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STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

**“Out of sight – out of mind”
EU-recruitment of Swedish Civil Servants**

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Scores rapportserie 2010:10
ISBN 978-91-89658-57-8
ISSN 1404-5052

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Abstract

Taking part in EU-negotiations is today one of the most prominent tasks of the member state governments and their administrations. The relative influence that member states can exert on these occasions varies and the strategies deployed are numerous. Nowadays it seems common knowledge that it is important to partake early on in the rule making processes, as decisions are shaped through discussions early on in the many formal and informal working groups surrounding each issue.

One way of achieving this early mover strategy is by having national civil servants employed by the European commission, either as permanent staff (PS) or as seconded national experts (SNE). This paper explores the recruitment policy of the Swedish Government as well as the experiences of civil servants working within the EU, either as PS or SNE:s. Stories of the life of Swedish civil servants are analysed from an organization perspective. The study takes as a point of departure the picture displayed in Swedish media, where the Brussels sphere is portrayed as posing major challenges to Swedes working in the EU. Many have left and few want to go. Why is it so? And is it really so? How are civil servants recruited to the Commission, how are they treated by their home organizations while working in Brussels, and what happens to them when they get home? These are the main questions set out in this explorative paper, which is based foremost on interviews with Swedish civil servants working in Brussels and in the national administration. By gathering stories of actors involved we aim to increase our understanding of the processes through which national values and modes of organizing shape staff policies and practices, but also what happens when these values and modes of organizing meets those present within the EU-sphere.

Introduction

In 2004 one of the leading Swedish morning papers published a major article, featuring the title: “Top positions in Brussels – Not interesting for the Swedes” (DN 2004-05-02). The article started with the following lines:

It all started as a rumour. “Swedes are going home”. Today it is an unquestioned truth in Brussels that the Swedes don’t like it there.

This quotation illustrates a widespread story present in Swedish media – as well as in the general public debate – claiming that Swedes working in the EU are not comfortable with their working situation, and that they tend to leave their positions prematurely. The story is underpinned by statistics. For example, during the first five years of Sweden’s membership in the EU Swedes abandoned five out of nine top positions. Since 1999 Sweden has also had difficulties filling its informal quota of higher officials in the EU – in 2006 Sweden only filled half of it (Prime Minister’s Office 2007a).

If this story is true it might be considered problematic from a democratic point of view. Formally, officials in the EU machinery should in their work only consider what is best for the EU. However, in practice officials can bring national perspective into the policy processes of the union. Indeed, when working out proposals the Commission often wants to know the position of the member states; the commission will try to take such national standpoints into account in order to make sure that its proposals will pass the Council. Thus, if Swedes participates actively in the EU’s daily work the chances of Swedish ideas and values making marks in the union’s decisions may increase. Swedes being present in the EU is also about developing competencies and providing the Swedish state administration with knowledge about the EU’s institutions, working procedures and policies.

In this study we examine the story outlined above. Is it really true that Swedes are uncomfortable with their working situations in the EU? Do they often leave their positions prematurely? Is it difficult to recruit Swedes to EU-positions? And if the story is true, how can it be explained?

An organizational perspective

Stories about Swedish officials working in Brussels are constantly shared between officials who work there, who have worked there, who consider working there, and those who study and interact with Swedish officials. This contributes to the creation of an image of what Swedish officials are like. This image in turn affects not only the recruitment of new staff to the Commission but also the organization of national activities for promoting Swedish civil servants to go to Brussels and supporting those working there. Thus, to some extent stories and accounts shape notions of individuals and also their behaviour within the organizations they reside. Indeed, Czarniawska (1997) argues that one of the core principles in the knowledge about organizations resides in stories. Persons who join a new organization learn how to act appropriate by means of asking other members how they are expected to behave. In that way stories are not just an image of how an organization works, they are also parts of what constitute the organization itself. This type of analysis should not be neglected due to an overemphasize on measurable and more hard science studies, since social situations and institutions are not only created through strategic regulation and intention but also through interaction and narration (Lyotard (1979) 1993).

Thus, the stories themselves partly explain their presence and stability over time. However, in order to move the analysis further beyond description into the more interesting field of explanation we will analyze the stories from an organizational perspective. Following the results of a previous study within the same field, we depart from an analytical model created by Trondal et al. (2008) in their study of the socialization of SNE:s. The organizational features used by Trondal et al. in order to explain socialization focus on the EU Commission; they are (1) organizational affiliations, (2) the formal organizational composition of institutions and (3) the socialisation within institutions. We depart from the same basic theoretical assumptions as Trondal et al., but we develop their model somewhat as to fit our particular research questions. Just as Trondal et al. we believe that the organizational features of the Commission are valid explanatory factors. However, we argue that it is also necessary to consider the features of the national administration. According to Jan Beyers national features have been neglected in this kind of research:

...member-state institutions are still key socialization sites. Therefore, future research on the socialization of EU-level officials as well as domestic officials participating in EU

affairs need to look much deeper into how bureaucrats are selected, recruited and trained at *both the European and the national level* (Beyers 2008 p. 17, our italics).

Empirical research shows that national organizational features may be just as important as features of the Commission, in terms of for example the organizational specialisation leading to local rationalities and routinized learning cycles (e.g. Beyers & Trondal 2004; Larue 2006; Trondal et al. 2008 p. 265; Olsen 2006).

Thus, in this study we will consider institutional features relating to staff policy in general and recruitment issues in particular of both the Commission and the national administration. For Swedes working in Brussels and for those considering going there, these are essential parts of the structures supplying both opportunities and barriers. The organizational features of the Commission in terms of its organizational composition, cultural traits, employees, etc are important parts of the organizational environment and something that national administrations as well as individuals have to relate to. They may pose important demands on how to behave (March & Olsen 1989). The recruitment procedures are part of the Commission's features and deserve extra attention in this study. The recruitment feature involves formal structures for the concour as well as informal norms for candidates on the reserve-lists. There are also certain rules – formal as well as informal – for the recruitment of SNE's. Regarding institutional features of the national administration we aim to map ideas and formal organization of staff policy in general and recruitment issues in particular as well as informal and institutionalized norms of appropriate conduct in relation to these issues.

