

# **On Trojan Horses and Revolving Doors: Assessing the Independence of National Officials in the European Commission**

## **Abstract.**

National officials working in international bureaucracies regularly invokes the fear that member-states strategically use such officials for influencing decision-making and agenda-setting to their advantage. This article first theoretically analyses *conditions* under which the independence of national civil servants in international bureaucracies might become compromised. The ensuing predictions are then tested using a unique survey among Seconded National Experts (SNEs) in the European Commission ( $N \approx 400$ ). Finally, evaluating the characteristics linked to reduced independence among SNEs in the Commission, the article illustrates that these officials are in practice likely to be relatively independent from member-state influence.

**Keywords:** International bureaucracy; Independence; European Commission; Seconded National Experts, Revolving door.

**Word count:** 9293 words

## Introduction

Governments formulate and execute policies with consequences for individuals and society on a daily basis. In recent years, however, the role and influence of international organizations (IOs) and their bureaucracies in the formulation and implementation of public policies has drastically expanded (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Trondal *et al.* 2010). One unresolved question with respect to this development is to what extent, and under what conditions, such international institutions are able to formulate and execute *own* policies. This is an important question since such autonomy is deemed ‘constitutive’ for an IO from a legal perspective (von Bogdandy 2008: 1930). Moreover, one necessary, although not sufficient, factor in building independent international political orders is the establishment of common institutions – including a permanent administration – independent of national governments and serving the common interest (Olsen 2010; Skowronek 1982; Trondal and Peters 2013). For instance, in the European context, what matters is the extent to which a common European political order is in practice autonomous from key components of an intergovernmental order, not whether it is autonomous in general. ‘[A]utonomy is about (...) the extent to which [an organization] can decide itself about matters that it considers important’ (Verhoest *et al.* 2010: 18-19).

In general terms, the capability of IOs to be independent of national governments is, arguably, to a large extent supplied by the autonomy of its bureaucratic arm. That is, it is determined by the ability of international bureaucracies – and their staff – to act relatively independently of mandates and decision premises from member-state governments (Cox and Jacobson 1973; Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009, 2013; Reinalda 2013; Trondal 2013). Although the prevalence of, and requirements for, such independence are becoming an increasingly vibrant area of research, it thus far offers inconclusive findings (e.g. Moravcsik 1999; Checkel 2007; Beyers 2010). To shed further light on IO (staff) autonomy,

this study approaches the issue from a novel perspective by theorizing, and empirically assessing, the autonomy of international civil servants.

We thereby start from the observation that international bureaucracies typically have two clusters of staff: i.e. permanent personnel recruited on the principle of merit, and a more flexible set of contracted temporary staff. The latter cluster often involves a significant share of civil servants seconded from member states to the IO for a specified period of time (Meron, 1976; Udom 2003). Intuitively, autonomy might most easily become compromised in the latter staff contingent, because national civil servants in international bureaucracies by definition serve two masters (i.e. their home and host institutions). This creates a clear danger that member-states may strategically make use of ‘their’ national officials to gain ‘substantial impact on decision-making and agenda setting’ within international bureaucracies (Geuijen *et al.* 2008: 67; Udom 2003). This is known as the ‘dependency problem’, which emphasises the potential difficulty for staff recruited from IO member countries to remain sufficiently independent vis-à-vis their home country while working in an IO (Mouritzen 1990; Ellinas and Suleiman 2012).

Evidently, seconded national experts’ (SNEs’) and their home institutions’ ability and willingness to influence what happens in an IO is crucial for a dependency problem to arise. While often taken for granted by academics and observers alike, this is not self-evident. For instance, SNEs are usually attached to a specific unit in the host institution, which can impose some constraints on SNE’s ability to influence policies or agenda-setting. Moreover, many SNEs are hired for their technical or managerial knowledge, which might limit their likelihood to influence the host institution’s *policy-making*. In the remainder of this article, we follow the existing literature by taking as given the *potential* for a dependency problem to arise, and focus explicitly on the *conditions* under which it may surface.

Indeed, although the ‘dependency problem’ has long been acknowledged (see, for instance, Hammarsköld 1961), little is known about the *conditions* under which the independence of (seconded) national civil servants in international bureaucracies might become compromised. Early studies of SNEs in IOs were predominantly concerned with normative and legal discussions about the potential implications of secondments in terms of attaining the ‘ideal’ of an independent International Civil Service (Hammarsköld 1961; Kay 1966; Reymond 1967, 1970; Cox 1969; Meron 1976; Spierenburg Report 1979; Mouritzen 1990; Udom 2003). More recent work on SNEs shifted attention away from SNE’s potential lack of independence, and instead has evaluated whether secondments have an impact on SNEs’ home institutions (as part of the broader Europeanization literature; Bulmer and Burch 1998; Smith 2001), constitute effective ‘indirect lobbying’ efforts (Suvarierol and van den Berg 2008; Haverland 2009; Marshall, 2012), and lead to the socialisation of national civil servants into more supranational – rather than intergovernmental – mindsets (Trondal 2007; Trondal et al. 2008; Suvarierol et al. 2013). Against this trend, Trondal (2006, 2008) and Murdoch and Trondal (2013) explicitly re-connected with the earlier secondment literature by focussing directly on these actors’ potential (lack of) independence from member-state influence. Our analysis extends their work by developing a more rigorous theoretical framework concerning the *conditions* under which SNEs’ autonomy might become compromised, and testing the ensuing predictions on a new large-N dataset.

The first, theoretical, contribution of this article thus lies in developing an analytical framework – building on the vast literature analysing regulatory capture (for a review, see Dal Bó 2006) – that aims to improve our understanding of the determinants of individual officials’ autonomy. In contrast to existing theories on the autonomy of IOs (Abbott and Snidal 1998; Reinalda and Verbeek 1998), we thereby specifically focus on the degree of autonomy of organizational units or individuals within these units. Herein, our study exploits insights from

both social exchange theory and organisation theory. Our second, empirical, contribution lies in the application of our theoretical arguments using a unique survey administered to all 1098 SNEs in the European Commission (Commission). This not only provides an opportunity to assess the conditions under which national civil servants in the Commission remain independent from member-state influence, but also allows evaluating their *de facto* independence. This constitutes, to the best of our knowledge, the first empirical verification of the dependency problem using a large-N dataset.

