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## **Secretariat, Facilitator or Policy Entrepreneur? Role Perceptions of Officials of the Council Secretariat**

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**Abstract:** The Council Secretariat General has emerged as one of the institutional winners of the dynamic development of the EU's foreign and security policy, especially in the field of crisis management. Despite this, the role of the Council Secretariat in European foreign policy remains under researched. Based on extensive qualitative and quantitative data, the article provides new insights into the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by examining the role(s) of the Council Secretariat and its officials from the perspective of the latter. Firstly, it discusses the theoretical framework drawing on the insights of role theory. Secondly, it provides a historical account of how the Secretariat has developed into the kind of actor it is today – especially in foreign and security policies – and also presents rich empirical evidence about EU diplomats (e.g. nationality, professional background, etc.). Third, it explores in detail the officials' views on the roles they themselves play and the roles of the Secretariat as an institution involved in the making of European foreign policy. In this

regard, the article reveals interesting differences amongst the constitutive parts of the Secretariat as to how they perceive both their individual and institutional roles. It also uncovers potential conflicts in perceptions between old and new institutional roles.

**Keywords:** Council Secretariat General, European officials, role theory, role conceptions, role conflict, CFSP, ESDP, external relations, governance, institutions, institutionalisation, political science

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, the development of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) - renamed by the Lisbon Treaty as Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) - has empowered certain institutional actors within the EU decision-making system. This has

particularly been the case with the Council Secretariat General whose influence has grown exponentially with the development of the EU's capabilities in crisis management (see Mérand, Hofmann and Irondelle, 2010; Klein, 2010). By actively engaging in the development of the EU's external action, the Secretariat has been instrumental in increasing its effectiveness and coherence and exporting EU values worldwide. This has also resulted in an impressive transformation of the institution itself, not only organizationally and functionally, but also in terms of the officials recruited by the organization. The number of nationally seconded officials, temporary agents and military personnel has increased in parallel with the competencies of the Secretariat. Despite this development and the increasingly important functions it currently performs, its role in foreign policy has attracted little academic attention thus far. This article addresses this gap and focuses on the officials working in the Secretariat. It does so by examining their own beliefs concerning (1) the roles they play as individuals and (2) the roles of the Council Secretariat as a whole.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it aims to shed some light on the Council Secretariat officials dealing with European foreign policy. In other words, who are the people dealing with this policy on a day-to-day basis? Where do they come from? This is the first time that such an extensive round of interviews has been conducted with Council Secretariat officials dealing with EU foreign policy. This has provided us with rich empirical evidence about the EU's diplomats and the workings of the organization, which is important in itself. The evidence complements works that systematically studied the officials from other EU institutions, such as the research by Liesbet Hooghe (2001), Michelle Cini (1996), Neil Nugent (2000) on the European Commission or by Michael Shackleton (2006) and Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton (2007) on the European Parliament.

Second, the article examines the different roles played by Council Secretariat officials, as they perceive them. Role theory allows us to better understand how individuals conceive their own position within an institution, as well as the role of the institution as a whole. It provides a useful background to study how individuals see their role differently depending on the institutional context. It also allows us to explore instances where role conflict might occur, which is particularly relevant in the case of the Secretariat given the continuous transformation it has experienced. While the article focuses on role perceptions, the influence on the actual policy remains beyond the scope of this study.

While certain officials in the Council Secretariat still serve the original purposes for which it was created – i.e. providing logistical support for the Council meetings, record keeping and provision of legal advice – others have developed additional 'new' roles, of a more political nature, such as supporting the Presidency and the High Representative. More recently, certain officials have assumed executive functions in the planning and implementation of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Are these roles, in the understanding of the officials, well combined or are they overlapping or even clashing with each other? Is there a consensus on what roles the Secretariat should play? Is this likely to change with new reforms of the Council Secretariat as, for example, those introduced by the Lisbon Treaty? As the

formulations of the new treaty are very vague, the interpretations of the officials will be crucial for the way in which the provisions will be implemented. Therefore, the answers to these questions have important implications for European foreign policy, particularly in relation to internal coherence, but also for the implementation of foreign policy – especially in the field of crisis management.

The article begins with an explanation of the conceptual and methodological framework of the study, outlining the role theory used in this article, an explanation of the methodology and how the data was collected. It then proceeds to discuss the historical and political context of the roles played by officials in the Secretariat. The empirical evidence is presented in three sections: the first on the background of the officials working in the Secretariat; the second on the individual roles they play within the institution; and finally, the third on how they perceive the role of the Secretariat as an institution involved in the making of European foreign policy.

## 2. Role theory as the background for analysis

The point of departure of this study is role theory and its assumption that humans behave in different ways that are predictable depending on their social identities and situations (Biddle, 1986: 68). Role theory literature provides a useful way to illustrate the empirical evidence, focusing on the Council Secretariat's officials. The article does not have the ambition to 'test the theory' or prove that it is the 'most appropriate' one to explain the functioning of the European foreign policy. However, this particular theoretical approach provides a good background for the study, as it derives its logic from a theatrical metaphor and assumes that actors behave in a predictable way, according to certain scripts. In this way, role theory provides a link between individuals (actors) and social structures (society/stage) (Aggestam, 2006: 12) and assumes a link between the roles and actors' behaviour. There are a number of definitions cited in the literature, but here we adopt a rather general one, understanding roles as 'the part one plays in an event or a process' (Searing, 1991: 1248).

In order to avoid conceptual misunderstandings, in the early literature a distinction was made between *role prescriptions*, related to the expectations attached to certain positions by external actors; *role performance*, related to the actual behaviour; and *role conceptions*, which focuses on an actor's own perception of his/her position and function, as well as the appropriate behaviour (Holsti, 1970: 239-240). The distinction between an actor's self-expectations and those held by others as to his/her role has divided empirical studies into two strands (as illustrated later by the example of the EU); this research fits into the first type. The focus of this study are roles *as they are perceived* by those 'playing' them and not the analysis of the actual role performance. Only if we understand first in what way the officials perceive their own roles (which is the aim of this study), will we be able to study the link between the roles and the actual behaviour and possible impact on the policy.

Despite the popularity of role theory in social sciences in general, there has not been much written on roles in political science in the last two decades. Arguably, one of the reasons was the ‘economic’ turn that the discipline underwent in the mid-1970s, moving away from a more sociological approach (Searing, 1991: X). Nevertheless, after a considerably long absence in the mainstream, recently sociological approaches have been receiving more attention from scholars in the fields of International Relations and European Studies. As assessed in one of the leading journals in the field, they ‘have the potential to bridge the gap between stylized dichotomies in international relations, as well as EU studies, such as rationalist versus constructivist approaches or ideas versus interest-based explanations’ (Saurugger, 2009: 937). For those studying international organizations this would mean, shifting the focus of research from member states to the attitudes and social representations of individuals.

