This indicator allows us to assess how professional capital is accumulated, converted, and mobilized to shape individual trajectories.

The fourth and final indicator addresses the degree of internationalization. We deliberately chose not to use nationality as our unique variable, due to its limited discriminatory power, especially in the case of PR officials, for whom national origin is a formal requirement, and to the methodological challenges it raises. In particular, the absence of harmonized national rules regarding the recognition, acquisition, or limitation of dual or multiple nationalities makes systematic comparison highly problematic[2]. Some member states impose conditions or do not recognize multiple citizenships, while others allow for extensive dual-national status, which introduces considerable inconsistencies into the data and risks obscuring the very transnational dynamics we aim to capture. Instead, we developed a more functional indicator: whether or not an individual pursued higher education in a country other than their own, specifically within another EU member state. This choice is grounded in the assumption that academic mobility acts as a robust proxy for european socialization (Wagner, 2020). As Anne-Catherine Wagner puts it, studying abroad typically involves linguistic, cultural, and institutional acculturation, and often reflects an early commitment to a transnational career trajectory. As such, this indicator captures a set of soft skills (polyglotism, openness, adaptability) that are more meaningful than formal nationality in analysing Eurocratic careers (Wagner & Réau, 2015).

Taken together, these four indicators (educational background, academic excellence, professional experience, and degree of internationalization) enable us to analyse trajectories in a way that is both structured and reflexive. They allow us to cross-reference empirical data obtained through profiling with interpretive frameworks drawn from elite sociology. In doing so, we are able to identify observable regularities while remaining attentive to the heterogeneity of individual careers and the differentiated forms of capital mobilized in the competitive space of the European administrative field.

Firstly, we examine the similarities in the university curricula that form the common foundation of these two bodies, while identifying points of convergence that could presage potential mobility between them. Secondly, we focus on the divergence of trajectories from the moment of entry into the European civil service: how do initially similar profiles evolve according to the recruitment logics and institutional imperatives specific to the Commissioners' cabinets on the one hand, and the national representations on the other? A third line of analysis focuses on the "*cursus honorum*" of the Permanent Representations, highlighting the importance of passing through the preliminary stages deemed indispensable for access to the most senior positions. In addition, an examination of the ambivalent role played by the passage through the Commissaires' offices identifies both its potential as a springboard and its inherent limitations. Finally, we explore the rarity of cases where the institutional frontier is crossed, in order to question whether the separation between these two fractions is truly watertight.

[2] « La Double Nationalité : Comment Ça Se Passe Ailleurs (En Europe) », *Courrier International*, 6 December 2022.

1. Academic foundations and initial homogeneity: the university curriculum of the senior civil servants

Academic training plays a central role in the careers of senior European civil servants. Although the initial base of excellence is generally homogeneous, disciplinary orientations, the internationalization of curricula and the level of studies make it possible to distinguish the population of Permanent Representations (PR) from that of members of Commissioner's Cabinets and Directors General (Cab/DG).

1.1 Subjects studied: between national tradition and the redefinition of legitimate knowledge

From a disciplinary point of view, the two populations share a common academic base founded on classic disciplines such as law, political science and international relations. However, analysis of the data reveals distinct orientations linked to the evolution of the European field.

In PR, legal training predominates. Indeed, 34% of diplomas obtained at Bachelor's level are in the field of law, with a sustained representation at Master's (38%) and post-Master's (31%) levels. This predominance is in line with the Germanic tradition, which has historically positioned law as the foundation of diplomatic training (Vincent, 2006). At the same time, PRs benefit from solid training in political science (22% at Bachelor's and Master's level, 21% at post-Master's level) and international relations, which account for 15% at Bachelor's level, 19% at Master's level and 36% at post-Master's level, notably via the post-Master's courses offered by national diplomatic academies.

At the same time, the population of commissioner's offices and general managers share with PRs a common core of training in law and political science: around 30% of Bachelor's degrees are in law (25% at Master's level and 17% at post-master's level) and political science represents 25% at Bachelor's level, 34% at Master's level, and 33% at post-master's level. However, training in international relations is clearly under-represented in these programs (12% in Bachelor's programs, 10% in Master's programs and 0% in post-master's programs). On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on business studies. Around 15% of Bachelor's and Master's degrees come from business courses, rising to 25% at post-Master's level. This trend is even more pronounced among general managers, whose curricula include around 24% economics degrees, whatever the level of study (Bachelor's, Master's or post-Master's).
This rise of importance of the economics capital - with its demand for technical management and regulation - reflects the transformation of the European arena, where economic regulatory knowledge is gradually replacing traditional legal knowledge. At a time of crisis, political leadership is no longer the prerogative of lawyers, but is also opening up to economists capable of solving governance challenges (Georgakakis, 2012).

In summary, despite similar basic curricula, the permanent representations show a predominance of law and political science, while the Cab/DGs are distinguished by an orientation towards economics and commerce, reflecting a transformation of power in the Eurocratic field.

1.2 Training locations and institutions: national roots or strategic mobility

The place of study and the nature of the institutions attended play a decisive role in the training of senior European civil servants. The data show that the population of Commissioner's Cabinets (Cab) benefits from a much more internationalized academic background than that of Permanent Representatives (PR). Of the 112 complete academic profiles of cabinet members, 69 graduates (62%) hold at least one degree from a country other than their own. By contrast, only 23 of the 73 PR profiles (32%) show a similar degree of internationalization.

This internationalization manifests itself at different stages of the academic career. For the permanent representation population, 16% complete their Bachelor's degree abroad, 32% complete their Master's degree abroad and 43% continue their post-Master's studies outside their home country. Although internationalization increases with the length of studies, the majority of PRs choose to remain at their home university. By contrast, the internationalization strategy is much more prevalent in commissioning cabinets, with 27% of candidates completing their Bachelor's degree abroad, 58% opting for an international Master's degree and 72% pursuing a post-Master's degree in a foreign context. This strategic choice enables these players to enrich their inherited cultural and linguistic capital, while benefiting from a strengthened European network.

As a former member of a commissioner's office pointed out:

> "I had studied in Dutch, even though my mother was French. Then my parents pushed me to change my language regime. I studied at a French-speaking university, then a Dutch-speaking one, then in Germany, and finally in Great Britain. So, that gave me languages, that gave me openness to other cultures.[3]"

Furthermore, when we couple the data on internationalization with the types of institutions attended, a trend becomes clear. Permanent representation diplomats begin their studies at the best national universities: 49% of their Bachelor's degrees come from a Major national university (MNU) and 14% from a Major European university (MEU). This pattern continues at Master's level (42% from a GNU and 19% from a MEU). Conversely, members of commissioner's cabinets opt more for so-called "peripheral" universities at Bachelor's level (42%), before switching to prestigious international institutions at Master's and Post-Master's level - with 30% in MNU, 29% in MEU and a notable presence of training at American

[3] Interview with D.H, former member of one Commissioner cabinet, Bruges, April 2025.

universities at Post-Master's level (20% in the case of Cabs versus 0% in PR). These choices indicate that the Cabs' internationalization strategy aims to break out of the strictly national framework, an approach that is often costly but decisive in reinforcing their prestige and expanding their network on a European scale (Wagner, 2020).