Methods

Our study focuses on the European Commission. This is arguably the most important organization in terms of civil servant dominated activities. For example at present, about two thirds of all Swedish SNEs are working in the Commission. As the recruitment to the Commission is formalized through the Concour, it also facilitates cross country comparisons.

We divide our empirical questions in three phases: 1) 'Going to Brussels', (How are civil servants recruited to the Commission?), 2) 'At work in Brussels' (How are they treated by their home organizations while working in Brussels?), and 3) 'Going home or staying' (What happens to them when they get home?).

The study is, as mentioned, foremost based on interviews with Swedish civil servants, either currently working for the European Commission or with previous experiences of such work. Three groups have been selected for the study. The first consists of central civil servants (CSS) employed by the Swedish Government who are responsible for the recruitment (and other staff issues) of Swedes to the European Commission (and other EU institutions). These have been found at three locations: at the Prime Minister's Office (*Stadsrådsberedningen*), at an executive agency called Swedish Administrative Development Agency (*Verva*), and at the Swedish Permanent Representation in Brussels (see further below about their assignments in this area). So far we have interviewed six persons from these three locations. The second group of actors we are interviewing is SNEs. Eleven former or current national experts have been interviewed so far. The third group is permanent staff (PS) at the Commission. Here 13 people have been interviewed. The selection of interviewees for the two last groups have been made randomly from lists of employees in Brussels provided to us by the Prime Minister's Office and by the Swedish Permanent Representation in Brussels. The interviews lasted 40 minutes to 1,5 hours and have all been recorded and transcribed. The questionnaire contains open questions concerning the career of the interviewee, educational background, and contacts with different organizations and actors. However, as much as possible we have tried to make the interviewees describe the journey to Brussels, and when applicable back to Stockholm, in their own words (Czarniawska 1997 p. 28).

Sweden as a case

The study opens up for comparative analyses in supplying an individual case study with national particularities that may clarify different national approaches to the topic at hand. The Swedish Government has proclaimed high ambitions regarding Sweden's membership in the EU. In its most recent working program on EU matters the Government states that "Sweden should belong to the core of European cooperation and put forward Swedish priorities in an active and efficient way" (Prime Minister's Office 2007:1). An important means of realizing this ambition is the Government's staff policy. Just like elsewhere – and perhaps even more so in the EU – it is important, one can argue, to have the right person, on the right place, at the right time.

However, looking back EU's impact on Swedish politics has generally been underemphasized in the national political debate. The Government has argued that old Swedish institutions, i.e. ways of organizing and controlling the state, are in no need of change due to Sweden's membership in the EU (Jacobsson & Sundström 2007). The main responsibility for recruiting Swedish state officials to the EU is, just like the Swedish staff policy in general, highly decentralized. The individual ministries and agencies are themselves to look after their interests by making recruitment plans, keeping an eye on vacancies, examine the possibilities for placing employees on strategically important positions inside the EU, make sure that there are resources available for national experts etc. (CSS;5). However, in order to strengthen Sweden's ability to act strategically in EU-matters the Government has also taken some general measures. Among other things, the current Prime Minister has appointed a Minister for EU Affairs – Cecilia Malmström – and placed her next to him inside the Prime Minister's Office. Under her purview there is an office for coordination of EU affairs, the EU Coordination Secretariat. Earlier this department was organised inside the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, but in 2005 it was moved to the Prime Minister's Office (Johansson 2009). The department's main tasks is to spot jobs up for grabs in the EU and to make sure that Swedes – in both the public and the private sector – apply for these jobs. It functions as a 'bank of knowledge' to which ministries, agencies and private actors can turn for information about vacancies, dates for open competitions (concoours), contact persons etc. In order to ensure that Swedes working in the EU hold on to their jobs the department is also trying to make sure that they enjoy their work and that they have tolerable working conditions (CSS;1, CSS;2). There are currently two posts assigned to these issues – one executing officer and an assistant.

The EU Secretariat cooperates closely with Sweden's Permanent Representation in Brussels in these matters. The representation's main task is to ensure that Swedish interests and policies are pursued as effectively as possible in the EU, foremost by taking an active part in negotiations connected to Coreper and its working groups and by supplying analyses and assessment to the Swedish Government Offices, which is responsible for shaping Swedish EU policies. But the representation has also been given the assignment to support the work of recruiting Swedes to the EU, especially to higher positions (Prime Minister's Office 2006:3; Prime Minister Office 2007a:3). This task falls primarily on the Permanent Representative (CSS;1, CSS;5). At the representation, also one higher level and one lower level official are employed to deal

with the issues relating to recruitment and networking amongst Swedes going to Brussels and those already there. When we started our study the position in the EU Coordination Secretariat had been vacant for more than six months, but it was reassigned in 2008. Previously that position was held by a senior civil servant with a broad network at EU-level enabling direct contacts and lobby activities while the more practical issues were dealt with by an assistant. With the new organization, there is a broader focus on recruitment where also lower positions and junior civil servants are considered, as to aim towards having people at all levels. This is considered important because there are so few Swedes in the EU, which means that a very junior low level official might be the only Swede to contact in a certain EU-organization/-department (CSS;2).

Swedish Council for Strategic Human Resources Development – Krus – is yet another central state actor with the assignment to work for appropriate recruitments within the state. Krus is to assist the Government in matters concerning strategically recruitment within the state administration. This includes giving the agencies qualified help in their efforts to attain the right kind of competence in order to solve their tasks in a short as well as in a longer perspective.