In International Relations, the concept of role has been applied to states and their behaviour in the international system to explain the relations between nation states. For example, different roles such as Balancer or Aggressor have been conceptualized to account for the behaviour of states in the balance of power (Holsti, 1970: 234). This approach gained a new dimension when, at the beginning of the 1970s, Kali Holsti developed an innovative framework for national role conception in the field of foreign policy, where the conception of a role was based on the policymakers’ own definitions of ‘general kinds of decisions, rules and actions suitable to their state and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system’ (Holsti, 1970: 246). Naomi Wish (1980) pushed the study of individual role perceptions in foreign policy a step further by conducting empirical analysis that showed the links between role conceptions and policy behaviours. In the context of European states, Holsti’s work was fundamental to Lisbeth Aggestam’s (1999) study, that defined *role conceptions* as a ‘set of norms expressing expected foreign policy behaviour and action orientation’ to analyze and compare role statements from three member states, Germany, France and Britain, focusing on the perception of foreign policy by the decision-makers. She argued that such an approach provided new insights into how foreign policy was on one hand purposeful and on the other shaped by the institutional context.

The concept of roles has also been applied in the study of the EU and its role in the international system, yet mostly without an explicit link to role theory, by simply using ‘role’ as a substitute for influence (Elgström and Smith, 2006b: 5). The level of analysis in these studies was set either at the level of the member states or the Union itself. Some authors for example discussed the EU’s role as a global actor (e.g. Bretherton and Vogler, 1999; Hill, 1993, 1998) or its role as a promoter of certain norms and values as a ‘normative power’ (Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006; Smith, 2000). In most of these studies the EU’s role was derived from external expectations (Hill, 1998) or general EU discourse (Diez, 2005), rather than being systematically traced from the internal role perception of individual EU officials/decision-makers. Recently, a substantial contribution to our understanding of EU international roles is the volume edited by Ole Elgström and Michael Smith (2006a). The contributors use role theory in order to explain the characteristics of the EU in the

international system. What makes this work stand out from the main bulk of the literature is its emphasis on the internal sources (perceptions) of the EU's roles and the specific focus on agency.

This article, as traditional role theory prescribes, treats actors as holders of social positions, who hold expectations for their own behaviours and those of other actors (Biddle, 1986: 67). For the purpose of this research, we have to move a step further, as the actors we study are members of a particular institutional setting of the Council Secretariat with its social environment. Hence, this implies a particular institutional notion of structure within which roles operate (for more, see Hollis and Smith, 1986: 285). Role theory is well suited for this purpose, as it has a significant potential to capture the relations between agency and structure (Elgström and Smith, 2006c) by giving insights into the co-constitutive relations between 'self-understanding and structural conditions' (Manners, 2006: 81). In this case, the studied officials working in the Secretariat are not only passive actors performing the role assigned to them on the institutional stage, but they also take part in the construction of these roles – especially informally. Such informality is key to understanding the true roles of agents that are both constrained, but also empowered by their institutional environment, and which maintain a set of informal rules that are composed of norms and roles (Searing 1991: 1241). By organizing the study around the concept of roles, the analysis aims to also include the informal aspects of the Secretariat's work.

Even though this article does not address the direct link between the perceived roles and the actual behaviour of the agents, showing how the officials perceive their own tasks can be a first step to establish the connection with their actions. For instance, previous work analyzed the way in which the roles provided guidelines for policy behaviour of elites involved in decision-making in the foreign policy realm (see Wish 1980). This assumption is crucial in order to understand the practical implications of our study on the roles. Roles both constrain and enable the actors in their actions (Hollis and Smith 1986: 275). The constraint emerges from normative expectations related to the role – if one fails to meet the expectations and underperforms, it may cause criticism and a use of sanctions or other form of penalty. On the other hand, a role may also be a source of power, related to responsibility for fulfilling one's tasks. These expectations attached to the roles link role theory to the approach of new institutionalism and its 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen, 1989).

In this study we focus on two dimensions of individual actors' perceptions: (1) those relating to their own role within the institutional setting and (2) those concerning the role of their institution in the external environment. In the first case, role-bearers are the actors themselves, while in the latter case the role is attached to the institutional level. As the actors are an integral part of the institution, we cannot talk of external perceptions (or role prescription), but rather of role conceptions, deriving from the actors themselves. In order to avoid conceptual misunderstanding, it is important to note that we are not concerned here with the actual *role performance* (usually assessed in impact studies), even though critically comparing *role conceptions* with *role performance* would seem a logical next step in this

study. It is also important to note that roles do not have to be exclusive and, in theory, an actor may be fulfilling more than one at a time. This would also seem a relevant assumption for our research, since the roles of different parts of the Secretariat overlap and some officials may perform more than one role in parallel with each other e.g. an official might be both providing secretarial support and policy analysis for the Presidency. Finally, roles can be deployed in all phases of the policy-making process, from preparation of meetings to implementation (see also Mouritzen, 1990: 14). This can, however, also lead to role conflict, if different roles require different behaviours or status.

Role conflicts occur when ‘dominant role conceptions in the role-set are incompatible with one another’ (Aggestam, 2006: 23). Role conflict is thus likely to occur in the type of study conducted here – where new roles are being added over time, as the institution develops and as the original context in which the initial roles were developed changes. Often there is no consensus among the actors regarding the expectations attached to certain roles (Biddle, 1986: 76, 82) and this may also lead to a role conflict. If the situation is less acute and the roles simply do not fit together, role theorists have talked about ‘role malintegration’ (Biddle, 1986: 83). The social psychology literature has also explored the possible responses of actors in the case of role conflict (cf. Biddle, 1986: 83-34), suggesting a plethora of reactions, such as: choice or compromise among norms and, if this becomes impossible, withdrawal from the situation; or negotiations with others to change their expectations, changing their own behaviour or restructuring their own views. In any case, an actor would normally have some room for manoeuvre and the opportunity to choose which role prevails (Hollis and Smith, 1986: 276; Aggestam, 2006: 24-25).

To uncover possible role conflicts, we first need to identify the different roles that officials prescribe to the Council Secretariat and to themselves. As there is no such analysis to date, this article contributes to such an endeavour. The second contribution of this article lies in its attempt to determine whether role conflict(s) might occur, mainly, by examining the qualitative evidence from the interviews. In the next section we discuss some issues related to the methodology employed in this study, before moving to a detailed examination of the historical development of the Council Secretariat and how its formal role has changed over time.