Consequently, two inter-related research questions guide the analysis:

- How can we account – theoretically and empirically – for the independence of national civil servants working in an international bureaucracy (i.e. the Commission)?
- To what extent are national civil servants working in the Commission *de facto* independent from member-state influence?

The next section sets out our theoretical framework, and derives testable hypotheses. Then, we present the empirical evaluation of these hypotheses, and exploit the results to gain some insight into the *de facto* independence of national civil servants in the Commission. The final section provides a concluding discussion and indications for further research.

## **Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

To derive empirically testable hypotheses concerning the *conditions* under which the independence of national civil servants in international bureaucracies might become compromised, we build on the literature analysing regulatory capture. One central mechanism often invoked to explain regulatory capture – i.e. ‘the process through which special interests affect state intervention in any of its forms’ (Dal Bó 2006: 203) – is the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon. This can be broadly defined as the ‘tendency of regulators to favour industry

when they have an industry background or when they expect rewards in the form of future industry employment' (Dal Bó 2006: 204; see also Gormley 1979; Cohen 1986). Application of this revolving door phenomenon to national civil servants in international bureaucracies appears straightforward. Indeed, all such officials by construction have a history of national employment, and many may expect to return to their home country at some point. This suggests that particularly such returning officials face a strong incentive to not fully discard the expectations and aspirations of their home institution, since this might have important career consequences upon their return. Even though national civil servants in IOs are required to behave only with the best interests of the IO in mind (e.g., European Commission 2008 Art. 7:1a), a balancing act then is likely to ensue where both organizational affiliations remain within actors' minds and decision-making behaviour.

H1: When national civil servants expect to return to their home institution, they will be less independent from member-state influence while under IO contract.

Yet, even though all national officials in international bureaucracies have a history of national employment, the implications of this revolving door might not be equal for all of them. In fact, using insights from social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Akerlof 1982) and organisation theory (Egeberg 2004), the strength of its impact can be expected to depend on i) the relations between national civil servants and their home and host institutions, as well as ii) the organizational (dis)similarities between the home and host institutions.

Starting with the former, it is well-known from social exchange theory that actors' perceived obligations towards one another are dependent upon an explicit or implicit contract or agreement between them (Akerlof 1982; Blau 1964). The implicit contract thereby 'entails a social exchange that is superimposed upon the strictly economic transaction [i.e. the explicit

contract]’ (Blau 1964: 94) and comes about ‘as a result of normative expectations and value orientations in collectives’ (Blau 1964: 5). In our setting, national civil servants face an explicit contract whereby they are required to behave only with the best interests of the IO in mind during their secondment (see above). The implicit (psychological) contract, however, is likely to depend on the extent to which the boundaries between officials’ organizational affiliations – henceforth referred to as the ‘structural disconnect’ between multiple affiliations – are blurred (Egeberg and Trondal 2009; Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009), since this will determine the relations between national civil servants and their home and host institutions. Three conditions can be expected to play a central role in this respect.

- First, treating national civil servants the same as the permanent staff of the international bureaucracy may ‘engender feelings of personal obligation’ (Blau 1964: 94-95). This is likely to make staff more sensitive to the cues and decision premises supplied by current organizational structures (of the IO), and limit the impact of the ‘revolving door’ effect. Such *quid pro quo* would thus encourage national civil servants’ independence from member-state influence.
- Second, being asked (or ‘commissioned’) by one’s home institution to temporarily join the international bureaucracy may likewise induce an implicit norm of reciprocity under which national civil servants want to ‘repay’ their home institution for this international opportunity and experience. While this implicitly assumes the absence of purposive behaviour from the home institution, such purposive actions – i.e. sending in people to act as ‘Trojan horses’ (Coombes 1970) – cannot be a priori excluded. In both cases, however, previous structures (i.e., those of the home institution) will maintain relevance alongside current structures (i.e., those of the IO) within actors’ minds – thereby undermining national civil servants’ independence from member-state influence.

- Finally, the same outcome is likely to arise when national civil servants maintain close contacts with their home institution while working in the international bureaucracy. This breaks the structural disconnect between both structures, and may sustain previous structures' influence over actors by reinforcing the perceived psychological contract with the home institution. Moreover, close contact is a prerequisite for transmission of information and/or instructions, and also more broadly premises for choice, which may undermine the independence of national civil servants in international bureaucracies.<sup>1</sup>

H2: When national civil servants are treated the same as the permanent staff of IOs, they will be more independent from member-state influence while under IO contract.

H3: When national civil servants are asked to join the IO by their home institution, they will be less independent from member-state influence while under IO contract.

H4: When national civil servants maintain regular contact with their home institution, they will be less independent from member-state influence while under IO contract.

Scholarship in organisation theory – which studies how formal organizational structures provide cognitive and normative shortcuts to guide agents' choice of behaviour (Egeberg 2004) – furthermore suggests that the implications of the revolving door phenomenon will depend on the degree of organizational (dis)similarities between the home and host institutions (i.e. the domestic branch of government and international bureaucracies). This literature indeed maintains that organisational dissimilarities directly affect individuals' dependencies. The reason lies in a so-called 'novelty argument' stating that organizational incompatibility between current and previous structures establishes autonomous cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, it could also be that civil servants who tend to operate less independently have more frequent contacts with their home institution, which makes the direction of causality between both variables not self-evident. Our analysis – which relies on cross-sectional evidence – focuses on the correlation between the dependent and independent variables, and unfortunately cannot offer firm conclusions as regards the direction of causality.

scripts and codes of appropriate behaviour in different organisations (Coser 1975). As such, it creates exposure to new cognitive scripts and new codes of appropriate behaviour, challenging officials to change their behaviour (Hooghe 2005) and perhaps making them more sensitive to the decision premises supplied by the current structures (Pratt 2001).<sup>2</sup> Hence, when officials – such as SNEs – change organisational location into one that is dissimilar to their previous organisational location, they are challenged to change their behavioural and role patterns accordingly. For instance, SNEs receiving portfolios within the Commission that depart significantly from their previous domestic portfolios are likely to experience a cognitive challenge towards shifting their behaviour and role. Also, SNEs entering the Commission for the first time are likely to discover non-compatible working environments, since the physical structure of the Commission building and the presence of the blue flag with golden stars may strengthen perceptions of novelty and organisational dissimilarities (March 1994: 70). More generally, the sheer *perception* of organisational dissimilarities might be conducive to the emergence of behavioural independence among SNEs.

