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# The mainstreaming of EU affairs: a challenge for parliamentary administrations

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## ABSTRACT

Past research has identified a trend towards the bureaucratisation of the parliamentary scrutiny of EU affairs. It highlighted the role of parliamentary staff in selecting relevant issues, advising on subsidiarity and procedures and drafting of opinions and resolutions. However, while administrators clearly play a role, less is known about the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations. In particular, the impact of the growing Europeanisation of sectoral committees on the Europeanisation of staff is unexplored. This article presents data from a survey of parliamentary administrations in 2021, which shows that the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations extends beyond the main units in charge of EU affairs and affects sectoral committee staff more generally. At the same time, it reveals that the organisation of staff support for EU affairs varies greatly across the national parliaments depending on the organisation of the political scrutiny, on administrative capacity and on pre-existing units.

**KEYWORDS** Parliament; staff; administrator; scrutiny; interparliamentary cooperation; Early Warning System

## Introduction

The literature on parliamentary administrations in EU affairs has shown that staff plays an important support function. In addition to their core task of organisational support, administrators often provide procedural advice, substantive advice, help with the preselection of relevant EU issues and sometimes even with the drafting of reasoned opinions, resolutions and other parliamentary decisions (Högenauer et al., 2016; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015). In addition, Neuhold and Högenauer (2016) illustrate the crucial role of the network of permanent representatives of national parliaments in the European Parliament (NPRs) in the day-to-day coordination of scrutiny across national parliaments. In parallel to these comparative studies on the

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extent of bureaucratisation of EU affairs scrutiny, academics have started to conceptualise the roles of staff (Högenauer et al., 2016) and to analyse the nature of the political checks on bureaucratic activity (Christiansen et al., 2014; Winzen, 2014) and to compare the work of parliamentary staff to executive bureaucracies (cf. this special issue).

However, while we are beginning to understand the *bureaucratisation* of EU affairs scrutiny, we know much less about the *Europeanisation* of parliamentary staff, i.e. about the extent to which national parliaments employ EU experts, the range of EU-related tasks that EU experts and other staff need to perform and the extent to which different staff units have developed an EU component. As the comparative studies (Högenauer et al., 2016; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015) show that parliamentary staff is involved to a considerable extent in EU affairs scrutiny in all cases, one can of course assume that all national parliamentary administrations in the EU are Europeanised to at least some extent: They all employ EU experts and they all deal with EU affairs. However, there are many things about the Europeanisation of national parliamentary administrations that we do not understand, in large part because there still is a dearth of relevant data: For example, Högenauer and Christiansen (2015) show that the number of EU experts per parliament varies widely, but there is no ‘good’ explanation in terms of size of the country, EU competences of the parliament or accession date (Högenauer, 2019). This may be in part due to the fact that we do not even fully understand the organisation of EU support. National parliaments employ experts that support their European Affairs Committees (EACs), but we do not know to what extent they employ other EU experts that support sectoral committees or that work in the research service or some other central unit.

An understanding of the organisation of EU affairs support is particularly important in the context of recent trends in the Europeanisation of national parliaments. Thus, Gattermann et al. (2016) argue on the basis of an extensive literature review that EU affairs scrutiny has become increasingly ‘mainstreamed’: In most parliaments it is no longer under the sole control of the EAC, but is also covered by sectoral committees. In some cases sectoral committees play a subordinate role, and it is up to the EAC to consult them when it sees fit. In other cases the consultation of sectoral committees is mandatory. In yet other cases the sectoral committees are fully in charge of EU issues that fall in their domain. Karlas (2012) shows that only four out of 27 lower chambers, namely the Austrian Nationalrat, the Polish Sejm, the Romanian Camera as well as the Maltese Parliament, have reserved EU affairs scrutiny exclusively for EACs.

These different directions of Europeanisation are likely to have consequences for the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations, as they create different types of demand for support. The key question of this

article is therefore to what extent the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations mirrors the Europeanisation of the political dimension of parliaments? To what extent has to organisation of administrative support changed in the last decade and what is the administrative capacity of sectoral committees with EU competences? These questions are important to improve our understanding of the capacity of national parliaments for EU affairs scrutiny.