### **3. Methodology**

This article is based on 46 interviews with Council Secretariat officials dealing with EU foreign and security policy, including those working in Directorate-General E (DG E) – External and Political-Military Affairs, but also in the Policy Unit, Solana’s cabinet, the EU Military Staff (EUMS), the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) and the Situation Centre (SitCen). Since there is no public database listing all the officials working for these bodies,<sup>1</sup> the sample was constructed with data obtained from the pilot interviews about

the distribution of officials in the Council Secretariat, in particular taking into account variables such as nationality, gender, and organisation. The methodology used combined quantitative (a closed-ended questionnaire) and qualitative methods (a semi-structured interview), together with primary and secondary documentary sources. Five rounds of interviews were conducted in Brussels between January and September 2009. The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes.

The survey was handed in person to the interviewees for them to fill in at the beginning of the meeting and included yes/no questions; questions where the respondents had to indicate one out of several alternatives; and questions where they could choose several alternatives. Interviewees were allowed to elaborate on the reasons for their answer, which provided invaluable qualitative data. Once the questionnaire was completed, a semi-structure interview followed. The script contained a number of open-ended questions that allowed the interviewee to talk at length and express their views and motivations. It explored topics such as interest in EU affairs, the interviewee's experiences as a Council Secretariat official, principles guiding the Council Secretariat's work and intra- and inter-institutional relations. All interviews were anonymous; references in the text contain only a coded number.

#### **4. The role of the Council Secretariat in foreign policy: a historical overview of institutional adaptation and change**

Before moving to the discussion of the role(s) of the Council Secretariat, it is necessary to outline here the process of transformation undergone by this institution in recent decades, which has facilitated the emergence of new individual and institutional roles as discussed later. It is worth noting that although a secretariat had been established to support the work of the Council at the very first meeting of the European Coal and Steel Community (Christiansen and Vanhoonaeker, 2008: 756), the formal task of this institution was to be circumscribed to the administrative management of meetings.

With the establishment of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) at the end of the 1960s, the creation of a permanent secretariat to serve in areas of foreign and security policy and, in particular, the physical site of the secretariat would become a subject of heated debate among the member states.<sup>2</sup> Because of these disagreements, for 17 years the EPC did not have a permanent secretariat. The rotating Presidency was responsible for providing administrative support to the EPC, and every six months the EPC's limited machinery and archives had to move from one capital to the next Presidency capital. But this arrangement entailed a huge burden for the Presidency and soon the member states realized that the EPC system required a permanent body to support its day-to-day work. The precursor of the EPC Secretariat can be found in the Troika system. The London Report (1981) established the Troika composed of the present, previous and subsequent Presidency in order to maintain continuity and consistency. To support the task of the current Presidency, the London Report foresaw a

limited administrative structure consisting of one official of the past and the future Presidency, being at the disposal of the Presidency at the helm (Smith, 2004: 166).

Even though member states tried hard to keep the EPC away from Brussels, perceived as the domain of the Commission, the Single European Act (1986) confirmed the creation of a permanent EPC Secretariat. The latter was based upon ‘an extended troika’, staffed with 17 officials, mostly officials from the previous, current and following Presidency, plus an archivist, administrative and communication staff and a Head of Secretariat (Tonra, 2000: 153). Since it was the only permanent body in the area of European foreign policy, the EPC Secretariat became an important body for maintaining institutional memory, it became, in Nuttall’s words, a ‘keeper of the books’ (Nuttall, 2000: 23). Although this had the effect of limiting flexibility and innovation in the EPC, it helped to ensure policy consistency. The EPC Secretariat also became a contact point for outsiders regarding EPC matters (ibid.). However, member states’ reservations meant that EPC and Community activities were kept strictly separated from each other to the extent that the EPC Secretariat was to be separated from the rest of the Council Secretariat ‘by doors with special locks on them’ (Allen, 1998: 50). Moreover, as Nuttall has mentioned (2000: 23):

“Member States had taken great care in drafting the SEA to ensure that the Secretariat had no powers of its own. It was placed under the authority of the Presidency, and could neither prepare papers on its own initiative nor represent EPC to the outside world.”

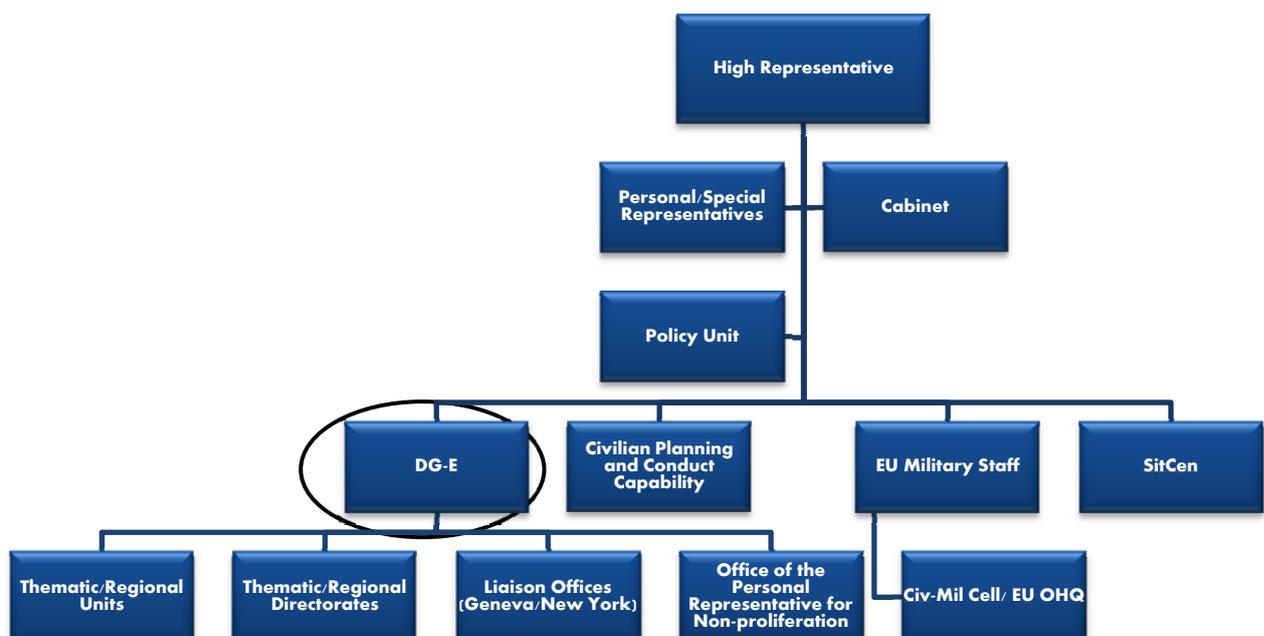
The Treaty of Maastricht (1991) did not change this state of affairs, but introduced some organisational changes. With the establishment of a single institutional framework and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EPC Secretariat was merged with the Council Secretariat. The newly established Directorate General E (DG E) consisted of two branches: one dealing with external economic relations and another one with the CFSP (the former EPC Secretariat) respectively (Nuttall, 2000: 251). While officials working on external economic relations – where the Commission has a leading role – focused on the ‘traditional [supportive] tasks of the Secretariat’, officials working in the CFSP unit developed new tasks assisting ‘the Presidency on substantive and conceptual issues, such as drafting agendas and providing policy papers’ (Dijkstra, 2008: 155; Nuttall, 2000: 252).