One key source of variation in our setting may thereby lie in public officials' experience with multilevel governance structures. The perceived similarity between national and international administration is indeed likely to be stronger for civil servants originating from federal, rather than unitary, states. The underlying idea is that IOs generally add one level of governance to existing tiers of territorial government, such that experience with multilevel governance structures might make it easier for civil servants from federal countries to employ the normative structures embedded in the IO. These officials are indeed relatively more

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<sup>2</sup> Intuitively, the relation might also run in the opposite direction. That is, to the extent that officials *recognize* structures and processes as familiar, socialization inside the IO may go smoother. If so, it may well be organizational compatibility, rather than *incompatibility*, that fosters national civil servants' independence within an international bureaucracy. We follow previous scholarship in defining our main research hypotheses, but should keep this alternative channel in mind when interpreting the results below.

familiarized with sharing authority across tiers of government (Hooghe and Marks 2001). Despite varying degrees of authority allocated to different levels in federal polities (Hooghe and Marks 2012; Hueglin 2013), bureaucrats from federal countries may therefore possess a less unitary conception of sovereignty (Beyers and Trondal 2004). Federal polities are also characterized by sophisticated and complex institutional mechanisms that help to accommodate – often ‘frozen’ – territorial cleavages of societal conflict (Benz and Broshek 2013: 5). A unitary state, on the other hand, reflects only marginally the territorial composition of its sub-territories, and is less sensitive to the sharing of responsibilities across tiers of government (Egeberg 2004). Consequently, civil servants originating from unitary states may perceive the current structure as novel, challenging and generally dissimilar compared to their previous domestic structures. H5 thus follows:

H5: When national civil servants originates from structures that are relatively *dissimilar* to their current Commission structures (i.e. deriving from unitary states), they will be more independent from member-state influence while under contract.

One might argue at this point that the potential role of organizational (in)compatibility (H5) may not be independent from that of the structural disconnect between agents’ primary and secondary affiliations (H2-H4). This can most easily be illustrated via the two-by-two matrix in Figure 1, where we depict the degree of structural disconnect in the vertical dimension and the degree of (in)compatibility between national and international structures in the horizontal dimension. That is, national civil servants experiencing both a structural disconnect and organizational incompatibility are placed in the lower right corner of the matrix, while those experiencing both a lack of structural disconnect and organizational compatibility are placed in the upper left corner.

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Figure 1 about here

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Based on the arguments above, we can expect that low levels of structural disconnect induce less independence particularly when organizational compatibility is high. That is, national civil servants' independence from member-state influence is lowest in the top-left corner in Figure 1. The intuition is that national civil servants under such circumstances 'recognize' the structures and processes within their work environment. Facing unclear demarcations between their home and host institutions then is most easily resolved by simply carrying out tasks exactly as in their home institutions – thereby undermining independence. Reversely, clear boundaries between national civil servants' affiliations induce high independence particularly under organizational incompatibility. That is, national civil servants' autonomy is highest in the bottom-right corner in Figure 1. This situation creates a 'sink or swim' situation where national civil servants are separated both from their home institution and familiar structural cues. Hence, they are forced to think in new ways and adapt to their new environment, which fosters independence.

H6: Blurred boundaries between national civil servants' multiple affiliations (i.e. asked to join, regular contact, or treated the same) curtails their independence particularly when organizational compatibility is high (i.e. deriving from federal states) – and vice versa.

## **Data and methodology**

### *Case selection and dataset*

Our empirical laboratory consists of national officials working on time-limited contracts (maximum six years) in the Commission (SNEs). We chose this setting because the

Commission has gained substantial administrative capacities to support its formal independence vis-à-vis the Member States (Kassim 2006; 2010). This makes it of prime interest for analyses of the patterns of international bureaucratic staff, since it can be viewed as a ‘most-likely’ case for the development of significant supranational norms and values among its staff (Hooghe 2005; Kassim *et al.* 2013; Suvarierol *et al.* 2013) – or, equivalently, a least-likely case for the retention of national norms and values (thus independence). However, among Commission personnel, SNEs represent the least likely case of independence. SNEs have a double allegiance to the Commission and their home organization (to whom they retain their long-term organizational affiliation and which – except for additional financial allowances granted by the Commission – continues to pay their salaries), and are generally assumed to return to their home organization after their secondment (Trondal *et al.* 2008; Murdoch and Trondal 2013). Nonetheless, during their secondment, SNEs’ positions and the policy salience of their work is generally equivalent to that of permanent Commission staff – although with some restrictions on their responsibilities (e.g. in terms of representation or entering into commitments on behalf of the Commission). This creates substantial ambiguities regarding SNEs’ organizational boundaries, which may influence their independence (Hammaršköld 1961; Kay 1966; Reymond 1967, 1970; Cox 1969; Meron 1976; Spierenburg Report 1979; Mouritzen 1990).

Hence, we effectively select a sample of international civil servants that is most likely to remain sensitive to member-state influence (i.e. SNEs) and study them in a setting where the EU’s decades-long engagement in identity-building is likely to have most effect (i.e. the Commission). SNEs in the Commission thus arguably become central to answering questions regarding the (in)dependence of IO staff vis-à-vis their home country. Indeed, if they manage to remain sufficiently independent vis-à-vis their home country, it appears unlikely that (in)dependence concerns will arise where such interplay is weaker (such as, for instance,

among Commission's permanent staff or in IOs where identity-building efforts have been lower). This is important from a theoretical perspective since, although 'no single-case test can offer strong confirmation of the theory' (Gerring 2007: 236), negative findings in an environment where 'it is most (...) likely to fulfil a theoretical prediction' (Gerring 2007: 232) would bring substantial doubt to the validity of the theory.

Evidently, the fact that we have a least-likely case (i.e. SNEs) embedded within a most-likely case (i.e. the European Commission) implies different degrees of generalizability of our results for different types of generalisation. That is, a finding that SNEs within the Commission are independent is likely to generalize to permanent staff in the Commission (since ties to the home country are weaker for permanent staff than SNEs), but not necessarily to temporary national officials in other IOs (since Commission identity-building efforts have been higher compared to other IOs). Yet, when SNEs in the Commission are *not* independent, the same lines of argument suggest that this will provide little information as regards the (in)dependence of Commission's permanent staff (i.e. they may still be independent even though SNEs are not), but is likely to generalize to national officials working in other IOs (since even Commission's strong identity-building efforts then cannot force independence).