For this purpose, this article will first present an overview of the current literature. It will then present an overview over the mainstreaming of EU affairs across the EU-27 parliaments, followed by a section on the Europeanisation of staff support. The study covers all 11 Upper Houses and 23/27 Lower Houses (see data section below).

### **State of the art: parliamentary administrations and EU affairs scrutiny**

National parliaments are traditionally considered late-comers in EU policy-making. In the early decades of European integration, national parliaments were largely bystanders. When national parliaments began to take an interest in EU affairs in the 1970s many of them had few formal rights. Their influence over EU affairs was further affected by the shift towards qualified majority voting on the European level, which complicated the control of the government (Norton, 1996; O'Brennan & Raunio, 2007). Maurer and Wessels (2001) still considered most national parliaments weak at the beginning of the 2000s due to a combination of limited powers and low motivation.

Unfortunately we know little about the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations in those early decades, as more systematic comparative studies only emerged after the Treaty of Lisbon. However, those studies point towards the fact that the dynamics of the 2000s led not only to an increasing Europeanisation of national parliaments, but also to changes in the organisation and work of their administrations (e.g. Högenauer et al., 2016).

In the 2000s, the literature argued that national parliaments started to take a more sustained interest in EU affairs and were reversing the trend of deparliamentarisation (e.g. Raunio & Wiberg, 2009; Winzen, 2012). Studies tended to emphasise the role of European Affair Committees (EACs) in empowering parliaments (e.g. Auel, 2005; Bergman et al., 2003). The pressure exercised by national parliaments led to a stronger recognition of the role of national parliaments in the Draft Constitutional Treaty and later the Lisbon Treaty, which then in turn provided new incentives for the Europeanisation of national parliaments.

However, Gattermann et al. (2016) argue that the incentives provided by the Treaty of Lisbon led to a change in the manifestation of Europeanisation

and, in particular, to the involvement of a broader range of actors in EU affairs scrutiny. This trend is known as ‘mainstreaming’ in the UK and Ireland and as ‘decentralisation’ in the Netherlands (Carter & McLeod, 2006; van Tweede Kamer, 2006) and captures the idea that EU affairs should not be dealt with in isolation, but be integrated into the work of all relevant parliamentary bodies alongside related domestic issues. Gattermann et al. (2016) argue that mainstreaming has up to four dimensions including a more active involvement of sectoral committees, the organisation of dedicated staff support, the participation in inter-parliamentary cooperation and a greater presence of EU issues in plenary debates. The committee dimension is particularly relevant for this chapter, as it is likely to have a direct effect on the Europeanisation of different staff groups.

Gattermann et al. (2016) identify three main external pressures for Europeanisation in the direction of mainstreaming: The first long-term pressure for Europeanisation are the expanding competences of the European Union. As the EU regulates an ever-growing number of policy issues, the domestic political space slowly shrinks and national parliaments can either accept a slow decline in their relevance, or push back and carve out a role for themselves in EU affairs. This trend first led to the creation of EACs, but there is arguably a tipping point where decentralisation or mainstreaming becomes more attractive. When this tipping point is reached is likely to depend on a combination of ambition (how many policy areas and specific issues the parliament want to juggle) and capacity (size of the EAC, resources of the EAC).

The second opportunity/pressure stems from the developments in the context of the Treaty of Lisbon, namely the creation of the Political Dialogue in 2006 and the Early Warning System (EWS). The EWS allows national parliaments to check an EU legislative proposal for a breach of the principle of subsidiarity, in which case they can issue a reasoned opinions to put the European Commission under pressure to revise, amend or withdraw the proposal (cf. Buskjaer Rasmussen & Kluger Dionigi, 2018; Malang et al., 2017 for a discussion of the EWS and the Political Dialogue). Each parliament has two votes, which are split in the case of bicameral parliaments. If national parliaments want to put pressure on the European Commission, they need at least 1/3 of the national parliaments to find a breach of subsidiarity, so that they can issue a ‘yellow card’ and require the European Commission to either change or withdraw its proposal or to justify it better. The deadline for the adoption of reasoned opinions is eight weeks, which is relatively short by the standard of parliamentary procedures. Thus, the successful use of this new tool requires expertise, administrative support and coordination with other parliaments. This puts a strain on EACs. In addition, under the Political Dialogue, national parliaments can communicate substantive comments on EU legislative proposals to the European Commission, and sectoral