The Amsterdam Treaty (1999) resulted in a profound transformation of the Council Secretariat structures in the area of foreign policy. The creation of the post of the High Representative, supported by an Early Warning and Policy Unit (hereafter Policy Unit) transformed the nature of the Council Secretariat, adding a political function to its traditional administrative one. The appointment of a high-profile figure, the former Spanish Foreign Minister and NATO Secretary General Javier Solana also contributed to enhance the political profile of the Secretariat (Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008). Javier Solana, appointed in 1999, helped establish its reputation and a certain field of manoeuvre for the new post thanks to his active engagement in foreign and security issues, as shown, for instance, by his mediation during the crisis in Macedonia in 2001. Usually, perceived as less threatening than the Commission in the field of foreign affairs, the member states have entrusted the post with

resources – currently, the High Representative can draw on the resources of the Policy Unit, cabinet office, EU Military Staff, the Situation Centre, DG-E and the EU Special Representatives – and with significant mediating missions such as in the case of the Balkans, Ukraine or Iran. To some extent, the attempt to balance the power of the Commission in the communitarian sphere by building a strong actor in the CFSP area has produced the unforeseen result of creating a ‘Commission II’ (Buchet de Neuilly, 2002: 28).

Under the Amsterdam Treaty, the High Representative was to be supported by the Policy Unit with national seconded diplomats from each of the member states, a representative from the Commission and another one from the WEU Secretariat. The creation of the Policy Unit was in response to the shortcomings apparent during the Yugoslav conflict. The Policy Unit officials are seconded by the member states and thus, can turn to their capitals to gather information that can later be used in the CFSP decision-making process. In practice, its performance has hinged on the will of the member states to collaborate in providing the necessary information. Tensions have also arisen between the Policy Unit and DG-E officials, which has led to the integration of Policy Unit officials in the structures of DG-E in areas of particular concern for the EU such as the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The structure of DG-E has undergone other changes post-Amsterdam, the most significant one being the merger of the economic external relations and CFSP units. Within DG-E, new thematic and regional directorates have been created to reflect the increasing role of the EU in international relations. Two liaison offices have also been established in Geneva and New York (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Council Secretariat General’s Organisation Chart (1 December 2009)**<sup>3</sup>



Yet, the most important development in the last few years is the extension of Council Secretariat's responsibility in ESDP to carry out planning and executive functions. After the St. Malo summit (1998) and Cologne European Council (1999) establishing the European Security and Defence Policy, the Council Secretariat has undergone a series of structural reforms. New units have been created in DG-E to manage the political-military aspects of ESDP (Defence issues/Directorate 8) and civilian crisis management operations (Civilian Crisis Management/Directorate 9). The creation of the EUMS in 2001 (Council of the EU, 2001) and the recent establishment of the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability in August 2007 have also increased the operational capacities of the Council Secretariat in the field of military and civilian crisis management. SitCen has also been strengthened in recent years with the creation of a new analysis unit.<sup>4</sup>

The need to fulfil these new tasks has, however, imposed some strains on the Secretariat's structures, which were not originally designed for this type of tasks and has required the recruitment of a further battery of officials from the member states (seconded national experts) to cover these functions. In the case of civilian crisis management, these developments have clashed with the Commission and even with the member states, which feel that they are no longer in the driving seat.<sup>5</sup> It is also said to have increased tensions between different bureaucratic cultures (old administrative secretariat/new operational secretariat; civilian/military personnel) coexisting within the Council Secretariat (Christiansen, 2001: 756).

The Lisbon Treaty brings a whole new set of innovations in European foreign policy (cf. Whitman and Juncos, 2009). A significant change to the role of the Council Secretariat might result from the newly gained right of initiative of the double-hatted High Representative. Furthermore, the European External Action Service will assist the High Representative in fulfilling his/her mandate and will be staffed by officials from the Council Secretariat, the Commission and staff seconded from the diplomatic services of the member states. As noted elsewhere, the Lisbon Treaty will transform the role of the Council Secretariat by 'outsourcing' the current foreign policy functions and the implementation of EU crisis management to the new External Action Service (Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008: 767).

## **5. Who are the EU's diplomats?**

As shown in the previous section, the Council Secretariat has undergone a process of continuous transformation in the last two decades – at the time of writing another round of restructuring was due to take place with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. The Council Secretariat has also become one of the fastest growing institutions in the EU, in particular, those bodies and directorates dealing with foreign and security policy. In October 2009, it was estimated that more than 500 officials work in foreign policy related issues in

various units: DG-E (approximately 140 officials), the Policy Unit (31 officials), Solana's cabinet (20 officials), the EU Military Staff (181 military officials, 25 civilian officials, plus 5 planners), the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (approximately 60 officials) and the Situation Centre (approximately 100 officials).<sup>6</sup> As seen in Figure 1, the Council Secretariat has expanded from the original DG-E to include a wide array of organisations.

The interviews conducted by the authors provided interesting data about the 'demographics' of Council Secretariat officials. A typical Council Secretariat official in our sample was male (73.9%), between 30 and 39 years old (39.1%) and came from an old member state (78.3%). Although a majority of interviewees had been recruited through a general concours (54.3%), there was a significant number of nationally seconded officials (21.7%) and officials recruited through other procedures such as temporary agents or through a specialized concours (23.9%). Their nature of employment was in most cases civilian (84.8 %) and they had been working for less than 5 years in the Council Secretariat (54.3%) on non-ESDP matters (58.7%). The length of service varies among national seconded officials. For instance, EUMS officials typically serve 3 years, although it can be extended to 4 years in some circumstances.

The majority of our interviewees had university education in the area of Social Sciences (73.9%) and had studied at European universities (43.5%), North American universities (2.2 %), European and North American universities (17.4%) or other universities (10.9%). Half of the respondents had some kind of international experience attached to an embassy in another EU member state (26.1%) or non-EU member state (13%), as a civil servant in an international organization (15.2%), as a European Commission civil servant (8.7%) and/or attached to a diplomatic mission towards an international organization (2.2%). The majority of the interviewees had also had some domestic experience working for their national administration (65%).

Having discussed the historical evolution of the Council Secretariat and considered the people dealing with European foreign policy on a day-to-day basis, the next section explores in more detail the role of the Council Secretariat in this policy area.