Finally, it appears that these two populations sometimes rubbed shoulders on the same lecture theatres, reinforcing the homogeneity of their initial training. The College of Europe trained 21% of the PRs studied and 15% of the members of commissioners' cabinets, Sciences Po Paris 7% of the PRs and 5% of the Cabs, while the London School of Economics 3% of the PRs and 7% of the Cabs. These three major European universities, renowned for their excellence, act as a privileged gateway into each of the spheres - PR or Cab - of the European field and suggest that certain players met as students before setting off on distinct trajectories in Brussels.

1.3 Level of study and value of PhDs : homogeneity of excellence and functional specificities

In terms of educational attainment, the two populations show comparable excellence[4]. The average length of studies is around 7 years for Permanent Representatives, with modest variations according to position (6.30 years for Mertens, 7.20 years for Antici, 6.43 years for deputy permanent representative and 6.35 years for permanent representative), compared with 6.22 years for members of Commissioner's cabinets and 7.12 years for Directors General. These results testify to the fact that these future senior civil servants follow extended courses of study, often punctuated by the award of a second Master's degree, which reinforces their academic preparation in a context of intense competition, where academic baggage is a highly valued asset.

The presence of PhDs also differs according to access route. In the PR population, only 6 PhD holders out of 73 complete profiles, i.e. 8%, are recorded. This scarcity reflects the logic of national diplomatic competitive exams, which are generally taken - and passed - directly after

[4] Academic excellence, as defined in this study, encompasses two complementary dimensions. First, it refers to the ability to gain access to and graduate from institutions that are both highly selective and symbolically prestigious, typically associated with national or transnational elite formations. Second, it includes demonstrable academic performance, such as outstanding grades, competitive distinction in academic programs, or the production of original scholarly work—most notably a doctoral dissertation. This conceptualization moves beyond simplistic metrics such as the number of years spent in higher education, which may reflect academic orientation or persistence, but do not in themselves constitute reliable markers of distinction. Rather, excellence is understood here as a combination of institutional recognition and performance-based legitimation within the academic field. This definition draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of academic capital as developed in *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), where he conceptualizes distinction in higher education as rooted in both the institutional prestige of training pathways and the symbolic value of academic achievement. See also his related work on the hierarchy of educational institutions and their role in elite reproduction.

the first Master's degree, thus reducing the incentive to undertake a thesis that would certify sectoral expertise, whereas the diplomatic profession is by essence a generalist one.

Conversely, the cabinet population has a relatively high proportion of PhD holders, with 22 PhDs out of 142 profiles (16%), rising to 18% among general managers (7 out of 39). The importance of PhDs in these positions can be explained by the increased technicality of the files to be handled in certain Directorates General, as well as by the presence of experts recruited from the cabinets for their sectoral specialization - such as a permanent representation attaché whose job description focuses exclusively on EU policy, a profile not represented in our sample of PRs.

Although the two groups share a common academic base of excellence, the conditions of appointment, the technical nature of the subjects covered and the nature of the functions performed lead to a differentiated valuation of the PhDs, reflecting distinct institutional logics in the development of these careers.

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An analysis of the academic backgrounds of senior European civil servants reveals a common base of excellence, but also significant differentiations which, right from the training stage, guide trajectories within the European field. While the Permanent Representatives are mostly part of a national academic tradition, based on law, political science and success in diplomatic competitions, members of the Commissioner's cabinets and Directors General adopt more internationalized career paths, marked by an increasing emphasis on economic and technical capital.

This initial bifurcation is not limited to a simple difference in curricula: it prefigures distinct logics of integration, legitimization and advancement in European institutions. Through disciplinary specialization, the choice of training locations and the unequal place of PhDs, symbolic hierarchies and differentiated modes of access to key positions are already taking shape, which we will explore in the following sections through the study of careers, appointments and reproduction dynamics specific to each of these fractions of the field.

2. Recruitment logic and differentiated career paths: the impact of appointment conditions

Access to the cabinets of commissioners and the permanent representations is governed by different selection logics. While experience and skills are always valued, the appointment process is based on a set of rules - explicit or implicit - that favour certain profiles. Competitions, peer recognition, national diversity and gender balance are all filters that structure access to these influential positions within the European Union.

2.1 Recruitment: valuing experience and skills

2.1.1 Objective validation of skills: the competition

In the context of permanent representation, the diplomatic competition remains the central selection tool. Indeed, 63 out of 72 people occupying strategic positions in permanent representation are attached to their Ministry of Foreign Affairs, i.e. 88%. This figure reflects the strong predominance of staff who have followed the traditional path of competitive diplomatic examinations, a tradition that has its origins in diplomatic admission practices in Europe dating back to 1850 (Badel, 2021).

Membership of the national diplomatic corps is the rule, ensuring that officials joining the Permanent Representation already have a solid background validated by a rigorous test.

In the cabinet sphere, volunteers for cabinet posts are pre-selected within the permanent representations by national civil servants responsible for their country's presence within the institutions. The first criterion evaluated is the ability to be rapidly operational. This is partly due to practical reasons of manpower, but also to a logic of distribution by nationality in the Cabinets.

They are also mainly recruited from among those who have successfully passed European competitive examinations, which ensures that cabinet members are very familiar with the internal workings of the Commission departments with which they will be interacting. In the current composition of cabinets (UVDL 2, 2024-2029), 120 of the 146 (82%) complete professional profiles drawn up by our study are European civil servants. A permanent representation official explains:

> "European competitions act as a form of accreditation of the level expected to work in practice. Internal experience is essential to progress within the institution[5]".

[5] Interview with N.F., national civil servant at one Permanent Representation in Brussels, Brussels, April 2025

In addition to knowledge of the Commission's departments, knowledge of how the cabinets work is also highly valued in the selection procedure, as confirmed by an official from the Permanent Representation in Brussels, who said: *"The practice is fast-paced so we want people operational from day one.*[6]*"*

This need for rapid efficiency is reflected in the statistics: 49% of cabinet members (71 out of 146) already have at least one cabinet experience, and 34% (50 out of 146) were in office during the previous term (2019-2024, UVDL 1).

2.1.2 Peer validation: certification of experience and know-how

In addition to success in the competitive examination and the ability to be immediately operational, cabinet appointments are largely based on validation by peers. As one staff member from a permanent representation office put it:

> "We find out what colleagues think of this person, it's an excellent way of assessing their integrity, seriousness and professionalism.[7]"

This recognition, both formal and informal, plays a decisive role in the selection process. A former cabinet member points out in retrospect:

> "These formal and informal networks are quite important, especially when working in a cabinet. I also underestimated the role of the internal recognition within the services. So, the intra-Commission network and the opinion of peers are also very important.[8]"

This recognition is complemented by a particularly thorough interpersonal selection phase. Successful candidates must first meet the Deputy Head of Cabinet, then the Head of Cabinet, and finally the Commissioner himself. The aim of this series of interviews is to ensure not only technical, but also intellectual and personal suitability. As one former member reports:

> "I was very close intellectually to the Commissioner. This is absolutely necessary to establish the Commissioner's political line.[9]"

The cabinet operates as a space of intense intellectual collaboration, where the small number of collaborators implies a strong sense of cohesion. Efficiency relies on the fluidity of exchanges and mutual trust. However, this balance is fragile as another former member confides: *"I wanted to leave the Cab because relations with the Commissioner were very complicated.*[10]*"*

In this restricted environment, interpersonal compatibility is just as crucial as technical skills, and can determine the success or failure of the experience.