The dataset derives from a web-based survey administered between January and April 2011 to all 1098 then active SNEs in the Commission.<sup>3</sup> While 667 SNEs followed the link to the survey (representing a response rate of just over 60 percent) many did not complete all questions relevant to the present analysis. As the drop-out rate between the questions relevant to the present analysis differed significantly across SNEs, the final estimation sample hovers around 400 respondents. Although background characteristics of all SNEs were not made available to us, respondents' distribution across Directorate-Generals (DGs) compares to that

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<sup>3</sup> Compared to a total of 12591 'AD'-level employees, this implies that SNEs make up just under 10 per cent of AD-level staff in the Commission. The 'AD' category refers to individuals at the level of administrators/advisors, which is most relevant as a comparison group because SNEs' positions at the Commission are generally equivalent to an AD-level position.

observed for *all* Commission SNEs in 2011: i.e., we have more respondents from Directorate-Generals concerned with statistics, taxation and climate action, compared to Directorate-Generals dealing with purely administrative areas (such as human resources and language services). The distribution in terms of gender (40 percent female) and age (no birth-year represents more than 7 percent of the sample, and about 55 percent is between 33 and 47 years old) also appears a close match to the distribution of Commission permanent staff at the AD level.

### *Dependent variable*

To operationalize the *independence* (or *autonomy*) of national civil servants working on temporary assignments in the Commission, we rely on two proxies. The first employs respondents' answer to: 'In your daily work, to what extent do you feel you act as a representative of [the Commission/your country's government]?' – with answers provided on a six-point scale from 'fully' (coded as 0) to 'not at all' (coded as 5). To check the robustness of our results to the choice of this particular question, our second proxy builds on the question: 'When putting forward a proposal, how much emphasis do you put on the best interests of [your home country/the Commission]?' – with answers once again coded on a six-point scale from 'very much' (coded as 0) to 'none' (coded as 5). In both cases, the answer captures the strength of SNEs' national or Commission 'attachment' (Hooghe 2005: 874) underlying their decision-making behaviour. As strong Commission (national) attachment can be seen as supporting the structuring importance of Commission-specific (country-specific) roles on SNEs (Murdoch and Geys 2012), a stronger Commission (compared to national) attachment signals SNEs' relative independence from member-state influence. Hence, subtracting SNEs' answer regarding their national attachment from that reflecting their Commission attachment, we obtain our central dependent variable: 'Independence'. Given our

coding schedule, this variable can in principle vary between -5 (minimum independence from member-states) and +5 (maximum independence). The actual distribution using both questions is pictured in Figure 2.

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Figure 2 about here

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Figure 2 illustrates that both the mean and median value of our key dependent variables are clearly positive. This suggests that SNEs tend to profess a stronger attachment to the Commission than to their home country while working in the Commission. Evidently, socially desirable answers might have shifted the mean and median in Figure 2 upwards. Nonetheless, substantial variation in SNEs' answers remains, which is much harder to account for by a simple social desirability story. It is, however, this variation that is exploited in the analysis below. Note also that, consistent with our theoretical framework, one might argue that the influence of social desirability on respondents depends in part on the organizational context. For instance, norms to seem supranational may be stronger in some DGs than others, while norms to remain in touch with home institutions may be stronger for some nationalities than others. As this undermines the independence of observations from the same country (or DG), we address this below by clustering standard errors at the level of the SNEs' country (or DG).

### *Independent variables*

To operationalize H1, we define an indicator variable '*ReturnHome*' equal to one for SNEs stating they will return to their home institution (whether to their old job or a new one), and 0 otherwise.<sup>4</sup> With respect to H2, we asked SNEs to evaluate how their treatment during day-to-day interactions in the Commission compares to how they perceive permanent staff is treated.

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<sup>4</sup> Summary statistics and exact question wording for all variables in the model are provided in Table A2 in the Appendix.

The scale presented to respondents ranged from ‘Never’ (1) to ‘Always’ (5), such that we expect the relation of the variable ‘*Treatment*’ with our measure of independence to be positive (i.e., equal treatment inducing higher independence). To assess H3, we define an indicator variable ‘*AskedbyHome*’ equal to one for SNEs that were asked to apply by someone within their home institution (which in practice is usually their direct superior), 0 otherwise. For H4, we measure the extent of SNE’s contacts with their home institution via a self-evaluation of the frequency of such contacts (objective data on SNEs’ contacts are, unfortunately, unavailable). Given that this variable ‘*Contact*’ is measured on a three-point scale where 1 is ‘never, 2 is ‘very/fairly little’ and 3 is ‘very/fairly often’, we expect a negative association with our measure of independence (i.e., more frequent contacts relate to lower independence).<sup>5</sup> Note that the correlation between *AskedbyHome* and either *Contact* or *ReturnHome* is weak (i.e.  $\rho < 0.1$  with  $p > 0.10$ ), which suggests that these variables are *not* tapping into a common underlying dimension, and that multicollinearity is unlikely to become a concern in our analysis.

Hypotheses H5 and H6 refer to the influence of organizational (in)compatibility across home and host institutions. To operationalize this, we define an indicator variable – ‘*Federal*’ – equals one for SNEs deriving from a country that has an explicit legislative and/or executive power-sharing arrangement between a federal and regional level of government (Hooghe and Marks 2001). We introduce this variable directly in our estimation model to evaluate H5, but additionally employ it to split the sample in two distinct subsamples: i.e. one with SNEs from compatible backgrounds (i.e. federal states) and one with SNEs from *incompatible*

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<sup>5</sup> The original scale separated ‘very often’ and ‘very little’ from ‘fairly often’ and ‘fairly little’. We prefer using the collapsed scale here because differences between ‘very’ and ‘fairly’ often/little may arguably be somewhat arbitrary. Still, employing the full scale does not affect the qualitative nature of our results (details upon request). Note also that our data unfortunately do not allow us to separate the mere existence of ties (i.e. individuals having contacts) with the directionality of such ties (i.e. who influences whom during such contacts).