## **6. The role(s) of the Council Secretariat**

As explained earlier in the text, the aim of this article is not to examine the formal and informal functions of the Council Secretariat and each of its units or how it *actually* works – which has been done elsewhere (see Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008; Dijkstra, 2008) – but as *perceived* by the individuals involved in these activities, the Council Secretariat officials themselves. We first look at how Council Secretariat officials see their own individual roles. Then we move on to how they perceive the role of the institution as a whole.

### 6.1. Individual roles as seen by the officials

In order to explore the individual roles of Council Secretariat officials, this research seeks to reconstruct these roles by taking as a starting point the individual tasks performed by Council Secretariat officials as they perceived them. In order to do so, we asked officials to identify those tasks that were more relevant for them in their daily activities from a list of eight and rank them in order of their priorities. The tasks were as follows:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) mediate conflicts in the Council between the member states;
- (2) provide administrative support to Council meetings (room arrangement, minutes...);
- (3) support the Presidency's role by drafting initiatives and conclusions;
- (4) provide with information and a common analysis;
- (5) identify new policy problems and devise new policies;
- (6) defend the Council Secretariat prerogatives vis-à-vis the Commission;
- (7) provide expertise for the design and implementation of ESDP operations;
- (8) promote specific national interests.

As shown in Table 1, the individual task that was considered to be most important was to provide with information and common analysis, followed by supporting the Presidency and identifying new policy problems and devise new policies. This highlights the ambition and willingness to play an active role by Council Secretariat officials in the design of European foreign policy. The kind of information provided by Council officials depends on their specific responsibilities: from the provision of more technical and legal assistance (from those working on external relations) to political advice (Policy Unit and cabinet officials, for instance). Other supporting tasks that scored highly were providing with expertise for the planning and implementation of ESDP operations, mediate conflicts between the member states, followed by providing administrative support. Only a minority of the respondents considered defending Council Secretariat prerogatives vis-à-vis the Commission as one of their key tasks and only a few respondents identified promoting specific national interests as a relevant task.

**Table 1: Individual tasks (ranked in order of priority)**

	Provide with information and common analysis	Support the Presidency	Identify new problems and policies	Provide expertise for ESDP operations	Mediate conflicts	Provide administrative support	Defend the Council Secretariat prerogatives	Promote specific national interests
Valid	45	45	45	45	45	45	45	45
Mean	6.31	5.82	4.44	3.29	3.11	2.89	1.64	.16

*Values represent mean of importance. 8= Most important; 1= Less important; 0 = N/A*

If we look at the data in more detail, there are a few things worth noting. Firstly, the way individuals perceive these roles depends on where they ‘sit’. This is consistent with what has been mentioned in role theory studies (Mouritzen, 1990), but also in ‘bureaucratic politics’ approaches (Allison and Zelikow 1999) and neo-institutionalist analyses (March and Olsen, 1989). For instance, providing information and common analysis is the most important task according to Policy Unit, cabinet and Sitcen officials. According to DG-E officials, their most important duty is to support the Presidency. This is also the case for the CPCC, together with providing expertise for ESDP operations. For EUMS officials, the most important task is to plan and monitor the implementation of the ESDP. These results are also in line with the tasks that are often associated with each of these units in their official mandates or as described in the literature (see for instance, Dijkstra, 2008). For example, the role of the EUMS is officially described as providing ‘in-house military expertise for the Secretary-General/High Representative (SG/HR)’ and performing the following functions: early warning; strategic planning; and situation assessment.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the traditional task of the Secretariat, that of providing administrative support to Council meetings – see for instance the Council’s Rules of Procedure, art. 23.3 (Council of the EU, 2004) –, is generally perceived by officials to be of secondary importance, in particular in the area of foreign policy. However, again there are different views as to how important this task is depending on which unit they belong to (see Table 2). For instance, while DG-E officials considered this task as a very important one, for Policy Unit officials it was less important and officials in the CPCC and the cabinet did not consider this task to be amongst their normal duties at all. Third, the latter also demonstrates that although some of these tasks might be conceived to be cumulative (Dijkstra, 2008: 161), i.e. that officials who carry out planning and executive tasks in ESDP also provide information, support the Presidency and remain responsible for administrative tasks (room booking, minute taking...), that is not always the case. Thus, for nineteen officials providing administrative support was not amongst their responsibilities and for six of them providing support to the Presidency was not one of their duties. Fourth, in general, officials did not consider promoting specific national interest as part of their day-to-day responsibilities with the exception of those working for the Policy Unit. This is understandable given the role of the Policy Unit as a link between the member states and the High Representative.

**Table 2: Individual tasks: administrative support provided to Council meetings per unit**

UNIT	Mean
DG-E	4.04
Policy Unit	2
CPCC	0
EUMS	1.43
Sitcen	2.33
Cabinet	0

*Values represent mean of importance. 8= Most important; 1= Less important; 0 = N/A*

Fifth, differences regarding which tasks they perceived to be most important were also pronounced according to basis of recruitment. While these differences were not so important between nationally seconded and officials belonging to the category ‘other’ (special concours or temporary agents), there were significant differences between these two categories and those recruited through a general concours (traditional Secretariat officials) as can be seen in Table 3. For the former, the most important task was to provide with information and common analysis, followed by providing with expertise in the field of ESDP (for nationally seconded) and identify new problems and policies (‘other’). What is interesting is that nationally seconded or temporary agents considered traditional secretariat tasks (minute taking, room booking) to be less important, while for civil servants, this was still a very important task. Supporting the Presidency also scored highly among traditional functionaries, while that was not the case among nationally seconded and officials appointed through other procedures. Civil servants were also not so involved in ESDP tasks. As claimed by one official, nationally seconded officials usually have to adjust to their new role, as they are more accustomed to giving policy advice, while those recruited through general concours are more used to providing traditional secretariat’s services.<sup>9</sup> Other officials used the terms ‘diplomats’ to describe the former category and ‘bureaucrats’ for the latter.