The EU Secretariat has worked out an action plan for the recruitment of Swedes to the EU. The plan was originally created in 2002 and was at that time rather extensive and detailed with appendixes and statistics (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2002). However, when the plan was revised in 2006 it was cut down to only four pages (Prime Minister's Office 2006). At the same time separate guidelines for Swedish SNE:s were formulated (Prime Minister's Office 2007a). (A new guideline has been issued in 2009). The action plan states that Sweden has failed to fill its informal quota of higher officials in the EU. The development has in fact gone backwards. During 1995–1999 Sweden managed to fill the quota, but since then Swedish employees have left the EU's institutions in a rapid stream, and in 2006 Sweden only managed to fill half of its quota. In the plan it is also stated that many Swedes employed today in the EU were recruited in connection to Sweden's EU-membership in the mid 90s. A more regular recruitment of Swedes has been harder to accomplish. This means that knowledge about the Swedish administration and about Swedish ideas and values that the Swedish Government wants to see represented in the EU is becoming increasingly obsolete (ibid. p. 2). Especially worrying is the low proportion of Swedes at higher positions (Prime Minister's Office 2002:6). According to the action plan the number

of Swedish SNE:s has also fallen since the mid 90s, from around 60 to around 40 in 2007 (Prime Minister's Office 2007a:1). However, recent figures show that they have increased in number, and in October 2009 they were around 60.¹

The EU Secretariat claims that Sweden must take action in order to increase the representation of Swedes in the EU; otherwise Sweden is running the risk of losing influence. If Swedes participates actively in the EU's daily work the chances of Swedish ideas and values making marks in the union's decisions will increase, the department argues. But Swedes being present in the EU is also about developing competencies and making careers, as well as providing the Swedish state administration with knowledge about the union's institutions, working procedures and policies (Prime Minister's Office 2007a p. 1). In order to increase the number of Swedes in the EU – either PS or SNE:s – the EU Secretariat suggests the following measures to be taken (Prime Minister's Office 2006 p. 3–4 and 2007a p. 2–4)

- Keep up the work of identifying vacancies in the EU and of stimulating and coaching Swedes.
- Spur and give support to Swedes working in the EU to apply for higher positions.
- Help Swedes on the reserve lists to get a permanent job.
- Work for a higher number of Swedes participating in the open competitions (the concours), by writing more articles and making more announcements in the Swedish press, by cooperating more closely with EPSO and by offering more and better educational programs.
- Point out prioritized directorates-generals where Sweden needs to strengthen its presence by placing out SNE:s.
- Ensure that employers in Sweden conduct preparing discussions with state officials who are accepted as SNE:s.
- Ensure that there are continuous contacts between Swedish SNE:s in Brussels and their employers in Sweden, regarding for example exchanges of information, wages and what to expect when the expert returns home.
- Work for stronger networks between Swedes working in the EU.

Thus, in formal rules and documents a quite clear picture emerges of how it *ought to be*, a picture shared by the persons we have interviewed. But what do these people's experiences look like? To what extent does the norm fit their stories about their everyday life in Brussels?

¹ This is according to a list sent to us by the Swedish Permanent Representation in Brussels in September 2008.

Going to Brussels

The Permanent Staff

For the permanent staff the concours is an important phase on the road to Brussels and for most Swedes this is an unusual and quite peculiar mode of applying for a job. Recruitment to the national public sector knows no such procedures, nor is it known within the private sector in Sweden. This constitutes something of an initial obstacle for some to apply for a job in Brussels, and several interviewees believe that in particular more senior persons can not see themselves degrading to take that kind of test in order to get a job – or rather the chance of getting a job, in Brussels (Interview ref). In terms of preparations for the concours, the EU Secretariat in collaboration with Krus (earlier Verva) organizes one-two day courses for anyone interested in doing the test. Most courses participants are already employed in the public administration; advertising is done on the Government's and Krus' websites, and requires specific interest in order to be found. On occasion there have also been advertisements in major newspapers or information campaigns directed towards certain groups allegeable for applying to a specific concours (CSS;1). Such intense campaigning led to an increased number of people writing the concours and ending up on the lists of applicants (ibid.).

Of those interviewed in Brussels around half were aware of the training courses or had undergone one. Several of them complained about the fact that many Swedes do not realise or get informed about the fact that the oral test is a test and not a regular job interview, and therefore did not prepare in the right way (CSS;3, PS; 1). They also describe other countries as being more advanced in their preparations and their support for national officials taking the concours.

One interesting observation, relating to the story about Swedes spread amongst those interacting with Swedes in Brussels, has to do with the questions asked during the oral test. One of the interviewees reported having been asked why he would not – as many other Swedes – be leaving the Commission after a short while (PS;1). It should be noted, that in terms of number of people with fixed employments at the Commission Sweden is by no means lagging behind other countries that joined the EU during the same time period as Sweden (EPSO). Still, Swedes point out that they during oral exams and interviews are being asked why they would not leave the

Commission within a short time period since many Swedes are believed to do so. The story as such is thus strong. Several of the interviewees also spontaneously comment on the low number of Swedes within the Commission. Some believe (wrongly) that they are the only Swede within their DG (PS;1) while others express views as exemplified by the quote below:

The Finns are countless here in the building! And the Danes. There are heads of departments everywhere. And us Swedes, we just get fewer and fewer over the years. It is horrendously bad (PS;2).

All in all the interviewed maintained that they received quite little help from the central organizations in Sweden when applying for a job at the Commission. None had been encouraged or asked to apply, but instead it had throughout been personal initiatives (PS; 1-16). Below one of the interviewees formulates her thoughts in a way that captures many of the answers we got concerning why Swedes chose to apply for a job at the Commission:

There are very few opportunities if you don't take a personal initiative. There were some people going away as SNE:s or doing internships, and I noticed that those who did went off to Brussels more often afterwards. Firstly, I think they enjoy their work, and second it is easier to do your job in Stockholm with that experience (PS;2).