backgrounds. This allows us to evaluate H6, which posits that any observed effects with respect to H2-H4 are mainly concentrated in the former subsample.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we control for SNEs' age (in years), gender (1 if male), level of education (1 if PhD), whether part of his/her education was obtained outside the SNE's country of birth (1 if yes), and whether his/her professional affiliation prior to secondment was a ministry (rather than, say, an agency or university).<sup>7</sup> Then, we also include the number of years an SNE has been on secondment at the Commission, '*SNEyears*'. Since secondment posts last for at most 6 years (see above), a longer presence in the Commission by definition implies coming closer to one's return to the home institution (if such return is de facto anticipated). Hence, inclusion of this variable is crucial to avoid biased inferences with regard to H1. Finally, we control for the fact that, before entering the Commission, the SNE believed that cooperation within the EU was advantageous in general (1 if yes). This is necessary as SNEs with a positive opinion regarding the EU may not only self-select into becoming an SNE, but are also more likely to develop a strong Commission attachment and high independence from member-state influence. This leads to the following regression model (with subscript *i* referring to SNEs).

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Independence}_i = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Treatment}_i + \beta_2 \text{ReturnHome}_i + \beta_3 \text{AskedbyHome}_i + \beta_4 \text{Contact}_i \\ & + \beta_5 \text{Ministry}_i + \beta_6 \text{Federal}_i + \delta \text{Controls}_i + \varepsilon_i \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Where Independence is vector comprising two elements: a) 'Independence\_Representation', and b) 'Independence\_Policy proposal' (as depicted and described in Figure 1). The regression model is estimated separately for both dependent variables, as well as their

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<sup>6</sup> Testing this hypothesis using interaction effects provides equivalent results and allows testing the significance of the difference between both groups. While details of these interaction models are available upon request, we will refer to the significance tests conducted on these models in more detail below.

<sup>7</sup> We do not include a separate indicator variable for SNEs deriving from universities as these make up only a small share of the overall sample (i.e. 6.5 per cent). Auxiliary regressions indicate that inclusion of such an additional indicator variable does not affect any of the results reported below (details upon request).

constituent terms (i.e. national/Commission ‘attachment’). The latter is important since it allows a more detailed analysis of the conditions that shape national civil servants’ national/Commission ‘attachment’.

Before turning to the results, it is important to point out that our analysis relies on survey questions, which may raise concerns about the influence of question framing or phrasing, or even respondents’ inaccuracy regarding their own true attitudes or perceptions (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001; Hillman, 2010). Moreover, because both dependent and independent variables are extracted from the same survey inquiry, an instrument bias may arise that would typically be expected to artificially inflate the significance of correlations. Still, such bias can be expected only when using *subjective* perceptions as independent variables. In our analysis, this is the case for the *Contact* and *Treatment* variables. As such, we should be appropriately careful in their interpretation below. However, the remaining independent variables refer to *objective* facts about the SNEs. This strongly mitigates any concerns that our inferences with respect to these variables would be affected by instrument bias.

## **Analysis**

### *Determinants of independence*

Table 1 brings together our main findings using the ‘Representation’ proxy for SNEs’ independence (Results using the alternative ‘Policy’ proxy are provided in Appendix A). In column (1), we present our baseline estimation results using SNEs’ attachment to their home country *relative to the Commission* on an 11-point scale between -5 (minimum independence) and +5 (maximum independence) (see Figure 2). In columns (2) and (3), we alternatively use SNE’s national/Commission attachment (on a 6-point scale from ‘fully’ (coded as 0) to ‘not at all’ (coded as 5)) as our dependent variable, such as to evaluate to what extent SNEs’ national or Commission attachment is the main driver of any observed effects. Finally, in columns (4)-

(7), we split the sample by SNEs from federal versus unitary countries (columns (4) and (5)) or from national ministries versus agencies/universities (columns (6) and (7)) to evaluate H6. Note that the nature of all dependent variables requires that we estimate Eq. 1 using an ordered logit approach. We also cluster standard errors at the level of the country from which the SNE originates. This accounts for the fact that observations from SNEs coming from the same country may not be fully independent (see above), which may induce biased inferences when ignored (Wooldridge 2003).<sup>8</sup>

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Table 1 about here

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The results in column (1) provide only weak support for the view – expressed in the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon and H1 – that expecting to return to one’s home institution after secondment undermines national civil servants’ independence from member-state influence in the IO. The sign of the coefficient estimate (*ReturnHome*) confirms to expectations, but only just surpasses the 90% confidence level. Firmer support is found for the notion – expressed in H2-H4 – that the lack of a clear structural disconnect between SNEs’ *primary* and *secondary* affiliations undermines their independence. Specifically, SNEs who perceive their treatment to be equal to that of permanent Commission staff act more strongly in line with Commission-specific behaviours and roles (*Treatment*). Such *quid pro quo* thinking strongly affects national civil servants’ independence from member-state influence. Similarly, being asked by one’s home institution to join the international bureaucracy (*AskedbyHome*) and the maintenance of close contacts (*Contact*) undermine SNEs’ independence, which supports the presence of an implicit (psychological) contract between such SNEs and their home

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<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, we experimented with clustering at DG level. The reason is that auxiliary regressions indicated that SNEs feel significantly more integrated in DGs where a larger share of the AD-level workforce consists of SNEs (e.g., DG Markt, DG Climate, DG Taxud and Eurostat). Importantly, this alternative treatment of the standard errors does not affect our main inferences (details available upon request).

institutions. Interestingly, and in line with social exchange theory, Columns (2) and (3) indicate that the effects of these three variables on SNEs are mainly driven by the institution relevant for a particular psychological contract (i.e. the IO for the *Treatment* variable and the home country for the *AskedbyHome* and *Contact* variables).

The results with respect to hypothesis H5 are inconclusive. On the one hand, no statistically significant associations are retrieved in column (1) for SNEs coming from federal states. On the other hand, columns (2) and (3) show that national officials originating from federal (compared to unitary) states profess lower levels of national *as well as* Commission attachment. One tentative explanation is that our results reflect the structuring importance of regional-level loyalties for officials from federal countries. For these officials, it might indeed be regional – thus still territorial – as opposed to national influence that affects their independence while working in an IO. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to pursue this in more detail. Clearly, however, this provisional interpretation would require further substantiation in future research.