committees are arguably more likely to have substantive expertise. As a result, national parliament obtained – for the first time – the opportunity to engage in a regular dialogue with the European Commission and to scrutinise compliance with the principle of subsidiarity. How positive this development really is has been subject to debate. Critics tend to argue that national parliament gained limited additional powers that risk distracting them from their main task of controlling the government (e.g. De Wilde, 2012; De Wilde & Raunio, 2018; Jancic, 2015). However, others have argued that these new powers allow national parliament to fulfil their democratic function in the EU (e.g. Cooper, 2015). Gattermann et al. (2016) have found that these new powers had a positive effect in that they motivated many national parliaments to reform their procedures, which ultimately strengthened their capacity to deal with EU affairs more generally.

Thirdly, the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and now the Covid crisis have raised the stakes in EU policy-making, making it more attractive to sectoral committees. Debates about national policies and ‘bailout’ packages for struggling countries, a fairer distribution of migrants and the ‘right’ amount of solidarity between countries are often salient and blur the distinction between domestic and European politics. Similarly, the creation of the ‘European Semester’ where the European Commission checks national budget plans means that budget committees are now centrally affected by EU politics.

Finally, a fourth opportunity/pressure can be added, namely the creation of new interparliamentary conferences (IPCs) and a general increase in interparliamentary cooperation. Thus, in addition to COSAC (the conference of EACs), there is now an IPC on economic policy and the IPC on the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defense Policy. In 2020, the first annual interparliamentary committee meeting to evaluate Eurojust was organised.

While traditional structures, resources, dynamics and different constellations of party political actors are likely to influence the timing and extent of mainstreaming, the four factors create general pressure towards a greater involvement of sectoral committees. There are of course also disincentives (cf. Gattermann et al., 2016), for example that mainstreaming might require more administrative resources to support sectoral committees, that sectoral committees may prefer to focus on domestic politics and that strong EACs may be reluctant to give up control. This may be particularly true in the case of parliaments where EACs have strong mandating powers (i.e. can control the position of the government in the Council of the European Union), which may find the new incentives created by the Treaty of Lisbon less enticing. In addition, there is a potential trade-off between horizontal and temporal coherence and policy expertise. A single powerful EAC and a single EU-related staff unit have more generalist knowledge, but can

act as an institutional memory. By contrast, in a scrutiny system that relies on sectoral committees (and sectoral committee staff), there committees have a higher level of policy-specific expertise, but there is a risk of different committees adopting slightly different stances on policies. Nevertheless, Karlas (2012) found evidence of sectoral committees being involved to some extent in all but four national parliaments. The first goal of this paper is to see how this trend has evolved and to assess the extent of mainstreaming today.

An up-to-date understanding of the extent of mainstreaming is important for the study of parliamentary administrations, as it determines who requires support to do what. The study of European parliamentary administrations is still in its infancy, and there are a lot of gaps even in terms of basic data. Thus, the first studies on the role of parliamentary administrations in EU affairs largely focused on the extent of delegation to administrations and the mechanisms of political control over bureaucrats (Christiansen et al., 2014; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015; Strelkov, 2015; Winzen, 2014). These studies show – for a larger number of cases – that delegation to administrators is quite extensive in most parliaments, where staff plays a role in pre-identifying relevant EU issues, provide substantive, subsidiarity and procedural advice and often assist with the drafting of (reasoned) opinions, mandates and resolutions. However, while the studies attest administrators the potential to play a positive agenda-setting role, they also agree that this does not lead to a ‘runaway bureaucracy’ or tensions between the political principals and the administrative agents. The reason for this is that political control over bureaucrats is quasi-automatic in the case of parliaments, where most steps ultimately require a decision by a committee or the plenary. In other words, the final decision rests with politicians, and how closely they follow administrative guidance depends on how well the staff anticipates the preferences of the committee.