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[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Interview with E.P, former member of two Commissioner cabinets, Brussels, March 2025
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*

2.2 Appointments to the commission are governed by explicit and implicit rules that go beyond the recognition of experience.

In addition to valorising experience, appointments to the Commission are also governed by formal rules - defined in institutional directives - and implicit practices stemming from intergovernmental realities.

2.2.1 Explicit rules for appointments to key Commission posts

Since the arrival of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission, the issue of gender equality has been raised to the level of a political priority. This ambition has led to a significant strengthening of the rules on parity in the composition of Commissioners' cabinets. Whereas texts under the Juncker Commission were content with a declaration of intent – "the members of the Commission undertake to apply gender equality in the composition of their cabinets[11]" – the text governing the composition of cabinets under UVDL II adopts a much more binding tone. It explicitly requires "commissioners to include at least 50% women among their AD staff[12]", reflecting a shift from a voluntary commitment to a formalized obligation.
This voluntarism has tangible effects: today, there are 80 women for every 75 men. However, this apparent quasi-parity masks an unequal distribution of roles within the cabinets. Among heads of cabinet - the most strategic and politically exposed positions - there are 17 men and only 10 women. Conversely, the majority of deputy chief of staff positions are held by women (18 versus 9 men), highlighting a gendered distribution of responsibilities in which women remain more present in support roles, which are certainly important, but less visible. This finding suggests that feminization is still partial and remains inversely proportional to the political centrality of the position.

The same trend can be observed among the Commission's Directors-General (DGs). Here too, efforts to promote gender equality under the 2020-2025 strategy have led to significant progress: women now account for 46% of DGs (18 out of 39), compared with just 36% in 2018. While this near parity is remarkable at this level of hierarchy in an international public administration, it nevertheless remains unfinished business. As with the cabinets, women's access to the most exposed positions continues to be the subject of a gradual normalization process, driven by both institutional objectives and a slow but real cultural evolution.

On the other hand, the Permanent Representations (PR), which report to national diplomatic services, are not subject to any explicit gender parity requirements. This is reflected in the

[11] Jean-Claude Juncker, 'Communication to the Commission - Rules Governing the Composition of the Cabinets of the Members of the Commission and of the Spokesperson's Service', C (2014) 9002 (Brussels, 1 November 2014).
[12] Ursula von der Leyen, 'Communication from the President of the Commission - Rules Governing the Composition of the Cabinets of the Members of the Commission and of the Spokesperson's Service', P (2024) 7 (Brussels, 1 December 2024).

figures: women account for 59% of Mertens (13 out of 22) and 52% of Antici (12 out of 23), positions with a strong technical and organizational dimension, but they are far less present in positions with a high political dimension. They account for only 37.5% of Deputy Permanent Representatives (9 out of 24) and 33% of Permanent Representatives (9 out of 27). This distribution illustrates a feminization of diplomatic functions that diminishes as the level of political arbitration increases.

This phenomenon is part of a long-term legacy. As Laurence Badel points out in her study of European diplomacy, women have long been confined to peripheral functions within permanent representations, particularly in the cultural, social and humanitarian fields. It was only belatedly that they gained access to economic posts - from the 1990s onwards - and to strategic positions only in the 2000s. In short, while the European Commission has a proactive policy on professional equality, the Permanent Representations are still marked by recruitment practices inherited from diplomatic traditions that have been slower to evolve (Badel, 2021).

The composition of Commissioners' cabinets is governed by a series of formal rules designed to guarantee the diversity of nationalities represented. Already under the Juncker Commission, a formulation of these principles called on cabinets to reflect the diversity of the European Union, introducing in particular a minimum requirement of three different nationalities among AD staff, as well as a preference for a dissociation between the nationality of the Commissioner and that of his or her head or deputy cabinet. However, it was under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen that these requirements were considerably tightened. A communication now imposes precise quotas: for "ordinary" Commissioners, no more than two AD members of the cabinet may share their nationality, and at least three distinct nationalities must be represented. The chief and deputy duo must systematically be of a different nationality to the commissioner. For the most strategic members of the College (President, Executive Vice-Presidents, High Representative), the rule is even stricter, with specific ceilings and a minimum of five nationalities represented, due to the larger number of staff.

These complex rules serve a dual purpose: to reflect the Union's geopolitical balance, and to limit the risk of a single member state capturing a practice. In practice, however, the logic of national proximity persists. Of the 155 members of the current cabinets, 51 share the nationality of their Commissioner, i.e. a third of the workforce. This proportion illustrates the importance attached to cultural, political and linguistic proximity between a Commissioner and his or her most direct collaborators. As one former cabinet member put it:

> "Nationality plays a major role in the composition of a Commissioner's cabinet - both for network-building and language. My Commissioner was very clear: he wanted a French national as Deputy Head of Cabinet.[13]"

[13] Interview with E.P, *op. cit.*

An analysis of management positions reinforces this observation. Of the 27 chiefs of staff in post, 22 share their commissioner's nationality. In the five cases where this is not the case, this proximity is re-established at Deputy Head level: each of these Commissioners thus has at least one trusted collaborator from his or her own country. These adjustments demonstrate that the institutional rules, while ambitious in terms of diversity, leave sufficient room for interpretation to maintain bilateral political balances, often dictated by considerations of loyalty or operational efficiency.

The great historical powers, such as France and Germany, perfectly illustrate this double game between respect for standards and political clout. The cabinets include 16 French and 15 German members, although these nationalities are not always over-represented in command positions. France currently has only one head of cabinet but makes up for this with seven deputy heads. Germany has a more even balance, with four chiefs of staff and four deputies. This distribution reflects both the ability of these states to place their nationals in key positions, and the care taken not to appear hegemonic within a system that values balance between member states.

Ultimately, the question of nationality in the composition of cabinets reveals a constant tension between the desire for European integration, the imperatives of geopolitical representation, and the logic of personal trust. Although the rules governing diversity have been considerably tightened, the reality shows that nationals of the most influential member states continue to enjoy privileged access to the most visible positions. This does not call into question the legitimacy of the rules, but it does highlight the complexity of applying them in a context where loyalty, networks and language continue to play a key role.

2.2.2 Implicit rules and “valued capital”

Alongside the formal regulations governing the composition of cabinets, a series of implicit, often informal rules also help to structure appointment trajectories. These practices, although not part of the official texts, play a fundamental role in the selection of profiles and testify to the highly political dimension of cabinet recruitment.