Splitting the sample by the degree of organizational (in)compatibility – in columns (4) and (5) – indicates that the effects of structural (dis)connect (i.e. H2-H4) are not independent from SNEs' organizational (in)compatibility. This can be seen by comparing the coefficient estimates of '*AskedbyHome*', '*Contact*' and '*Treatment*' in columns (4) and (5). In all three cases, the estimated parameters in column (4) are larger in absolute terms than those in column (5) (this difference is statistically significant at conventional levels in all three cases). This suggests – in line with H6 – that blurred boundaries between national civil servants' multiple affiliations indeed dampens SNEs' independence particularly when organizational compatibility is high.

### *Independence among Commission SNEs*

To illustrate the implications of the above analysis, a natural extension involves evaluating whether or not national civil servants in international bureaucracies might reasonably be viewed as relatively independent from member-state influence. In the remainder of this section, we address this question looking at SNEs in the Commission. To preserve space, the analysis concentrates on the three variables with the strongest effects – in terms of statistical significance – in the foregoing analysis: i.e., equal treatment, contact pattern and being asked by one’s home institution.

Starting with ‘equal treatment’, our data strongly suggests that most SNEs do not perceive their position in the Commission as secondary to permanent Commission officials. They most often view themselves as ‘ordinary’ Commission officials, and only a very small minority feels they are treated differently from permanent Commission staff (i.e. 8 to 14 percent in our survey sample). Moreover, while 69 percent of SNEs in the Commission expect to return to their home institution (which tends to undermine their independence; see Table 1), less than 10 percent was asked by their home institution to take up a secondment post in the first place. In fact, most SNEs applied for their secondment position to have a new challenge (57 percent) or because they wanted to work in the Commission or an IO (50 percent and 39 percent, respectively). Such motivations for joining the Commission make it likely that they will be relatively independent from member-state influence once working in the Commission.

Finally, Table 2 reports on the contact patterns of SNEs during their everyday work. It shows that contacts are clearly concentrated within one’s immediate work environment (i.e. DG and unit). While 31 percent of SNEs report frequent contacts with domestic ministries and/or agencies, a similar share reports frequent contact with ministries and/or agencies in other member-states, or with other IOs, industry, universities and research institutes. We

should here be careful not to conflate the mere existence of ties (as reported in Table 2) with the directionality of such ties. This directionality is hard to establish with the data we have available. Yet, some indications can be obtained when analysing the frequency and nature of these home country contacts in greater detail. Indeed, 43 percent of SNEs states that contacts with the home institution are ('always' or 'mostly') initiated by themselves (compared to 8 percent reporting that contacts are 'always' or 'mostly' initiated by their home institutions), 86 percent sees them as mostly of an informal nature, and 79 percent states that such contacts are characterized by a lack of institutionalized communication channels (e.g. conference call, written reports, etc.). Moreover, contacts are mostly maintained with SNE's colleagues in the home institution rather than their superiors, and only rarely involve receiving feedback or input about their work. Taken together, this strongly suggests that such contacts are not conceived of, or exploited, as a transmission mechanism for member-state influence.

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Table 2 about here

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## **Conclusions**

This article offers two lessons. First, from a theoretical perspective, national officials' independence from member-state influence can be explained at least in part by characteristics of their home institution (and country), their treatment within the international bureaucracy, and their contact patterns and post-contract preferences. Herein, this study lends support both to social exchange theory and organisation theory. Second, contracted personnel in international bureaucracies such as the Commission are in practice largely integrated and committed to international bureaucracies, and act fairly independently from member-state governments. This effectively undermines a long-lived conjecture maintaining that

‘secondment system[s] would tend to produce an unmanageable cacophony’ of officials loyal to their own national civil service (Cox 1969: 208; see also Spierenburg Report 1979).

While these results are reassuring in light of the common conception of temporary agents as Trojan horses, policy influence evidently need not be the only consideration for Member States when evaluating the secondment of national officials to international bureaucracies. One alternative consideration could be that Member State officials can be employed as first contact points into the Commission. Having nationals in the Commission is then seen as valuable in terms of contact points, rather than direct representation of member state interests. A second consideration, more specific to top jobs, might be that prestige is an important consideration to send national officials to international bureaucracies. It might therefore be of significant interest in future studies to assess in greater detail the relative importance of these various considerations, in order to explain the general high importance attached by Member States to the appointment of their nationals within international bureaucracies (Trondal et al. 2010; Murdoch et al. 2014), and to top jobs in the Commission (Ban 2013: 103; Kassim et al. 2013: 52).

Based on our findings, we see the contours of at least three intertwined avenues for future research. First, our analysis only concerns SNEs in the Commission. Knowing that other international bureaucracies are likewise largely staffed with contracted personnel (Trondal et al. 2010), future research should verify to what extent our findings carry relevance for international bureaucracies. From this perspective, it is important to note that despite the often highly specific nature of the European institutions and the decades-long engagement of the EU in identity-building, the European institutions do share a number of characteristics with other IOs (e.g., international staff, interplay of structures, identities and interests among employees, and so on) – which opens space for comparative research (Kreppel 2012).

Secondly, future research should also evaluate whether the *de facto* independence of national officials in international bureaucracies depends on the policy area at stake. One could indeed argue that there is substantial variation depending on policy responsibility within each IO (e.g. politically sensitive policy areas versus purely administrative policy areas), which might play a decisive role in the extent to which national officials are prone to national influence while working in an IO. Similarly, one might expect heterogeneity in the *de facto* independence of national officials in international bureaucracies depending on these officials' position during secondment. SNEs that take up a highflyer position close to a political leader in the institution are indeed unlikely to face the same constraints and pressures than SNEs in lower positions among the rank and file administrative staff of the institution. Future research on SNEs should thus further unpack the secondment problematic in order to avoid falling victim to overall simplistic conceptualization of it.