**Table 3: Individual tasks according to basis of recruitment**

Basis of recruitment	Mediate conflicts	Provide administrative support	Support the Presidency	Provide with information and a common analysis	Identify new problems and policies	Defend the Council Secretariat prerogatives	Provide expertise for ESDP operations	Promote specific national interests
General concours	3.72	4.00	6.72	6.56	4.28	1.68	2.32	.08
Nationally seconded	2.00	1.89	4.44	5.33	3.67	1.11	5.00	.00
Other	2.64	1.18	4.91	6.55	5.45	2.00	4.09	.45

*Values represent mean of importance. 8= Most important; 1= Less important; 0 = N/A*

These specific tasks are also important to build more general roles performed by Council Secretariat officials. In previous studies, a number of different roles were identified e.g. Technician, Advocate, Legalist, Broker, Trustee, Facilitator, Partisan, Policymaker and Ombudsman in a study of politicians by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) or Conflict Preventor, Active Mediator, Communication Facilitator, Boundary Guardian, etc. in a study of international civil servants by Mouritzen (1990). Based on secondary literature, our empirical research and some of the tasks discussed before, we singled out the following roles

individuals could perform with the following expectations attached to them (note that these roles are not mutually exclusive):

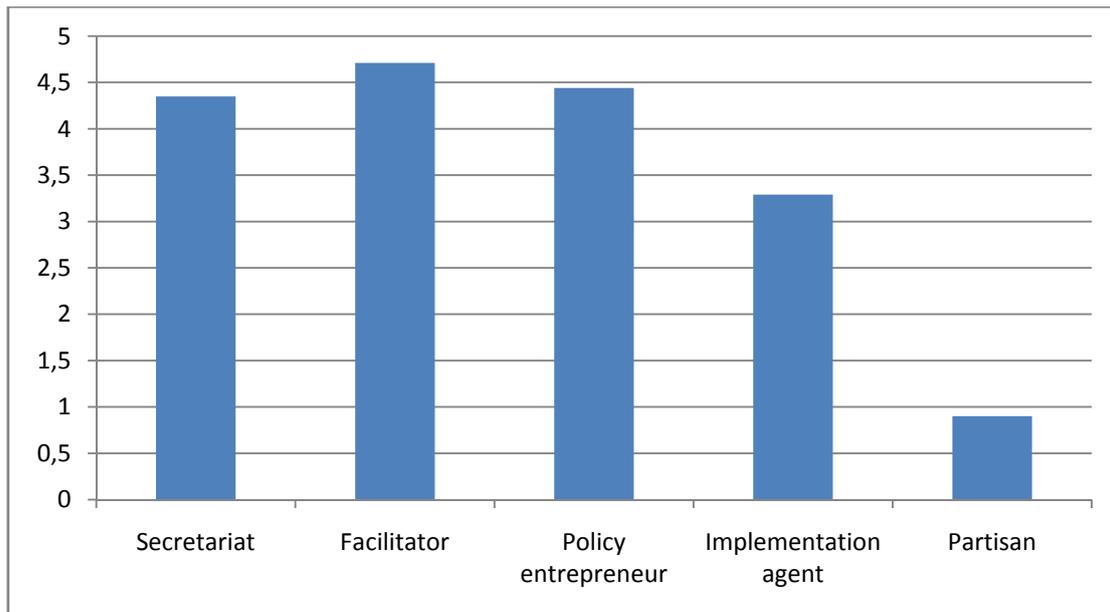
- *Secretariat*. This role would include the following tasks: provide administrative support to Council meetings (room arrangement, minutes...) and support the Presidency's role by drafting initiatives and conclusions.
- *Facilitator*. This role would entail the provision of information and common analysis and facilitating consensus-building (mediating conflicts between the member states in the Council).
- *Policy Entrepreneur* which it would mainly involve identifying new policy problems and devising new policies.
- *Implementation Agent*, including the provision of expertise for the design and implementation ESDP operations.
- *Partisan*, supporting or defending specific interests – those of the Council Secretariat vis-à-vis the Commission or specific interests of the member states.

Figure 2 shows the aggregated averages (means) for each of these roles. Three of these roles are considered to be particularly important for officials in the Council Secretariat. The first one is that of Facilitator of consensus (together with the Presidency), followed by that of Policy Entrepreneur and third, the role of Secretariat. As mentioned before regarding individual tasks, overall, Council Secretariat officials saw themselves as taking an active part in the formulation of European foreign policy through the provision of information, common analysis, facilitating consensus and devising new policies. One official referred to himself and other colleagues as 'masters of political dialogue'.<sup>10</sup> Another one affirmed: 'we combine the administrative skills of preparing drafts with political skills, used in negotiations'.<sup>11</sup> When asked about their individual roles, officials would use phrases such as 'co-defining EU policy' towards a certain country or state and would point to their ability as individual officials to influence EU policy through the drafting of policy papers and issuing recommendations.<sup>12</sup> They also mentioned that if they were to leave the Secretariat they would miss most the 'ability to influence the decisions'.<sup>13</sup> This was particularly the case among officials working in the Policy Unit. For example, one official argued that 'in the Policy Unit, you have more room for manoeuvre and I would say you are more often asked for your own views and input [and] to reflect and propose new elements of foreign policy. So, the room for manoeuvre there is certainly greater than in the regular secretariat'.<sup>14</sup> The role of Implementation Agent understandably is not shared by the majority of officials as most of the interviewees did not deal with ESDP (58.7%). Also, as mentioned before, only a small number of Council Secretariat officials saw themselves as partisans either promoting the interests of the Council Secretariat or particular member states.

Interestingly, many officials did not see these roles as mutually exclusive and would choose several among them, despite the fact that one might argue that there is an intrinsic conflict

between some of these roles, in particular, between those of Secretariat and Policy Entrepreneur and those of Facilitator (i.e. honest broker) and Partisan. As we will see in the following section, this was also the case with institutional roles. In the following section, we discuss how these findings match the perceptions about institutional roles (of the Council Secretariat) amongst its officials.

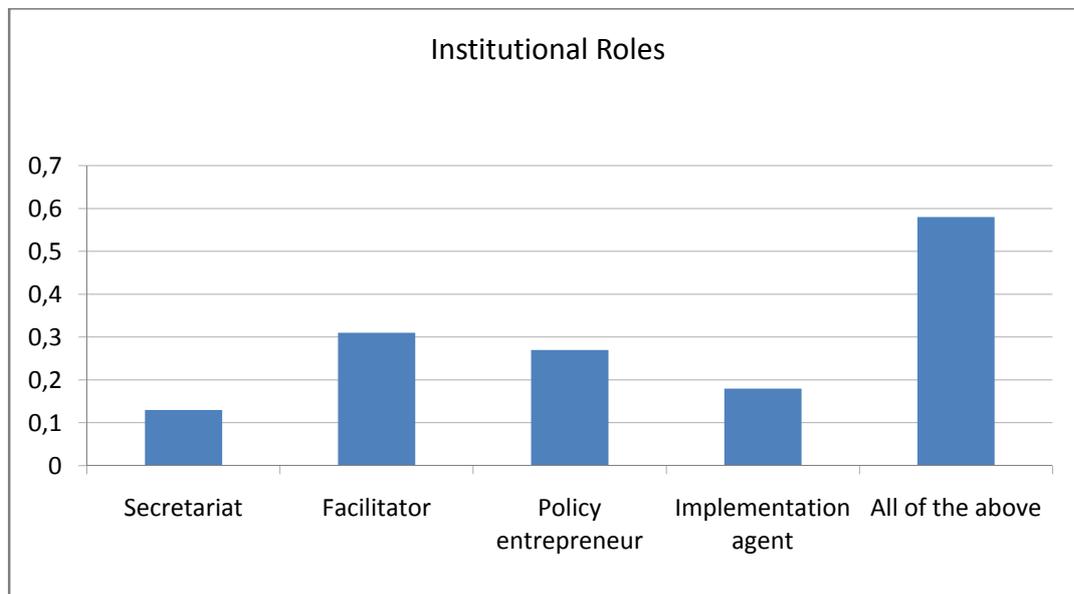
**Figure 2: Roles of Council Secretariat officials**