Among these discreet logics, intergovernmental arrangements occupy a singular place. Certain cabinet posts seem to be the subject of veritable tacit diplomatic traditions between member states. Thus, since the 1980s and the Kohl-Mitterrand tandem, an informal but firmly rooted agreement has been in place whereby the deputy head of a French Commissioner is systematically a German national, and conversely, that of a German Commissioner a Frenchman (Mérand, 2021). This exchange embodies a form of symbolic co-direction between two pillar states of the Union and illustrates a continuing political will to maintain a privileged channel for bilateral dialogue within the Commission itself. Behind the logic of national diversity advocated by the texts, we find here a parallel diplomacy, based on the stability of Franco-German relations and on shared political management of certain sensitive dossiers.

Language skills are another implicit selection criterion. While official texts require the representation of a wide range of nationalities, the reality of day-to-day work in the cabinet relies heavily on the ability to evolve in a multilingual environment. In this respect, multilingual candidates have a decisive comparative advantage. This linguistic requirement, combined with the constraints of national diversity, favours internationalized profiles. This is reflected in a significant figure: 61.6% of cabinet members have obtained at least one university degree in a country other than their own. This international capital - academic and linguistic - becomes an implicit selection criterion, as it guarantees rapid integration into cosmopolitan teams and intercultural intermediation skills.

In this context, individuals with dual or multiple citizenships emerge as particularly attractive profiles. At the crossroads of formal diversity, linguistic capital and national representations, these individuals embody a form of international capital, as theorized by Anne-Catherine Wagner: a set of resources acquired through transnational trajectories, foreign academic training, and multilingual competence (Wagner, 2020). This capital is implicitly valued within the Eurocratic field, as it enables candidates to adapt rapidly to multilingual, intercultural teams and to navigate the institutional and political complexity of cabinet work. Their dual membership makes them particularly useful in a bureaucratic system where rules are numerous and sometimes contradictory, and where each appointment must satisfy several criteria at once. As one former cabinet member lucidly sums up: *"They needed a foreigner who spoke German. And so, by chance, I ticked the boxes*[14]*"*. This type of profile makes it possible to simultaneously meet the requirements of plurality, linguistic competence and political loyalty - a triple compliance that is particularly sought-after.

Ultimately, the implicit rules of recruitment in curators' offices reveal the complexity of a professional space where the display of formal diversity is accompanied by a series of informal practices, forged by diplomatic power relations, functional requirements and the logics of social and cultural capital. These practices are not necessarily opposed to the official rules but extend them by adapting them to the concrete constraints of the institution's operations. Above all, they show that, in a highly standardized world, room for interpretation and interpersonal resources retain a structuring weight in access to positions of influence.

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Recruitment procedures for commissioners' offices and permanent representations are both structured and differentiated. While experience and competence are prerequisites, they are not enough: networking, interpersonal skills, language proficiency and the ability to navigate complex political balances are decisive assets.
Under the impetus of Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission has adopted explicit rules on gender and nationality. These have produced tangible results, but still leave room for political manoeuvring, often exploited through informal arrangements or strategic

[14] Interview with D.H, former member of one Commissioner cabinet, Bruges, April 2025

appointments. Cabinets thus appear to be places where institutional demands, diplomacy of influence and personal capital meet.
In short, over and above declared standards, access to positions of influence in the field of eurocracy remains profoundly linked to the balancing act between technical skills, institutional recognition and national positioning.

3. The "*cursus honorum*" of permanent representations: hierarchical rigor and accumulated experience

COREPER's diplomacy differs from that of traditional embassies in both its nature and the career paths it shapes. In contrast to the classic cycles of national diplomacy - often structured around alternating postings abroad and returns to the capital - insertion into the world of Brussels requires continuous immersion in European affairs (Badel, 2021).
Within this structure, COREPER is divided into two formations according to the nature of the policies addressed. COREPER I, made up of the Deputy Permanent Representatives, is responsible for preparing Council configurations with a technical focus (employment, competitiveness, environment, etc.), while COREPER II, which includes the Permanent Representatives, deals with matters with a high political content (general affairs, external relations, economy, justice). This division is reflected in the internal organization of the Permanent Representations: the Mertens prepare the work of the Deputy PRs, while the Antici supervise that of the PRs. As one Mertens puts it, not without irony:

> "When people outside the European sphere ask me what I do at the Permanent Representation, I say that I'm 'the number 2 of the number 2'.[15]"

This system is based on a progressive sequence of negotiations, structured in two phases: an initial technical phase, marked by the formulation of options and the alignment of national positions, followed by a more political phase, during which arbitration takes place between member states. This configuration imposes a gradual specialization of staff and an increase in skills through a series of hierarchical positions, from Mertens to permanent representative. It is within this bottom-up architecture that what can be described as a *"cursus honorum"* unfolds. This is based on an accumulation of practical experience behind the scenes, but also on the appropriation of tacit knowledge, interaction routines and unwritten rules specific to the *"COREPER club"*. Far from being a simple administrative progression, this trajectory is also a process of political socialization, in which symbolic capital, experience of institutional games and the ability to embody the codes of European negotiation condition access to the highest positions.

[15] Interview with E.V., Mertens for a small member state, Bruges, April 2025

3.1 Ages and experience that reflect hierarchical progression

Analysis of the population studied reveals a clear progression in terms of age and experience. The statistics show that the average age of jobholders is gradually rising, from 37.5 years for Mertens, to 40.8 years for Antici, to 50.5 years for deputy permanent representatives, to 55.7 years for permanent representatives. These figures reflect not only the length of the career accumulated, but also the requirement for ever greater depth of expertise as one moves up the COREPER hierarchy.

This progression is also reflected in the specific experience devoted to European issues. Mertens have an average of 6.79 years' experience on European issues, while Antici have an average of 8.2 years. Deputy permanent representatives and permanent representatives have 11.9 and 15.3 years of experience respectively. When considers the total professional experience - which is 12.4, 16.2, 26.4 and 30.2 years for Mertens, Antici, deputy permanent representatives and permanent representatives - it appears that the percentage of the career spent on European subjects is relatively high, at around 54.9% for Mertens, 50.6% for Antici, 45% for deputy permanent representatives and 50.9% for permanent representatives. Thus, on average, technical posts (Mertens and Antici) spend around 52.8% of their careers on European affairs, compared with 47.9% for posts with a more political dimension (deputy permanent representatives and permanent representatives). These data underline the fact that, paradoxically, players at technical levels accumulate proportionately more experience on European issues than their political counterparts, illustrating the initial rigor required to master the technical side of negotiations before entering the political dimension.

Looking at the entire study population (n = 72), only 28 individuals (39%) had never held a PR position before - including 8 Mertens, which is consistent with the position's relatively junior function. Conversely, 44 (61%) had already held a PR position prior to their current appointment. Of these, 19 (26%) had held a position directly below them in the hierarchy (e.g., a former Mertens who became an Antici, or a former Antici who became a deputy permanent representative), revealing a very marked logic of step-by-step advancement. This gradual structuring of careers bears witness to an informal but rigorous *"cursus honorum"*, based on the accumulation of expertise specific to European negotiation and its institutional codes.