On arrival none of our interviewed PS had any particular contact with the Swedish permanent representation or received any help in getting installed. Some, but not all, were introduced to the network of Swedes in Brussels that has contact points at each DG. The network consists of contact points responsible for the keeping in touch with Swedes within their respective DG:s. Some are more active than others and it seems as those most interested in the networks are the ones that have arrived most recently.

As for the lists emanating from the concour it may be of great importance if your national government helps out by making phone calls and if someone has an eye out for available positions to apply for. In the Swedish case the person in charge of EU-recruitment at the EU Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office handles the rather time consuming task of keeping track of available positions, as well as trying to match these with suitable candidates, all alone. Direct lobbying is to be conducted by the

Swedish permanent representation in Brussels, but according to the interviewees this is very seldom done at all. One reason provided by the Minister for EU-affairs is that the market mechanisms shall ensure that the best candidates for the job gets the position and that lobbying is therefore not necessary. If the Swedish candidate is the best suited one – that person will get the job.

The Cabinet in Brussels is another important part of the organizational structure for recruitment issues. The ambassador and deputy ambassador at the permanent representation usually has lunch once a month with the Swedish commissioner and the head of cabinet. At these occasions, available positions are discussed (CSS;4).

Our data hence indicates that the commitment from politicians and higher level officials at national level to support the recruitment and advancement of Swedes to and in Brussels is limited. This passivity is by the EU Secretariat explained partly as an ideological stance:

But it is also the case that my minister is liberal and of the opinion that you should not have any quotas or lobby – it should be a system that works. Free competition and a view on competence which means that we should not lobby and create inflation in national lobbying (CSS;1p.9)

Still, several of those within the national administration as well as those in place in Brussels believe this viewpoint to be a naive one (see e.g CSS;3 p.4, PS;3) ”So my answer was that if we believe that Swedes will get positions on their own, there will be very few Swedes in Brussels since all other member states lobby”, says a senior civil servant at ministry level (CSS;1, p. 9). A Swedish SNE working in the council also claims that the lack of strategies and ideas in Sweden concerning SNE:s is related to a strong belief in the market. This person also expresses doubts in such beliefs:

For one thing I think it has to do with us Swedes believing in some kind of justice. If you do your job well it will lead to results and so on. But the world doesn't quite look like that. I don't even know if it looks like that in Sweden but it sure doesn't in other places. This means that you, like everyone else, have to have strategies for how to get people inside and how to push your issues (SNE1 p. 1).

The SNE:s

On the EU-level there are no rules on how many SNE:s there should be in the EU, how their numbers should be divided between the member states or how they should be searched for and recruited. Formally, each position as a SNE has to be applied for in competition with officials from all other member states. Just like the PS the SNE:s must sign an agreement where they assure that they will carry out their duties and behave solely with the interests of the EU institution in mind.

The Swedish Government has not worked out any detailed rules on how to recruit SNE:s. Thus, it is up to each separate ministry and agency to decide if they should work out rules and strategies regarding recruitments of SNE:s and what such rules and strategies should contain. However, our material shows that this is something that Swedish ministries and agencies do not prioritize; these kinds of rules and strategies are rare. This is also mirrored in the way our respondents have been recruited. In most cases the force behind the recruitment has been of a personal kind, and as a rule our interviewees themselves have taken the initiative to have their situation changed, by seeking a job as an SNE in the EU. The reasons for leaving Sweden vary. One SNE told us that she wanted to be close to where the real power is – “to be where things happens” (SNE1 p. 3). Another SNE claimed that it was foremost a question of personal and professional development (SNE6 p. 1, 7). And a third one was curious of working abroad more generally and wanted to improve his language skills (SNE3 p. 3). But no one told us spontaneously that they saw working for the Commission as a chance to represent their own country. And only two SNE:s claimed that they were approached by their Swedish employer and that there was, from the employer’s perspective, a more strategic thought behind the recruitment (SNE3 p. 4–5; SNE4 p. 2). More elaborated recruitment strategies regarding SNE:s were in most cases absent in the ministries and the agencies. This does not mean that all colleagues at home are trying to oppose a person who is trying to get a job as an SNE. But our interviews show that there is a clear risk that at least other units, besides the person’s own, will try to put a spoke in the wheel if there are no strategies and goals worked out at the top of the organization (SNE2 p. 4). One has to remember that sending SNE:s to the EU, do cost ministries and agencies a lot of money since the employee keeps his/her salary while working in an EU institution.

It should be noted that one of the experts we talked to got direct support from a Swedish minister. The minister had happened to run into the Director-General of the DG in question and argued in favor of the expert getting a job in the DG as an SNE. The Director-General then phoned the expert and offered him the job. In our interview with the expert he stresses the importance of understanding the ways things work informally in the EU and the importance of Swedish politicians, and higher civil servants, being willing to act when Sweden wants to put SNE:s at strategically important places in the EU. Formal rules are not a big problem if there is dedication and a strong will, he argues:

It is possible to place people anywhere, provided that there is a will among Swedish politicians, in the Swedish administration and in the EU. As I understand it, it is possible to place SNE:s just about anywhere (SNE7 p. 3).

Sometimes the Commission is the driving force behind recruitments. The Commission can have its eyes opened to a certain organization or a certain individual who has an expertise that the Commission needs. On such occasions the Commission can make contact and ask the national organization to 'lend out' an expert (SNE5 p. 1–2). It is important for national ministries and agencies to be prepared when the Commission comes with such requests. They must not only create a basic structure – for example in the form of resources – but also think through, in advance, to which DG:s they would like to send their SNE:s and who is up for the job. But our material shows that this kind of planning is often missing in Swedish ministries and agencies (see also Ståhlberg 2004).