*Values in the y-axis represent aggregated means of importance.*

## 6.2. Institutional roles as seen by the officials

In addition to asking about the officials' individual role in the Secretariat, as described in the previous section, we also enquired about the role of their institution in the decision-making process – both in the survey and later in the interview. As mentioned before, our approach is based on the assumption that it is possible to accurately reconstruct officials' viewpoints on the basis of what they are telling us – which presupposes they know what their roles are presumably well (Searing 1994: 27). Here, four different roles of the Council Secretariat as an entity were singled out: that of Secretariat, Facilitator, Policy Entrepreneur and Implementation Agent, with similar expectations as discussed in the previous section. The results are shown in Figure 3. A majority of respondents thought the Secretariat was fulfilling all of the aforementioned roles.

**Figure 3: Institutional Roles of the Council Secretariat**

*Values in the y-axis represent aggregated means of importance.*

Many respondents were double-checking with us to make sure whether we were asking them about their own personal role or about the role of their institution, which to them seemed to be an important distinction. This is underlined by a discrepancy between the roles assigned to different officials/parts of the Secretariat and the institution as such. This fragmentation of roles assigned to different parts of the Secretariat is also sometimes a source of frustration and in some cases normative role conflicts. Some officials complained that the civilian and military sides should listen more to each other and coordinate better, while at the moment the Council Secretariat is ‘missing coordination authority that combines capacities of the Council’.<sup>15</sup> This may be a result of a historical development of the Council, with different parts being added over time – and with different roles and expectations attached to them.

None of the respondents limited the role of the institution to that of a mere Secretariat, despite acknowledging it was the oldest and the most traditional role of the institution. Even though, as shown in the previous section, many officials did not themselves conduct secretarial work, they would still indicate that it remains a very important role. One of the most important features of this role of Secretariat was to ensure effectiveness, i.e. ‘running things smoothly’, for instance, in the working groups.

Regarding the Facilitator role, a high-ranked official emphasized that the Secretariat’s added value to the making of European foreign policy is understanding the motivations of the member states and being a mediator that cannot be separated from the member states; ‘we should be the perfect mediator – that is the value added’.<sup>16</sup> Another official working on ESDP matters claimed: ‘we try to identify synergies between 27 MoD’s [Ministries of Defence], that is our daily life’.<sup>17</sup> The crucial characteristic of this role, repeated by many, was neutrality

and attempts to resist member states' pressures. One official compared the Council Secretariat to the Secretariat of the United Nations (UN), and argued that due to the fact that in the EU the Secretariat only started dealing with highly political issues recently, there is more tradition of 'not yielding to the member states' and staying more neutral than in the UN.<sup>18</sup>

Some respondents were keen to point out that the Secretariat has over time moved towards a Policy Entrepreneur role in the foreign-policy realm. Officials emphasized that drafting mattered<sup>19</sup> and working with the Presidency to set the agenda was 'a source of influence'<sup>20</sup> for the Secretariat. An official involved in ESDP matters emphasized that some member states simply do not have manpower to prepare policy drafts and they take the Council Secretariat's help for granted.<sup>21</sup> Other officials noted that, although not the only one, the Secretariat was 'one of the actors that shapes the policy itself'<sup>22</sup> and had a task of 'developing the content of foreign policy'.<sup>23</sup> It was noted by the interviewees that the overall level of influence of the Council Secretariat depends on the issue, the level of convergence among the member states and the strength of the Presidency in place.<sup>24</sup> The Secretariat is 'more in control' regarding some issues than others, for example, in the case of relations with Macedonia, where crisis management was involved. This is considered to be an example of a success story for the Secretariat. It was also very involved in setting-up the double-hatted Union's representative in Kosovo.<sup>25</sup> Another official gave example of a high involvement of the Secretariat in drafting status of forces agreements.<sup>26</sup> This was contrasted with the role in the case of relations with Russia, which are very sensitive, where there is high divergence between the member states and high salience of trade on the agenda.<sup>27</sup> The role of the Secretariat also increases when the Commission is not involved in the issues, such as in the ESDP area. Some interviewees also claimed that the role of Policy Entrepreneur was dependent on which country would hold the Presidency. For instance, there was less influence on the part of the Secretariat during the French Presidency and more during the Czech one.<sup>28</sup> It was also noted that a lot of what the Secretariat does 'behind the scenes' is 'not visible' and it is the Presidency who usually takes the credit for the work done.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, there were also officials from DG-E who believed that it was 'inappropriate' for the Council Secretariat to take the initiative without the Presidency being fully involved.<sup>30</sup> This may be caused by the fact that there is no complete agreement about the Policy Entrepreneur role within the Secretariat itself and even a role conflict between the Facilitator and Policy Entrepreneur roles. While for the former neutrality is crucial, the latter makes choices regarding policy initiatives to promote. These different understandings about what the role of the Council Secretariat should be were particularly noticeable between Council officials dealing with traditional first pillar issues in DG-E (external relations) and national seconded officials working for the Policy Unit on CFSP issues.

Finally, the last role indicated by the Secretariat officials was that of Implementation Agent. Respondents usually made a clarification that this role is limited to ESDP related tasks and implementation of strategies by those advising the EU Special Representatives (EUSR).

Hence, while many respondents would not choose this option as their individual role, they would still opt to include it within the institutional roles of the Secretariat.