3.2 The formative role of technical positions and the accumulation of symbolic capital

The initial phase of the career path - embodied by the Mertens posts - proves to be a veritable training ground for young diplomats. In this role, the negotiator is first confronted with the technical preparation of European dossiers. As a Mertens put it:

> "It varies from one delegation to another, but in some cases, the Mertens role is seen as a kind of entry point - a junior post for promising young diplomats to gain experience. It's not the case everywhere, but given how formative the position is, the HR rationale makes sense[16]."

[16] *Ibid.*

This testimony highlights the formative function of this position, which, despite its brevity in terms of overall experience, enables the accumulation of essential technical capital. This expertise, acquired through daily negotiation practice, is part of a learning process that goes beyond the simple transmission of formal knowledge. It involves appropriating the tacit rules of COREPER - the codes of conduct, unwritten norms and institutional culture that give negotiators their status within the closed club of European players (Chatzistavrou,' 2012). The accumulation of this symbolic capital is a sine qua non for access to higher levels, where the challenge is no longer simply to know the procedures, but to know how to use them to steer political compromises.

3.3 Learning from experience: from technical to political

While the technical phase is the essential foundation, the progression to deputy PR and PR positions implies a transition to functions more oriented towards political advice and arbitration. This evolution is perceptible in both quantitative and qualitative terms. With 11.9 and 15.3 years' experience of European issues respectively, deputy permanent representatives and permanent representatives reflect a maturity that goes well beyond mere technical mastery. Political experience, on the other hand, is measured by the ability to negotiate compromises that were prepared upstream during the technical phase. In this respect, COREPER operates in two phases: first, the negotiators, in technical mode, clean up the dossiers by applying rigorous procedures; in the second phase, the political dimension takes over, where judgment and arbitration know-how are brought to bear to debate the sensitive issues.
Membership of this "*COREPER club*" is also reflected in the presence of previous experience in political advisory functions. Among permanent representatives, 50% (8 out of 16) of negotiators have already worked as sherpas or specialist advisors on European issues. This rate even rises to 65.4% (17 out of 26) among PRs, demonstrating that the move towards political functions requires prior immersion in the nuts and bolts of consulting and negotiation. A former European Council sherpa illustrates this need:

> "If you want to succeed in these key positions, you need strong networks and a deep understanding of how the system works. You just can't become a PermRep without having been immersed in the system long before.[17]"

This underlines the fact that success in the COREPER arena does not rely solely on technical expertise, but also requires the accumulation of political capital - consisting of networks, relational know-how and informal codes - which can only be acquired through long experience in the representative environment.

[17] Interview with T.A., former Sherpa at the European council, Paris, March 2025

3.4 The "*great diplomat*" and the "*political gambler*": anomalies that skip stages

While most careers in Permanent Representation follow a gradual progression - from Mertens to Antici, then from Deputy to Permanent Representative - some profiles depart from this upward logic. One of them, who could be described as a "*great diplomat*", is atypical of the cursus honorum in force in Brussels. Coming from a classic diplomatic career, often long and prestigious in the national context, this type of profile is propelled directly to a high level of representation, bypassing intermediate technical positions.
This singular rise is partly explained by the very nature of the role entrusted to them. Their mission is based less on technical mastery of the issues than on negotiation and political arbitration skills, made possible by the support of teams experienced in the workings of Europe. As one deputy permanent representative put it:

> "I've been a career diplomat for over 20 years, but when I joined COREPER I, I had no prior experience with EU affairs. That kind of mobility is made possible by the strength of the team behind you - by the time a file reaches my desk, the technical aspects have already been handled. What really counts in this role is negotiation experience and political judgment, not deep expertise in European policy.[18]"

This quotation clearly illustrates that access to COREPER for these profiles is based on a form of symbolic capital - prestige, network, diplomatic skill - which compensates for the absence of "deep roots" in the European world. Their integration is based less on the expertise they have accumulated in technical positions than on their ability to activate the informal codes and dynamics of influence characteristic of the "*COREPER club*" (Lewi's, 2021).
This phenomenon is particularly acute in the case of deputy permanent representatives. While their appointment apparently reflects a logic of advancement - 62.5% of them having already held a position in permanent representation - the average proportion of their career spent on European issues remains lower than average (45% versus 50.5%), often testifying to a brief stint in permanent representation, as part of a more general diplomatic career path. For this fraction, the post of deputy permanent representative functions as a tipping point between two worlds: it remains aligned with classic bilateral diplomacy, while opening onto a possible more specialized European career. This makes it a place for experimentation and testing, particularly in matters falling within the remit of COREPER I, which covers policy areas deemed less sensitive (employment, competitiveness, environment, etc.). This configuration makes it possible to place profiles with political experience, but still new to European issues, in order to assess their ability to adapt before, potentially, a move to COREPER II.

Indeed, the post of Permanent Representative represents the culmination of a strict *cursus honorum*, with certain career paths disrupting its apparent linearity. Of the 27 permanent representatives, 70% had previous experience in the Permanent Representation, including 7 as deputy permanent representatives, 5 as Antici, and 3 in the Political and Security Committee (PSC). This high rate reflects the accumulation of experience and the gradual

[18] Interview with G.I., Deputy Permanent Representative for a small member state, Bruges, April 2025

learning of COREPER's practices and implicit codes, which only prolonged immersion in this world seems to allow.
However, a few figures escape this logic of sequential advancement. These profiles, rare but significant, belong more to the register of the "*political gambler*" than that of the deserving technocrat. A Permanent Representative from a Nordic country, is an emblematic example of this offbeat trajectory. At the age of 46 - well below the average age of permanent representatives (55.7) - he reached this position without having been a career diplomat, without having passed through the major national or European universities, nor through the intermediate positions of the Permanent Representation. His accession is based on a long-standing partisan commitment (party coordinator, political advisor, then Under-Secretary of State for European Affairs) and a familiarity with European affairs built up outside the arena of a permanent representation (22-year career linked to European policies).
In this case, the appointment can be seen as a reward for political loyalty, made possible by the alternation of power, and short-circuiting COREPER's own logic of promotion. But this type of trajectory raises questions. For while he may have a certain knowledge of European issues, he has not acquired the informal resources - symbolic capital, recognition among peers, mastery of unwritten rules - that accumulate precisely through internal progression within permanent representations. Yet this capital lies at the heart of COREPER's operations, which are based on hushed diplomacy, a system of tacit co-optation and a behind-closed-doors negotiation process (Chatzistavrou, 2012). The very existence of these exceptions, although marginal, is a reminder that the logic of merit and experience, which is supposed to structure access to key positions, can be circumvented..