The fact that Swedish ministries and agencies seldom care very much about the recruitment of SNE:s is also revealed in the answers to our question about how the experts were treated just before leaving Sweden. Most SNE:s told us that they didn't have any preparing discussions, where the home organization and the SNE clarified their expectations on each other (SNE2 p. 4; SNE3 p. 6; SNE5 p. 3; SNE6 p. 2). Only one SNE claimed that she had had such a discussion (SNE4 p. 2).

Finally, we found that none of our interviewed SNE:s received or searched for any support from Verva, now Krus, or any other central state agency with the assignment to help Swedish state officials going on missions abroad (SNE2 p. 4; SNE3 p. 6; SNE6 p. 2). Several SNE:s claimed that they do not even know of Verva (i.e. SNE4 p.

3; SNE5 p. 3). Worth noticing is also that there are no routines to support Swedish SNE:s arriving to Brussels. For example, it is not a routine that new appointed experts visit the Swedish permanent representation for an 'arrival talk'. The door is always open at the Swedish Representation, but it is up to the individual SNE to take initiative to such meetings (CSS;2 p.3)

At work in Brussels

The Permanent Staff

The interviewed PS all mentioned the “Golden Cage” as an important factor in describing their own or others position in the Commission (e.g. PS;2, PS;3). The concept relates to the fact that although the tasks that you have may not always be that rewarding, you earn a lot more money than you would if you were conducting other tasks in for instance your national administration. Having gotten used to the “good life” in Brussels with expensive habits and an easy life in terms of material values, it thus becomes difficult to leave a position at the Commission even if one finds the job a bit unsatisfying. One interviewee describes his job like this:

I might even find joy in knowing the bureaucratic windings of the Commission and knowing what wordings or paragraphs to use in order to get something done – but to an outsider this is useless because what is achieved is so little and has nothing to do with reality (PS;3).

When it comes to contacts with the national administration there is a clear divide among our informants. On the one hand there are those who believe that this is – or rather could be if it was used more extensively – a valuable tool for the Swedish Government to influence the Commission and receive information about ongoing processes (e.g. PS;1, PS:7). On the other hand there are those who believe that this type of contacts should be dealt with carefully so that no confusion arises concerning the Swedish standpoint. The role of the permanent representation as a broker for ensuring political anchorage in all issues is highly emphasized (PS;4). Very few of the interviewees had frequent contacts with the administration back home, and if they did it was mainly with former colleagues and as much for personal social reasons as for strategic or work related reasons. Some expressed surprise over the few contacts since

they believed that they without stepping over any ethical boundaries easily could provide useful help to the Swedish administration. Knowing the best timing for contacting and conducting lobbying, but even providing shorter papers or assignments, was suggested as useful possible contributions from those employed by the Commission (PS;1, PS2, PS;9).

There is also a phone list of all Swedes working in the EU institutions (Brussels, Luxembourg etc.) provided by the EU Secretariat in collaboration with the Permanent Representation in Brussels. It is updated every year in collaboration with the Swedish permanent representation but continuously becomes out of date as people move and change positions. The phone list is provided to all ministries in Stockholm, and Government authorities, agencies, local government etc. as to help getting access to the EU-sphere. Lately there has been some trouble with Swedes not wanting to be on the list due to the Swedish tax authorities using the list to investigate who has double living quarters thus affecting the income taxation. Several of the interviewed point at this as an example of the jealousy and suspicions concerning those who choose to work in Brussels (PS;1, PS;3, PS;4).

There have also been some other hitches in the relations between Stockholm and the Brussels community of Swedes. One concerns the deal struck on pensions within the new EU-regulation. This was disputed at a meeting between the minister who was at the time responsible for recruitment issues. The meeting was held in Brussels and complaints were raised that the Swedish Government did not negotiate the best deal for the officials, but rather had neglected the whole issue (PS;4, PS;5). The somewhat heated meeting with the ambassador and the permanent representation has later on also involved discussions where the Brussels employees criticized the Government for not taking action to get those who passed the concour into positions at the Commission. This was believed to require lobbying, but as mentioned earlier this was not carried out by the ministries.

There is clearly resentment in the group of PS residing at the Commission when it comes to their contacts with Stockholm, and many believe that their knowledge and experience is not valued or appreciated at home. The issue with people on the reserve lists also got its continuation later when a number of them decided to write a letter to the new EU-minister. The issue concerned a number of people having passed a concour for positions at the European Parliament, among whom, almost a year later, none had gotten any job offers. The letter, written in February 2008, urged the

minister to work towards changed methods of EPSO² and to answer the question of how one would take actions as to help these people get a position (Letter to Cecilia Malmström). In the somewhat tardy response the minister assured that the Government would work to get more Swedes into the Brussels organizations, but no specific measures were mentioned (Letter from Cecilia Malmström). One permanent employee also describes the relations to the permanent representation as a bit frosty concerning who gets help to get positions and who does not:

I think it has been seen with less mild eyes down here when people coming from the permanent representation have gotten nice jobs themselves, without being on the lists. 'Oh, we don't have any suitable officials that we could lobby for, but I can take on the job myself!' (PS;3).

As for getting help to get a promotion within the Commission after a few years there is not much hope. One interviewee contacted the permanent representation on such a matter, but the answer was straight forward that the Swedish Government did not lobby for anyone below heads of department (PS;6). All interviewees believe this to be an unfavourable position to take as there is a need to fill up from below so that you eventually have people eligible for promotion as these posts seldom go to someone from outside the organization. Other countries, such as the UK, Holland, and France, are often mentioned as having come to the understanding of the importance of fill up positions at all levels.