We also asked our respondents about their views on the role of their institution vis-à-vis other institutions, especially the European Commission. In the literature, the Council Secretariat ‘has been regarded as the institution that is more “intergovernmental” than the Commission’ (Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008: 764). Along these lines, one respondent stated that the Secretariat was ‘more neutral’ than the Commission, which usually has its own agenda to push, as they make their own policy choices, while the Secretariat is at the service of the member states.<sup>31</sup> Another official stressed that the Secretariat was much more cautious than the Commission with a more balanced approach, ‘listening’ to what member states are saying.<sup>32</sup> He admitted that the Facilitator role made the Secretariat less ambitious in some policy fields than the Commission (which yet again signals there are tensions between the roles), but it would instead make sure all member states had a say if they wanted to do so on new initiatives.<sup>33</sup> Compared to other institutions, one official summarized:

“the Parliament is political, the Commission has its own agenda and tries to be independent from the member states and the Council Secretariat General’s contribution is to move things forward [...] We contribute to define the line’ and in order to fulfill this, the officials need to know and carry out appropriate procedures and ‘not be too stubborn, but flexible’.”<sup>34</sup>

Another one emphasized that the Secretariat mediates between the politics of the member states and the technocratic approach of the Commission.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, some officials highlighted the political role of the Council Secretariat ‘pushing’ particular agendas, with one of them claiming that the Commission was ‘more technical and shines away from politics, that is where the Policy Unit comes along’.<sup>36</sup> In sum, there is still no agreement as to how neutral and apolitical the Council Secretariat should be, which, as mentioned before, demonstrates the existence of a role conflict.

Overall, the majority of officials pointed out that the Secretariat was fulfilling all four roles: Secretariat, Facilitator, Policy Entrepreneur and Implementation Agent. There was less agreement regarding the normative aspects of this development, as not everyone believed it was a ‘good thing’ for the Secretariat to take initiatives on its own and attempt to shape the policy and/or its outcome. Hence, there is lack of a role consensus among the Secretariat’s officials, an indication of an existing role conflict. This may be related to the fact that there is some friction between the roles, especially between the two neutral Secretariat and Facilitator and active Policy Entrepreneur. Still, some respondents admitted that it was exactly the transformation of the Secretariat and gaining new roles that brought influence with them.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article, we have drawn on role theory in order to examine the Council Secretariat from an ‘insiders’ perspective, or the way in which the officials see themselves and the institution they work for. Borrowing sociological concepts, the article discussed not only the perceptions of individual and institutional roles, but also how role conflicts emerged over time.

The article presents new insights into the Council Secretariat General by showing the background of the officials, e.g. the number assigned to different units, the nature of their employment, where they come from, what their education background is and what career they had before. It also allows us to understand their own take on their work and therefore provides a different, often complementary, account to previous analyses in the literature based on historical accounts or impact studies. In this way it allows for a more rounded understanding on the Secretariat’s work, with emphasis on role as a framework that guides officials’ behaviour. In order to study the impact of role perception on their behaviour in the future, the perceived roles had first to be established.

The article shows officials’ perceptions of two different sets of roles: those held by them individually and those attributed to the Secretariat as an institution. Regarding individual roles, the empirical evidence confirmed that they differed according to the recruitment procedure (civil servants, nationally seconded), but also the unit in which the official was placed. For instance, providing information and common analysis is a crucial task in the Policy Unit, cabinet and Sitcen, while DG-E officials emphasized support to the Presidency. A different view came from the Kortenbergh building, which is home to the EUMS, among other agencies. Here, the officials saw themselves as having an active role in providing early warning, strategic planning and situation assessment. The traditional task of providing administrative support was not considered by these officials (as well as those from the Policy Unit, CPCC, SitCen and the cabinet) to be of high importance in their every day work.

When asked about their individual roles, Council Secretariat officials chose those of Facilitator of consensus, Policy Entrepreneur and Secretariat, in this order. Most Secretariat officials perceived their institution as fulfilling all four roles singled out in this contribution: Secretariat, Facilitator, Policy Entrepreneur and Implementation Agent. The order of perceived roles was similar to the case of individual roles, with the difference that Implementation Agent came before the role of Secretariat and that the majority of respondents saw their institution as fulfilling all four roles *at the same time*.

The article has also shown that a role conflict exists between the Secretariat and Facilitator, on the one hand, and Policy entrepreneur, on the other, due to the different skills required by each of these roles (e.g. remaining neutral vs. taking the initiative) and the difficulties involved in performing them simultaneously (either by an official or the institution). One could think of this as a *functional* role clash. Such a situation may have its roots in the historical development of the Secretariat. The historical background discussed in this article

has demonstrated how different parts of the Secretariat were ‘added-up’ to its existing structures – with the most significant changes introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam and the rapid development of the ESDP – often with different expectations attached to them. In effect, there is no consensus among the officials regarding the most important role of the Secretariat or even whether gaining more influence as a result of recent developments is a ‘good thing’. This has led to what one might call *normative* role clash, in other words, when an official’s role perception clashes with the perceptions held by other colleagues, in particular as to whether the development of new roles is an appropriate or ‘good’ thing. This research could be taken further, for example, to investigate in what ways different officials react to such conflicts and what underlines their choices over which role is most appropriate at a given moment. Such role conflicts may constrain the intra-institutional coordination and, in effect, also undermine coherence and effectiveness.

Finally, one qualification must be made. Due to the changes envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty, the roles of individual officials and the Council Secretariat are bound to change, with some of the desk officers being moved to the European External Action Service (EEAS). At the time of writing (November 2009), many details regarding the exact design of the future service are still unclear. However, the findings of this study may have important implications for the emerging European diplomatic service. The important aspect of this is whether the conflicting roles will be institutionally decoupled, with the traditional Secretariat remaining in the Council Secretariat, while more active parts, currently fulfilling the roles of Policy Entrepreneur and Implementation Agent, being moved to the EEAS to support the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. For the moment, such arguments are not present within the debate on the shape of the new service, which focuses predominantly on the division of power between the member states and EU institutions.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Information about officials working in DG-E can be obtained at 'EU Who is who, the official directory of the European Union', accessible at <http://europa.eu/whoiswho/public/>. No information is made available about officials working in the EUMS and SitCen.

<sup>2</sup> Some member states (mainly, the Benelux and Italy) argued for the secretariat to be established in Brussels, but this was opposed by France since it could risk a 'communitarisation' of the EPC. Instead,

France pushed for a secretariat to be based in Paris, something rejected by those member states which wanted the progressive incorporation of the EPC into the Community structures (Smith, 2004: 166).

<sup>3</sup> Author's own data (October 2009). This chart reflects the organisation as it stood on 1 December 2009, but has since changed.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the authors, no 41.

<sup>5</sup> Authors' interview with a national diplomat, Brussels, 15 November 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Authors' own calculations and interview data.

<sup>7</sup> These tasks were singled out in the literature (see Christiansen and Vanhoonacker, 2008; Dijkstra, 2008) and during the pilot interviews. To ensure consistency, we check their answer to this question against their answer to another question we asked them to identify the two or three most important tasks involved in their role as Council Secretariat officials.

<sup>8</sup> See [Hhttp://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.aspx?id=279&lang=enH](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.aspx?id=279&lang=enH), last accessed 5 November 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 38 and 23.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with the authors, no. 1, 25 and 36.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 37; also no. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with the authors, no. 28.