4. The springboard effect of Commissioners cabinets: opportunities, constraints and limits

Commissioners' cabinets are at the heart of the European institutional machinery. As gateways to the Commission's strategic dimension, they offer both the opportunity to acquire political capital and high-level managerial expertise, and the prospect of visibility that can be both propitious and uncertain.

4.1 Profile and origin of applicants

As we have seen in the section on conditions of appointment, at first glance, Commissioners' cabinets seem to be the preferred domain for European civil servants from competitive examinations. Of the 146 profiles analysed, no less than 82% (120) come from European competitions, symbolizing an initial homogeneity deeply rooted in the Union's administrative culture. These civil servants, already familiar with the workings of the institutions, have a background that enables them to enter an area where strategic issues and the practice of power are intertwined.

However, this endogamy does not rule out the arrival of players from elsewhere, those some would describe as "outsiders" (Georgakakis, 2012). Indeed, the data show that only 15 profiles out of 146, or around 10%, come from the national sphere. Of these, six come from the political sphere (ministerial advisors, party coordinators) - and nine from their national civil service (office manager at the Ministry of the Environment, administrative judge). This dichotomy, which Frédéric Mérand had already sketched out by contrasting the "*Brusselers*" with the "*Parisians*" in the composition of Pierre Moscovici's cabinet (2014-2019), reveals a double registration of candidates in the European political arena (Mérand, 2021). The insiders, on the one hand, benefit from a legitimacy built on years of competition and in-house experience, while the outsiders attempt to impose a more external or even challenging reading of current practices. The experience of the cabinet itself, then, is not just a technical or managerial apprenticeship, but is tinged with an identity and political dimension that makes their trajectories differentiated and often subjective, even contested.

4.2 Between vocation and stage

The length of time spent in a commissioner's office is another indicator of the uniqueness of these career paths. For the majority, a spell in a cabinet is a necessary step, one among others in a career already rich in administrative experience. Thus, 75 of the profiles surveyed (51%) had their first mandate in an office. However, there is a gradual trend towards loyalty: 39 people are working in their second office, 23 in their third, six in their fourth, two in their fifth and, exceptionally, only one - Cunill i Rafael Miriam - is working in her sixth office.

The latter embodies a singular trajectory. She began her career as a substitute secretary and rose through the ranks from "personal assistant" to "policy assistant in charge of inter-institutional relations", changing Commissioner with each mandate. Her career path illustrates the extent to which the cabinet can become more than just a springboard - it can become a veritable professional melting pot, accumulating unique expertise and extraordinarily valuable relational capital.

This trajectory, while exceptional in its longevity, resonates with patterns identified by Sébastien Michon in his work on accredited parliamentary assistants (APAs), where subordinate yet strategic positions within European institutions serve not only as entry points but also as sites of long-term capital accumulation, both in terms of institutional expertise and dense relational networks (Michon, 2008).

However, multiple mandates are not always viewed positively. In an interview, a former member of the cabinet expressed with implacable lucidity:

> "The 'masochists' move from one practice to another. They have a lot of experience. They're sharks. They know everyone, they're very powerful, fearsome, cunning…[19]".

These words, charged with an ambiguity at once admiring and critical, underline the dual reality: on the one hand, accumulated experience reinforces the legitimacy and competence of the players; on the other, it can be perceived as the anchor of opportunistic behaviour, even

[19] Interview with D.H, *op. cit.*

an addiction to power - a form of trajectory which, by dint of multiplying, ends up compromising the image of neutrality indispensable to the European civil service.

4.3 What are the consequences of this move? Advances and limits

The impact of a spell with a cabinet on career development can be divided into two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, experience is recognized as a career gas pedal. On the other, it is by no means a guarantee of advancement in the hierarchy and can sometimes even turn into a real handicap. Many civil servants have come up against this paradoxical reality.

4.3.1 Post-cabinet promotion is not automatic

It's true that in-house experience gives us an in-depth understanding of the institutional "machine". As one former member frankly puts it:

> "In an office, you really see the machine from the inside. You understand the decision-making processes and the links between different policies. That's the fundamental difference between a unit head who manages projects and teams with a limited horizon, and a director who has to think in global terms.[20]"

This immersion results in the acquisition of a sharp political vision and managerial know-how that, on the face of it, should enable players to move up to top-level positions.
However, this advantage of visibility doesn't always translate into automatic progression. Another testimonial, tinged with a certain bitterness, recalls this cutting edge of experience:

> "My time in a Commissioner's cabinet did accelerate my career at a certain point, but it later became more of a handicap for further progress within the services. [...] Leaving a cabinet requires preparation; each Commissioner has only a few 'cartridges', and these positions are getting harder and harder to land. As a result, many former cabinet members from the previous commission are still without roles.[21]"

Here, the "*cartridge*" metaphor illustrates a Commissioner's limited ability to promote his staff, in the face of institutional constraints such as the logic of parity - which, for example, sometimes hinders the progress of over-represented male profiles[22]. Beyond these structural aspects, some Commissioners simply don't bother to invest in promoting their staff, while others delegate their responsibility erratically. As one former member points out, *"some Commissioners have no concern whatsoever for their staff.*[23]" The consequence is that, for many, the move to a cabinet, far from being a winning ticket, proves to be a risky gamble: visibility, while

[20] Interview with E.P, *op. cit.*
[21] Interview with D.H, *op. cit.*
[22] Interview with E.P, *op. cit.*
[23] Interview with D.H, *op. cit.*

rewarding, also condemns one to confront a relentless grading system, where the slightest weakness can have repercussions for the rest of one's career.
The visibility acquired in the cabinet also exposes the civil servant to a lasting reputation. In a restricted environment, where *"you always meet twice*[24]*"*, any event - positive or negative - can have long-lasting repercussions. A former member of the team describes the emergence of the "*Icarus*" phenomenon - young members whose arrogance and pretentiousness towards the Commission's services backfire when they return to work[25]. The risks are real, and for some, visibility becomes a double-edged sword.

4.3.2 A definite advantage for accelerating your career in the European institutions

For those who know how to extract the quintessence of this experience, a stint in an office is a decisive asset. The latter is a veritable school of political training, where you learn not only the ins and outs of European administration, but also how to develop a network of essential contacts in an environment where action is built from the first glance. As one former member testifies:

> "Working with these politicians from different sides gave me an understanding of the language and way of thinking of a politician. I joined my first cabinet quite young, and at 31 I had to learn how to think politically, which ultimately gave me the confidence to progress.[26]"

It is this immersion in the world of politics, which transforms technical experience into a global vision, that is the cabinet's main asset. The development of a *"helicopter view*[27]*"* enables us to see issues from a strategic angle, to unravel the multiple threads of issues and to grasp the complexity of inter-institutional relations. This ability to navigate complexity is all the more valuable in regulatory and strategic departments such as CLIMA, COMP, ENV or TAXUD.
The relational dimension is also essential. In a small space, where every action is commented on and trust is built up over time, the opportunity to forge an extensive and effective network only presents itself once. As one former member points out:

> "People will see you in action because there aren't that many members. Being in direct contact with senior management or other colleagues, people quickly see what you're capable of.[28]"

Personality, the ability to inspire trust and build relationships are essential assets, sometimes just as decisive as technical or managerial skills.
This is not to say that success in the transition to practice is based solely on talent or hard work. Luck and alignment with the Commissioner, that famous "guardian angel", also play a decisive role. As one former member succinctly sums up: *"You have to 'click' with the*

[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] Interview with T.K, former member of one Commissioner cabinet, Bruges, March 2025

Commissioner. You need a guardian angel. You need luck.[29]". This factor, inextricably linked to the political dimension of experience, is a reminder that the cabinet is an environment where personal influence and the ability to promote oneself are as important as acquired skills.