The SNE:s

Judging from our interviews Swedish ministries and agencies rarely have contact with Swedish SNE:s in Brussels. Many ministries and agencies seem to think that it is enough to send an SNE to the EU; if they do that they have done their duty. They do not seem to fully understand the need to develop and uphold continuing contacts with the experts working in the EU and to make sure that they get informed about Swedish strategies and standpoints, and that they continue to feel like a part of the Swedish

² EPSO = European Personnel Selection Office. EPSO became fully operational on 1 January 2003. Its mission is to organise open competitions to select qualified staff for recruitment to all institutions of the European Union.

administration. One SNE coming from a Swedish ministry told us how she felt right after arriving to Brussels:

It was seen as a good thing to get me in here. But after that it was, somehow, as if it was all over, as if: 'Now we have placed a person here, that's it'. That is not how other countries act with more long-term strategies about why they want to send their officials here. It's not enough just to put Swedes in place. You can't just leave them alone, without support from their home organizations – What do Sweden want? What's our policy? What do we want the EU to do on these areas? (SNE1 p. 1).

The lack of contacts between SNE:s and their home organizations can affect the SNE's behavior. We should remember that their role is highly unclear already from the start: On the one hand they have been sent out by their home organizations, which are also paying their wages. They can read in strategies worked out by the Swedish Government Office that they are expected to have contacts with their home organizations and to contribute to Swedish policies and standpoints having an impact on decisions made by the EU. And several of the SNE:s that we have talked to claim that the Commission often wants them to clarify what Sweden wants (SNE5 p. 2; SNE3 p. 7; SNE4 p. 4; SNE6 p. 3–4; see also Torp 2006).

On the other hand the experts must, as was mentioned above, sign an agreement where they assure that they will behave solely with the interests of the Commission in mind. And some DG:s and departments within the EU seem to take this agreement very seriously. One of our informants points out that SNE:s have to be very cautious in their contacts with their national administrations:

Take everything verbally and not by e-mail, because if it is a sensitive question you will be considered disloyal. (...) So, you have to think about that, if they just have a hunch that you are working for the Swedish Government and not for the Commission you will get screened off from all interesting work (SNE3 p. 7; c.f. SNE5 p. 6).

So, there are somewhat contradictory signals given about the role SNE:s are to play. This creates insecurity – to whom should they be loyal? All the SNE:s we have spoken to mention this loyalty conflict and claim that it is a tricky balancing, where there is plenty of room for interpretation (SNE2 p. 2, 6; SNE5 p. 2, 6; SNE1 p. 2; SNE4 p. 4; SNE3 p. 7). And just because it is a sensitive situation and a matter of

interpretation – where the experts have to use their own judgment to decide what they can, and can not, tell their Swedish employers – trust becomes a vital ingredient in the SNE:s relations to their home organizations. But trust requires close and frequent contacts. So, if Swedish ministries and agencies show low interest for the Swedish SNE:s there is a clear risk that the loyalty of the SNE:s tilts over to the EU (SNE6 s. 3). One of the SNE:s we have interviewed mentions the lack of contacts and support from Swedish employers, and she makes the following remark:

Of course you want to stay loyal to your country. But if you feel that you have to bear the brunt all by yourself, then it becomes some kind of survival instinct to get closer to the [EU]-organization and become more loyal to it than you would have done if you had felt that you were a Swedish agent (SNE1 p. 1).

Another SNE points at the same problem and claims that he has experienced it several times:

I have met people here who feel poorly treated by their home organization. They feel as if: ‘Oh, I am totally forgotten’. This has had the counter effect that they sit here and sulk, and revengefully think: ‘Sweden should not think that it can get any information from me’. Then you really missed something. I mean, if you first pay someone who then doesn’t give anything back (SNE2 p. 3).

Thus, according to our study contacts between Swedish SNE:s and their home organizations are not that well developed. But how about contacts among the SNE:s themselves? Some efforts have been done in order to create a network of Swedish SNE:s. For example, a Swedish section connected to Clenad³ was created in 2001 (Statskontoret 2001 p. 28). However, the experts we have talked to claim that this network is not working very well. No one wants to be appointed contact person for the Swedish section. And it is considered incongruous that a single SNE, who is working full time, should be responsible for bringing together and putting forward the Swedish SNE:s’ aggregated opinions. This should instead be a matter for the Swedish Government, it is argued (SNE1 p. 6; SNE4 p. 6–7).

³ Clenad is an abbreviation for “Liaison Committee of Detached National Experts”. Clenad was created in 1997. It is an international network for SNE:s with the aim of taking care of the interests of the SNE:s. Clenad is not a formal trade union, but is rather functioning as an arena for the experts and as a consultation partner in relation to the Commission and the member states (see Clenad 1997).

The Swedish permanent representation has also had the ambition of gathering the Swedish SNE:s a few times each year. But according to our informants these meetings have been quite a disappointment (see e.g. SNE;2 p. 8–9; SNE;5 p. 6). Bilateral contacts between the SNE:s and officials at the Representation seem to be more appreciated.

So, the networking between the SNE:s and their home organizations, and between themselves, are not functioning that well. But how do they like their working places more generally? Is there any support in our material for the 'culture clash' often mentioned in Swedish media? Yes, there is. The norms and values prevailing in the EU administration is said to be very different from those to be found in the Swedish administration. Two things are recurrently mentioned. Firstly, the EU administration is depicted as much more hierarchical than the Swedish one. The EU is described as big, slow and highly centralized. Many experts claim that they feel like a cog wheel in a giant machinery, where they – in comparison with Sweden – is given very little responsibility. Even the smallest decisions have to be cleared by superiors (SNE2 p. 11; SNE3 p. 9; SNE4 p. 7; SNE6 p. 5; see also Bøe & Albons 2004).

Secondly, gender equality is often mentioned as a big cultural difference. The EU is described as dominated by men and permeated with mannish ways. Sweden have taken gender equality much further, the SNE:s argue (c.f. Bøe & Albons 2004). Certainly, equality policies have been worked out and equality plans written in the EU, but in practice the differences are perceived as considerable (see e.g. SNE2 p. 11).

Going home or staying

The Permanent Staff

So far no officials who have left their positions in Brussels have been interviewed. Instead we have asked questions to those still in Brussels whether or not they had thought about leaving, and in that case why. We have also asked them about their beliefs on how they would be treated if they chose to go back.