Thirdly, future research should go beyond understanding the determinants of independence, and start paying attention to its sustainability. Such dynamic perspective indeed raises a number of important questions that cannot be addressed in a static research design. For instance, are organizational and actor-level independence sustained when put to a stress-test – such as during times of environmental turbulence and acute events, during times of organizational reform and the reshuffling of personnel (Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Hall 2002; Kettl 2014; March 1981; Tamuz and Lewis 2008)? Turbulence of these kinds can reveal the fragility of institutions and produce surprising cascading dynamics that test the sustainability of existing governance arrangements and behavioural patterns. Turbulent times also represent an underappreciated opportunity to examine the resilience of organizations, organized systems and organizational behaviour (Olsen, 2010). Less attended to by contemporary scholarship, such situations may offer opportunities for stress-testing existing findings (including those of the present study).



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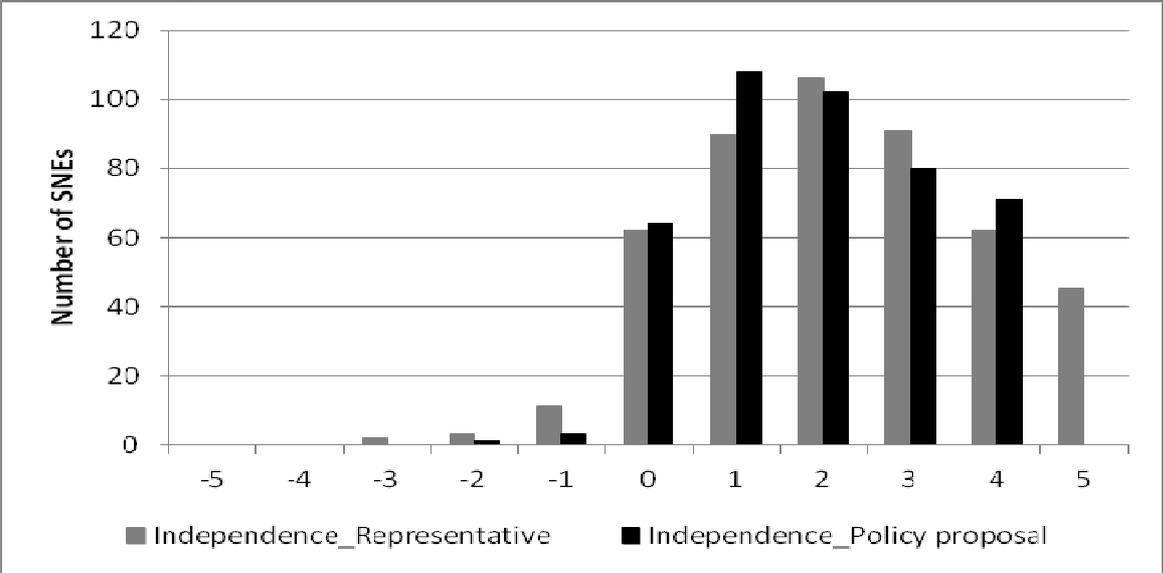
## Figures and Tables

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*Figure 1. Integrating structural (dis)connect and organizational (in)compatibility*

	Organizational Compatibility	Organizational <i>In</i> compatibility
Low structural disconnect	<i>Low independence</i>	<i>Medium independence</i>
High structural disconnect	<i>Medium independence</i>	<i>High independence</i>

Figure 2. Independence of national civil servants from member-state influence



Note: Data from authors' own 2011 survey; Independence varies between -5 (minimum independence) and +5 (maximum independence). The proxy 'Representative' uses the question: 'In your daily work, to what extent do you feel you act as a representative of [the Commission/your country's government]?' The proxy 'Policy proposal' employs: 'When putting forward a proposal, how much emphasis do you put on the best interests of [your home country/the Commission]?' Both questions are coded using a six-point scale from 'fully' (coded as 0) to 'not at all' (coded as 5). The figure presents the difference, for both questions, between the SNE's answers on the 'Commission' and 'country' wording of the question.

Table 1. Estimation results measuring independence through feelings of representation

	(1) <i>Independence Representative</i>	(2) <i>Representative Commission</i>	(3) <i>Representative Country</i>	(4) <i>Independence Representative (Federal)</i>	(5) <i>Independence Representative (Non-Federal)</i>
ReturnHome (dummy)	-0.344 * (-1.84)	0.048 (0.27)	-0.456 * (-1.75)	0.167 (0.47)	-0.524 ** (-2.03)
Treatment (5-point scale)	0.386 *** (3.71)	-0.407 *** (-5.77)	0.136 (1.23)	0.633 *** (4.14)	0.299 *** (3.06)
AskedbyHome (dummy)	-0.672 ** (-2.49)	0.493 * (1.92)	-0.720 ** (-2.05)	-1.544 *** (-3.18)	-0.237 (-0.63)
Contact (3-point scale)	-0.586 *** (-3.19)	0.148 (0.83)	-0.729 *** (-4.83)	-0.992 *** (-2.97)	-0.530 *** (-4.58)
Federal (dummy)	-0.007 (-0.04)	0.573 *** (4.06)	0.448 * (1.90)	-	-
Studyabroad (dummy)	0.205 (0.93)	-0.004 (-0.02)	0.241 (0.86)	0.135 (0.22)	0.305 (1.00)
Male (dummy)	0.293 ** (2.02)	-0.148 (-0.83)	0.349 ** (2.52)	0.098 (0.18)	0.342 * (1.66)
Age (years)	-0.007 (-0.69)	-0.004 (-0.33)	-0.010 (-0.96)	-0.022 (-1.04)	0.001 (0.10)
PhD (dummy)	-0.110 (-0.53)	0.272 (1.18)	0.091 (0.44)	0.371 (0.79)	-0.446 (-1.13)
Ministry (dummy)	0.430 ** (2.43)	-0.322 ** (-2.03)	0.271 (1.21)	0.170 (0.66)	0.565 * (1.90)
SNEyears (years)	0.068 (0.93)	-0.067 (-0.95)	0.056 (0.89)	0.070 (0.83)	0.074 (0.71)
EU advantagous (dummy)	0.246 (1.53)	-0.276 (-1.30)	0.188 (1.23)	0.072 (0.16)	0.342 (1.49)
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	92.73 ***	91.47 ***	102.95 ***	73.75 ***	65.23 ***
N	397	401	399	125	272

Note: t statistics based on standard errors corrected for clustering at the country-level between brackets, \*\*\* significant at 1%, \*\* at 5% and \* at 10%. Wald Chi<sup>2</sup> attests to the joint significance of all variables in the model. Independence varies between -5 (minimum independence) and +5 (maximum independence). The dependent variable builds on the question: 'In your daily work, to what extent do you feel you act as a representative of [the Commission/your country's government]?' It is coded using a six-point scale from 'fully' (coded as 0) to 'not at all' (coded as 5).