4.4 Case study of the 39 Directors General

A closer look at the 39 current Directors General is particularly instructive in measuring the impact of cabinet experience on the ascent to the highest echelons of European administration. Of these, 18 - or almost 46% - have had at least one spell in a commissioner's office, which clearly indicates that, for these profiles, the office acts as a real springboard (Joana & Smith, 2002). On average, these managers have served 2.44 terms in the cabinet. Of these, 13 held the position of Head of Cabinet, six of them after having been Deputy Head of Cabinet, while 2 only held the position of Deputy Head of Cabinet without progressing to Head of Cabinet.

These figures testify to a significant political and strategic enrichment for those who have managed to join this dynamic. They generally find themselves in departments where the stakes are crucial for European regulation. Positions in directorates such as CLIMA, COMP, ENV and TAXUD require an acute grasp of political mechanisms and an ability to manage the complexity of power - skills that the cabinet has, quite logically, helped to develop. For these General Managers, the skills acquired in the cabinet - whether in crisis management or the art of inter-DG coordination - translate into an ability to lead strategic divisions, where every decision has a major impact on European policy (Joana & Smith, 2002).

On the other hand, the other 21 Directors General have never had the experience of working in a commissioner's office. These profiles show a more technocratic trajectory, built on specialization and operational expertise (Georgakakis & De Lasalle, 2002; Georgakakis & Bordier, 2025). In directorates such as CNECT, DIGIT, OLAF or JRC, progression is essentially based on technical mastery and seniority, underlining the existence of a viable alternative to political career paths.

The value of the PhD mentioned above is also important here: of the 7 Directors General with PhDs, 4 have no cabinet experience and are mainly assigned to technical departments (e.g. CNECT, Internal Audit Service or Eurostat), where a thorough understanding of the issues requires an in-depth academic background. In this way, the path to the post of DG is not simply a matter of accumulating experience in the political sphere but is also based on specific skills and in-depth operational experience.

This dual access to the upper echelons of the European administration illustrates the plurality of career paths: on the one hand, DGs from cabinets make full use of their accumulated politico-strategic capital to occupy management positions in areas where political influence is preponderant; on the other hand, "technical" DGs demonstrate that specialized expertise and regular internal evolution can be sufficient to reach the highest echelons. It is also interesting to note that an analysis of the previous positions held by the 39 Directors General

[29] Interview with D.H, *op. cit.*

reveals that 17 of them had already held the position of General Manager in another department, and 13 had served as Deputy Director General. These data clearly indicate that, whether political or technocratic, experience acquired in other areas of activity facilitates navigation within the Commission and enables effective horizontal promotions.
In short, an examination of the career paths of the 39 Directors General that, while working in a cabinet confers undeniable additional capital - know-how in terms of strategy, crisis management and interpersonal skills - it is not the only route to the position of Director General. While cabinet-educated DGs dominate the fields of regulation and strategy, DGs who have not taken this step display recognized technical expertise and a progression based on seniority and specialization.

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Experience in a commissioner's office proves to be a double-edged sword. For those able to mobilize its assets - a detailed understanding of political mechanisms, a dense network of contacts and consolidated managerial expertise - it speeds up careers by offering a *"helicopter view*[30]*"* that is indispensable for managing European issues. Yet this heightened visibility runs the risk of turning into a handicap, depending on the Commissioner's support - or lack of it - and the calculation of promotional opportunities.
A former member of cabinet made very clear that *"joining a cabinet is no guarantee of a future career*[31]*"*., while, paradoxically, belonging to this world enables the development of an operational and strategic understanding, as confirmed by the trajectories of general managers. The wide range of career paths - from those who build their careers on a series of cabinet appointments to those who opt for a technocratic path - demonstrates that there is no single, predefined route to promotion within the European administration.
Ultimately, the commissioner's office is a political training laboratory, where individual ambition, technical skills and relational imperatives come together. Success lies not only in the accumulation of experience, but in the ability to emerge transformed and ready to take on wider responsibilities, juggling the political demands and hazards of a career based on constant visibility.

5. Crossing and inter-fraction mobility: rare transgressions of an apparently impermeable boundary

The traditional division between the permanent representations and the Commissioner's office/Director General's office is established from the moment of appointment and reflects distinct training and socialization trajectories. Nevertheless, inter-

[30] Interview with D.H, *op. cit.*
[31] Interview with T.K, *op. cit.*

functional mobility, although marginal, sometimes transgresses this separation and sheds interesting light on the flexibility of the European institutional system.

5.1 Relatively rare mobility

Transfers between these two entities remain extremely rare. In the permanent representative population, for example, of the 71 complete professional profiles drawn up, only 5 officials (7%) have previous experience in a Commissioner's office. This low percentage confirms that, for the vast majority of civil servants working in the permanent representations, their career path is part of a homogeneous trajectory, the boundaries of which are set as early as the appointment process. The idea of a "*cursus honorum*" for the Permanent Representation is confirmed, since the transition to a role outside this body is only an exception.
It should be noted, however, that temporary mobility within the institutions is more frequent. Indeed, 15 of the 71 officials surveyed (21%) have previous experience in Community institutions. These experiences made possible by the specific framework of mobility for "seconded national experts", concern 3 Antici officials, 5 deputy permanent representatives and 7 permanent representatives. However, this passage through the institutions is only a complement in their long career path, the average duration of this mobility being around 3 years, but it does give them a more comprehensive view of the European decision-making process.

Conversely, only 17 (12%) of the 146 complete professional profiles in the Commissioner's cabinets have previous experience in a permanent representation. This finding is consistent with the logic of cabinet appointments, which give priority to career European civil servants - currently 120 out of 146 (i.e. 82%) - while remaining open to the integration of profiles from capital cities (Joana & Smith, 2002).
These results show that, although inter-functional mobility may occur, it remains the exception rather than the rule. In practice, therefore, the boundary between permanent representatives and commissioner's offices appears to be a strong organizational marker.

5.2 Who goes where? Dynamics and job equivalents

The few mobilities identified shed light on functional equivalences and the dynamics of transfers from one side of the border to the other. A number of individual trajectories illustrate the move from a position in a commissioner's office to one in permanent representation. For example, in the current population studied, an expert in a commissioner's office moved up to the position of Mertens, and a Head of Cabinet became a deputy permanent representative. It is important to note that both of these cases concern actors who were not initially part of their country's diplomatic corps, having spent part of their career in the national (non-diplomatic) civil service, then joining the Commission, then the cabinets, before finally reaching their country's permanent representation by an original route.