Most of the PS we have interviewed believe that there is a limit to how many years you can spend in Brussels and still be attractive for the national administration when you return home. Many interviewees provide stories and accounts of how others upon their return to Sweden have been neglected and treated as someone who has

missed a lot and not learned anything new during their time away. At the same time the interviewees do not seem to believe that this would apply to them if going home. However, if you stay away too long the cost of the things you need to learn when going back might be bigger than the gains of the gathered experiences of being in Brussels. Only one of the interviewees named this as a major reason for considering leaving the position at the Commission. This is how that person described it when coming back the last time from a shorter contract at the Commission:

And when I came back from this short visit, there was almost like a vacuum. So you're here?! And my room? Hello?! There were no preparations for taking care of those who come home (PS;2).

When it comes to taking care of the competences potentially attained during the stay in Brussels few of the interviewed PS think that their skills would be taken on board in the Swedish administration in a systematic way. However, they still think that their knowledge would be appreciated and regarded as an asset, should they choose to go home. Some are more skeptical, and this is an example of how Sweden is considered to be worse than other member states when it comes to taking care of the competences of returning officials:

I had a colleague who used to work for the Finnish agricultural ministry and then at the DG Agriculture, and then at their permanent representation, and now he is in the cabinet. They make sure that he is packed with experience and keep track of everyone and make sure to make use of them (PS;2).

Let us return to the issue of top positions within the Commission. When Sweden joined the EU in 1995 a number of top positions were unofficially earmarked for Sweden. These were manned mainly by senior persons with a highly political background. As mentioned earlier, several of these positions were abandoned, impacting considerably on the view of Swedes and their position towards working in Brussels. Why did they leave? There are many answers to this question. Some left due to personal reasons, such as illness or family matters, but others left because they did not enjoy their jobs in Brussels. One of the interviewees involved in this recruitment process at the time expresses strong self criticism on this matter:

Well, one has to say that we did not make the best choices. We recruited mainly politicians, and I am not sure they realised what it would be like to work in a bureaucratic organization like the Commission. They were not prepared for what they signed up to (CSS;5).

Other top officials got into conflict with the management of their DG:s and chose to leave their positions, as the chances of changing or affecting the system was perceived as minimal (Allan Larsson). Several women also had trouble fitting into the new environment that was at the time very dominated by men. As one interviewee working as a head of department today describes it:

When I started ten years ago I was the only woman here. Of course that makes a difference and it is not what you are used to in Sweden (PS;6).

The SNE:s

There is a widespread opinion among our interviewed SNE:s that officials working in the Swedish public administration do not regard working as an SNE in Brussels as a merit. This becomes very obvious when the SNE:s returns home from the EU (CSS;2, p. 3). Our material is packed with stories about the poor reception Swedish SNE:s get when they return to their home organizations. Broader strategies and plans for home-comers are rare among Swedish ministries and agencies, and general statements like “this is what most SNE:s have anxiety over, they know that when they get home they will be forgotten and put in a corner somewhere” (SNE2 p. 6) and “you leave like a star and come home as a wreck” (SNE6 p. 6), is common in our interviews with the SNE:s (see also SNE3 p. 10–11 and SNE4 p. 10). One SNE told us:

There is no plan for how it will be when I return home. But then again, there never is at my ministry. You never know what will happen, and there is no strategy for anything. And again, a lot is also depending on yourself; you have to contact heads of units and try to talk yourself in (SNE1 p. 8).

On the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications things seem as bad. In the book *Hemvändarna (The Home-Comers)* a former SNE tell her story about the return to the ministry in 2002:

I was sent out by the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications after have been working for a private organization. So, I hadn't actually been working in the ministry before going to Brussels, and therefore I had no actual working place to return to. They called from the ministry and asked me if I could work at home (Rasmusson 2006 p. 34–35).

Another former SNE came back to the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications when Sweden was about to take over the EU presidency in 2001, but only to find out that other, much less experienced officials already had laid there hands on all the attractive jobs connected to the presidency. In an interview in 2002 she said:

I think it's easy to see persons who come back after longer periods abroad as a threat. Perhaps "the Jante Law" (Tall Poppy Syndrome) is playing in also. Just before the presidency all such mechanisms were brought to a head. Everyone guarded their territory (Storm 2002).

The official just quoted also claims that officials in the ministries see service abroad as a 'reward'. When the person who has gained such a 'reward' comes home he or she has to 'pay' by standing back and letting other people in the organization have the chance to develop (see also CSS;1).

Our conclusion is that home coming SNE:s often are seen as a problem. This problem is partly of a structural kind. Home-coming SNE:s do not, as a rule, expect to get their old jobs back when they return from the EU, but to get higher positions where their new experience and new knowledge can be used. As one SNE told us about her thoughts on coming home:

I'm afraid I will be offered the same job I hade when I left. But I'm not interested in that at all (...) But it's difficult, and I think it's a delicate matter to talk with my boss at home, because I don't know if I want to work there. It depends on what they have to offer (...)

They have to offer me something, because I don't want to return to the same job. You want something to happen – to get some coordinating responsibility for international matters, or if I can get a job at the international unit (SNE;4 p. 8–9).

Another former SNE points at the same problem: "When you send out skillful people they will come back even more skillful, and then you can't give them less qualified jobs than they had before they went away, but more" (Rasmusson 2006 p. 34; see also SNE;1 p. 8 och SNE;2 p. 7). But finding such more qualified jobs can be difficult, due to the fact that many Swedish ministries and agencies are small and rather flat organizations. The number of heads and coordinators of EU-matters are limited. Thus, instead of showing enthusiasm over the SNE:s and the experience and knowledge they bring to the organization heads and other officials can see these home comers as a problem (Rasmusson 2006 p. 35). As one SNE puts it:

So, here these people come home, already having a hard time trying to cope with the general change of environment, and on top of that they find out that they are not worth anything and that it is a huge problem to find them a position in the organization (SNE;2 s. 7).