Table 2. ‘How frequently do you have contacts and meetings with the following during a typical work week?’ (percent)\*

Colleagues in your unit	97
Your head of unit and/or director	79
Your Commissioner	7
Colleagues within other DGs	42
Head of unit and/or directors in other DGs	13
Other Commissioner(s)	0
International organization(s)	32
Domestic ministries and/or agencies in ‘own’ country	31
Domestic ministries and/or agencies in other countries	35
Industry, universities and/or research institutes	33
Mean N	468

\* This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: Very often (value 1), fairly often (value 2), fairly seldom (value 3), very seldom (value 4), never (value 5).

## Appendix A:

Table A1. Robustness check measuring independence through policy proposals

	(1) <i>Independence Policy proposal</i>	(2) <i>Policy proposal Commission</i>	(3) <i>Policy proposal Country</i>	(4) <i>Independence Policy (Federal)</i>	(5) <i>Independence Policy (Non-Federal)</i>
ReturnHome (dummy)	-0.338 * (-1.76)	0.591 ** (2.24)	-0.115 (-0.53)	-0.608 (-1.50)	-0.202 (-0.72)
Treatment (5-point scale)	0.246 ** (2.27)	-0.269 (-1.62)	0.139 * (1.77)	0.271 * (1.70)	0.227 *** (2.73)
AskedbyHome (dummy)	-0.590 ** (-2.47)	0.506 (1.61)	-0.354 ** (-2.38)	-0.858 ** (-1.96)	-0.500 (-1.58)
Contact (3-point scale)	0.763 *** (3.55)	0.046 (0.23)	0.920 *** (4.46)	-1.007 *** (-3.07)	-0.708 *** (-4.01)
Federal (dummy)	-0.188 (-1.28)	0.798 *** (4.62)	0.089 (0.47)	-	-
Studyabroad (dummy)	0.120 (0.54)	0.219 (0.62)	0.308 (1.45)	0.394 (0.70)	0.092 (0.37)
Male (dummy)	0.365 * (1.74)	0.241 (1.20)	0.616 *** (2.83)	0.605 * (1.66)	0.294 (1.22)
Age (years)	0.024 ** (2.15)	-0.022 * (-1.99)	0.011 (0.93)	0.051 * (1.79)	0.016 (1.13)
PhD (dummy)	0.041 (0.16)	-0.222 (-1.03)	0.121 (0.54)	0.003 (0.01)	0.093 (0.28)
Ministry (dummy)	0.035 (0.16)	-0.124 (-0.68)	-0.006 (-0.03)	-0.097 (-0.27)	0.091 (0.35)
SNEyears (years)	-0.029 (-0.40)	-0.038 (-0.59)	-0.039 (-0.47)	0.028 (0.23)	-0.077 (-0.94)
EU advantagous (dummy)	0.657 *** (5.08)	-1.114 *** (-5.72)	0.271 * (1.87)	1.026 *** (3.59)	0.516 *** (2.62)
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	60.12 ***	145.46 ***	90.84 ***	82.82 ***	54.15 ***
N	386	395	388	124	262

Note: t statistics based on standard errors corrected for clustering at the country-level between brackets, \*\*\* significant at 1%, \*\* at 5% and \* at 10%. Wald Chi<sup>2</sup> attests to the joint significance of all variables in the model. Independence varies between -5 (minimum independence) and +5 (maximum independence). The proxy 'Policy proposal' employs: 'When putting forward a proposal, how much emphasis do you put on the best interests of [your home country/the Commission]?' It is coded using a six-point scale from 'fully' (coded as 0) to 'not at all' (coded as 5).

Table A2. Summary statistics and question wording

Variable	Question wording	Mean	St. Dev.	Min - Max
Independence Representative	'In your daily work, to what extent do you feel you act as a representative of [the Commission/your country's government]?' Answer scale from 0 = 'fully' to 5 = 'not at all'; Variable is difference between answers on both options.	2.171	1.639	-3 – 5
Independence Policy proposal	When putting forward a proposal, how much emphasis do you put on the best interests of [your home country/the Commission]?' Answer scale from 0 = 'fully' to 5 = 'not at all'; Variable is difference between answers on both options.	1.921	1.337	-2 – 4
ReturnHome (dummy)	'What will you do after finishing your current secondment?' Answer options include 'Return to home institution', 'Apply for a permanent job in the Commission', and 'Other: Please specify'.	0.479	0.499	0 – 1
AskedbyHome (dummy)	'Why did you apply for your current secondment?' Answer options include 'Needed a new challenge', 'Wanted to advance my career', and 'I was asked to apply (If so, by whom?)'.	0.084	0.277	0 – 1
Contact (3-point scale)	'While on secondment, how often do you have contacts with your home institution?' (1 is 'never, 2 is 'very/fairly little' and 3 is 'very/fairly often')	1.621	0.589	1 – 3
Federal (dummy)	1 for SNEs deriving from a country with explicit legislative and/or executive power-sharing arrangement between a federal and regional level of government (Hooghe and Marks 2001).	0.331	0.471	0 – 1
Treatment (5-point scale)	'In your opinion, are you, in general, treated the same as permanent Commission officials?'	1.868	0.999	1 – 5
Studyabroad (dummy)	'What is your education and where did you obtain it?' (Answer option include: Bachelor, Master, PhD; Home-country, Abroad)	0.135	0.342	0 – 1
Male (dummy)	'What is your gender?'	0.596	0.491	0 – 1
Age (years)	'What is your age (in years)?'	42.671	8.943	26 – 67
PhD (dummy)	'What is your education and where did you obtain it?' (Answer option include: Bachelor, Master, PhD; Home-country, Abroad)	0.152	0.359	0 – 1
Ministry (dummy)	'What was your professional affiliation prior to current secondment?'	0.512	0.500	0 – 1
SNEyears (years)	*When did you start on your current secondment?'	3.032	1.323	1 – 5
EU advantageous (dummy)	'Before entering the Commission, did you generally think that co-operation within the EU was advantageous or disadvantageous?'	0.657	0.475	0 – 1