More typically, a Deputy Head of Cabinet has become a Permanent Representative, and two Heads of Cabinet, who had previously served as Deputy Permanent Representatives, have become Permanent Representatives. These examples demonstrate the to-and-fro between the two spheres and illustrate that, in terms of functional equivalence, a Head of Cabinet is not "worth" a Permanent Representative insofar as Heads of Cabinet promoted to Permanent Representative had already been Deputy Permanent Representatives. On the other hand, when a Head of Cabinet had no prior experience in permanent representation, he or she was appointed Deputy Permanent Representative, a position that acts as a gateway to a career in permanent representation for an agent who already has significant political experience, as we have already shown via the cases described as "*great diplomats*" .

In the opposite trajectory, from permanent representation to a position in a Commissioner's cabinet, nine permanent representation attachés moved into cabinet positions as members, and two attachés moved into expert positions. In addition, two Deputy Permanent Representatives were promoted to Head of Cabinet, and three Permanent Representatives became Heads of Cabinet.
One particular case illustrates yet another specific dynamic: a European civil servant who is currently Head of Cabinet has experience of permanent representation as an attaché. However, this experience only lasted six months and coincided with her country's assumption of the presidency of the European Union. With a career spanning 22 years, 19 of which were spent at the Commission, the influence of this experience of permanent representation in the first part of her career is marginal. Although this type of mobility is marginal, it does exist, and demonstrates that for certain countries, European civil servants can be mobilized to temporarily reinforce the workforce of permanent representations when the workload increases significantly, as is the case when a country takes over the presidency of the European Union.

These moves show that sectoral positions in permanent representation, such as attaché, find their functional equivalence in member or expert roles in the Commissioner's cabinets, while functions with a strong political dimension, represented by the positions of Deputy Permanent Representatives and Permanent Representatives, correspond to Head of Cabinet positions in the latter. What's more, the institutional rule that either the Deputy Head of Cabinet or the Head of Cabinet must not be of the same nationality as the Commissioner means that it is always the Head of Cabinet post that is preferred for the mobility of permanent representatives and deputy permanent representatives. In other words, the member State wants "its" Commissioner to benefit from the highly qualified workforce of "its" senior permanent representative, and not another member of the Commission (Mangenot, 2015).

5.3 The complicated human resources equation in smaller states and newly integrated countries

An analysis of inter-functional mobility by nationality reveals that this type of trajectory exclusively concerns senior civil servants from "small" member states or countries recently integrated into the Union.
The pressure on human resources, with a view to providing senior civil servants capable of negotiating with a high degree of technicality and political involvement, hits member states unevenly. By way of example, the demographic ratio between Germany (83.28 million inhabitants) and Malta (553,000 inhabitants) is 150, clearly illustrating this imbalance. An official from the Permanent Representation of a small member state recalls:

> "Advancement in the Permanent Representation does not follow the classic cycle familiar from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - the typical pattern of several years abroad in an embassy followed by a stint in the capital. [...] I see two main reasons for this deviation: first, relatively few individuals are willing to pursue such a demanding career path, and second, the role requires a substantial level of expertise that, in many cases, some countries simply do not have in abundance.[32]"

It also appears that this type of mobility is closely linked to later entry into the European Union. Indeed, at the time of our study, former Heads of Cabinet and Deputy Heads of Cabinet who were subsequently promoted to Permanent Representatives were from Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary and Malta. Similarly, Deputy Permanent Representatives and Permanent Representatives who have been appointed Heads of Cabinet are of Hungarian, Czech, Maltese, Lithuanian or Belgian nationality. These findings show that this type of mobility concerns the vast majority of countries that have recently joined the EU.

The training and "maturation" time required to produce civil servants of this level is particularly long, not least because of the accumulation of professional experience required (on average 20.1 years for a Deputy Head of Cabinet, 22.8 years for a Head of Cabinet, 26.4 years for a Deputy Permanent Representative, and 30.2 years for a Permanent Representative). This requirement in terms of professional capital means that a significant pool of senior civil servants competent in European affairs cannot emerge immediately in the newly integrated states. It is reasonable to assume that, as these countries become part of the European integration process, the number of qualified profiles will tend to increase. Nevertheless, the demographic factor is a persistent structural constraint: countries with small populations automatically have a smaller pool of talent, which limits their capacity to supply a volume of senior civil servants equivalent to that of more populous countries.

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In short, inter-functional mobility, whether from Commissioner's offices to permanent representations or vice versa, remains marginal overall. The boundary between these two spheres, firmly established from the moment of appointment and reinforced by the distinct

[32] Interview with E.V., *op. cit.*

distribution of training paths, constitutes a strong organizational landmark in European eurocracy. However, the rare cases of mobility, particularly among civil servants from small member states or recently integrated countries, occasionally enrich career paths by bringing a complementary dimension of inter-functional skills and experience, without calling into question the general rule of separation. As illuminating exceptions, these transfers offer a valuable perspective on the dynamics of inter-functional mobility and the way in which functional equivalence is established within the European system.

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In summation, this study charts the multifaceted landscape of European administrative careers by revealing a complex interplay between formal regulatory frameworks and informal adaptive practices. Our analysis demonstrates that career advancement in Eurocracy stems not solely from technical competence or academic excellence but from a dynamic process of professional socialization that blends rigorous competitive examinations, multilingual proficiency, and the strategic cultivation of influential networks.

By contrasting the distinct recruitment channels and progression routes between permanent representations and commissioners' cabinets (as well as directors-general), we show that institutional differentiation does not preclude the emergence of shared career patterns. Despite the diversified trajectories, all paths converge on the need for both codified expertise and the ability to maneuver through less tangible, interpersonal dynamics, ranging from proactive networking to the symbolic capital embodied in profiles such as the "*great diplomat*" or "*political gambler*".

Our findings further reveal that explicit mandates (such as competitive testing and formal diversity requirements) operate in tandem with implicit practices like nuanced language proficiency and intra-institutional trust. These dual mechanisms not only facilitate access to strategic positions but also infuse individual career journeys with an element of innovative adaptation that defies rigid hierarchical progression. In other words, while formal structures set the stage for merit-based recruitment, it is the subtle, often informal, capital derived from personal initiative and relationship-building that ultimately energizes career mobility and resilience.

Moreover, the analysis underscores how institutional strategies, ranging from gender parity initiatives to nationality-based considerations, can be instrumental in sculpting the professional destinies of European civil servants. This interplay between regulatory requirements and adaptive strategies provides a richer understanding of how advancement in such a highly specialized and politically sensitive field is achieved. The system, therefore, emerges as a complex synthesis where technical skills, institutional know-how, and

innovative personal strategies converge to create a multidimensional framework of professional success.

In essence, our study not only documents the specific pathways through which senior civil servants ascend within European power structures but also offers a comprehensive explanation of how both normative and emergent practices work together to shape a distinctive and evolving system of merit and influence.

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