Another SNE stresses that home-coming SNE:s often are running the risk of ending up in competition situations:

It becomes a threat with a person who has built up a network and an understanding for how things work here [in the EU]. Such a person is not always welcome back (SNE1 p. 8).

This kind of aversive attitude can have the affect that home coming SNE:s leave the organization, which means that the ministry or the agency or – if they go to the private sector – the whole state loses the competence they have paid for (Statskontoret 2001; SNE2 p. 8).

According to several of our informants the home-comer problem also stem from envy and – as was mentioned above – a notion that those who have been working abroad have received a 'reward' which has to be 'paid for' when returning home (SNE2 p. 7). This 'payment' is sometimes expressed in a very concrete way. For example, for SNE:s there is no routine for wage increase. Thus, if the experts do not

look after their interests their wages will, as a main rule, stand still while they are away (SNE1 p. 9; SNE2 p. 6; SNE5 p. 5). And sometimes this kind of ‘payment’ can be stretched even further. In 2002 an official at ministry level wrote in a trade-union magazine:

Inside the Government Office working abroad is not considered as a qualified job or a developing assignment but as a privilege. I was ready for a job as an SNE in the Commission last year but backed out when I learned that I had to accept a pay cut to get the job (implied because it was such a privilege to go away). With the employer showing such an attitude one can easily understand why the employer does not make an effort to make the best use of the competence that home-comers bring with them (*Jusektidningen* 2002).

Our interviews also show that heads of units who try to stand up for the SNE:s can meet resistance from the SNE:s’ colleagues at home. One SNE from the Government Office tells us about this problem:

The heads always have their budget for the subordinates, and it can be a problem explaining to them that: ‘Now we’re going to give the money to our SNE for these and those reasons’. ‘What? She is down there, and it is we who are doing all the work here, why shouldn’t we have the money?’ So it’s a hard job and if you do not look after your interests no one will care about your wages (SNE1 p. 9).

A senior official at Verva, responsible for competence and educational matters, claims that this kind of envy and grudge is widely spread within the Swedish state administration, and he is very critical:

In Sweden officials ask [home coming SNE:s]: ‘What have you done during the last four years? While we have been here working you have had vacation and taking strolls in the sun.’ Yes, that’s how it works. And everybody knows it and think that it’s wrong, and committees have been made to figure out how the SNE:s’ knowledge can be better taken care of. But in practice nothing has happened. And the ‘von oben’-attitude among officials in Sweden is still here: ‘What have you done? Now you have to start all over again, because you have been by-passed while you’ve been abroad’ (CSS;3, p. 4).

Conclusions

In this paper we have explored how Swedish officials are recruited to positions within the EU, their relations towards the Swedish state during their time in Brussels and how they are treated when they return home. Our sample – especially of Swedish permanent employees – is small, so we have to be cautious in our conclusions. They are perhaps more to be regarded as hypothesis than empirically based facts. Bearing this in mind, the study shows that there is a rather homogenous story among Swedish officials about the life of Swedes working in Brussels. This story is shared and spread by Swedish officials who are, or have been, working in the EU, as well as by officials working at the national level. The story – which is not very positive – has some main ingredients:

First, working in Brussels seems to be a rather *confusing experience*. The formal rules establishing what you – as an employee in the Commission – can do and say in relation to your home country are depicted as unclear. You can very easily make a wrong move and get into trouble. Here, learning the informal rules, which is not an easy thing, is crucial; it decides whether you will ‘sink or swim’.

Second, Swedes entering the Commission often experience *culture clashes*. The Commission is portrayed as an organization very different from what Swedes are used to work in. The Commission does not seem to go very well with Swedes – it is too big, too hierarchical, too mannish, and too ineffective. If you go there you will get well paid, but you will not like it, so the story goes.

Third, *the recruitment process disfavors Swedes*. The concour is modeled after recruitment systems used in other European countries. It is a long, and not very transparent, process, and it contains several practices unfamiliar and uncomfortable to Swedes, such as written and oral examinations, mysterious reserve lists and a need to promote yourself using lobbying. Thus, in the competition for jobs in the Commission civil servants from other countries have an advantage over Swedes already from the start.

Forth, the *Swedish Government down plays the importance of the issue*. In Sweden, very little resources are located to EU-related staff policy. Few people at the central level are working with these questions – two at the Government Office and

two at the permanent representation. And even if these people are working hard and are doing a good job, which many of our interviewees say they are, they are simply too few to manage this big task. Also, the appropriations given to responsible agencies (earlier Verva and now Krus) for Human Resources have constantly been cut down in recent years.

Fifth, *Swedish ministries and agencies do not care that much about Swedes going to or returning from Brussels*. There are virtually no recruitment strategies worked out at the central level about how to recruit Swedes to EU positions, how to take care of them while away or how to take care of them when they return home. And there are no rules telling ministries and agencies to work out such strategies or to make sure that they establish appropriate learning procedures.

Sixth, working in Brussels is professionally a *waste of time*. When it comes to policies Sweden is perceived as superior, at least by Swedish officials working in Sweden. Sweden did not join the EU to learn from other countries but to lecture other countries. Sweden already has the best solutions. Therefore, when working abroad you will lose terrain in relation to your colleagues at home, and you need to catch up when returning home.

Seventh, and finally, *the Swedish Government is naïve* in these matters. The Government and the Minister for EU-affairs refuse to lobby for Swedish officials trying to get higher positions within the Commission. They claim that this should be handled by 'the market mechanism'. Thus, if a Swedish official is best suited for a job he or she should also get it. It should be a matter of merit not lobbying, they argue. This is perceived as unrealistic; the Government does not understand how things work in Brussels.

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