However, these studies *de facto* focus primarily on EACs and EAC staff, which were a logical starting point. The role of other types of staff in EU affairs was studied in depth only in a small number of cases where the issue came up during qualitative research (e.g. mainly Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark with some information on a few other parliaments). As a result, we understand the role of EAC staff (or of the main EU unit), but we do not really know which other units are involved and who supports who in the context of mainstreaming. This may seem like a very basic issue, but it is also a fundamental problem: In the same way in which we cannot (correctly) analyse the political dimension of EU affairs scrutiny without an understanding of the division of labour within different parliaments, it is difficult to analyse the administrative dimension of EU affairs without an understanding of support structures.

For this reason, the main goal of this article is to provide a better ‘map’ of the units involved and their tasks. The key question is to what extent the Europeanisation of the parliamentary administration mirrors the Europeanisation of the political dimension of the parliament. The core expectations are that:

- (1) Sectoral committees with an active role in EU affairs scrutiny will indeed benefit from dedicated staff support.
- (2) Whether sectoral committees with a role in EU affairs have their own EU experts or receive support from a central unit depends on the administrative capacity of the parliament. A higher capacity will lead to sectoral committees having their own staff, whereas a limited capacity will result in central units in the service of all committees.

## The data

The data for this article stems from a questionnaire that was sent out to the members of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation. The survey contained questions about the distribution of roles between the EAC and sectoral committees and whether this changed over time, as well as questions about who supports the EAC and sectoral committees administratively, what their respective roles are and whether their organisation changed over time. The questionnaire also focused on the frequency of inter-parliamentary contacts on the staff level. It was qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and required a description of structures, roles and processes.

The response rate for the questionnaire was high. Overall, all 11 Upper Houses were covered and 23 out of 27 Lower Houses replied (around 85%). Responses were received in February and March 2021. The French, Italian, Dutch and Romanian Lower Houses are missing. For some parts of the analysis, the gaps can be filled with older data from the above-mentioned studies on parliamentary administrations and from the Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments (Heffler et al., 2015).

## The Mainstreaming of EU affairs in national parliaments

The first step to understanding the Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations is to understand who they are supposed to support. As noted previously, the literature so far only provided a partial overview over the different forms of Europeanisation of national parliaments. The most comprehensive study (Karlas, 2012) only covered the Lower Houses. This article classifies both Upper and Lower Houses based on the ECPRD survey, which covered all 11 Upper Houses and 23/27 Lower Houses (Table 1). It should be noted that three of the bicameral parliaments conduct EU affairs scrutiny



**Table 1.** Committees responsible for EU affairs scrutiny.

EAC only	EAC + occasional consultation of sectoral committees	EAC + regular consultation of sectoral committees	Sectoral committees are responsible for their areas
Slovenia Upper	Austria*; Croatia; Czech Lower; France Upper; Hungary; Latvia; Malta; Poland Lower; Romania Lower**; Romania Upper; Slovenia Lower; Spain*	Bulgaria; Cyprus; Czech Upper; Denmark; Estonia; Finland; France Lower**; German Upper; Greece; Italy Lower**; Italy Upper; Lithuania; Poland Upper; Portugal; Slovakia	Belgium Lower; Belgium Upper; German Lower; Ireland*; Luxembourg; Dutch Lower**; Dutch Upper; Sweden

\*both chambers conduct the scrutiny jointly.

\*\* Based on Thomas and Tacea (2015); Tacea (2015); Högenauer (2015); Cavatorto (2015).

jointly. The four missing Lower Houses (Netherlands, France, Italy, Romania) are added based on the data from the Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments (Heffler et al., 2015). The classification is based on the reported practice rather than formal rules, i.e. whether a parliament is classified as ‘occasional consultation of sectoral committees’ or ‘regular’ consultation depends on the use of these procedures. Parliaments where the EAC is exclusively in charge of EU affairs and sectoral committees are (almost) never consulted are classified as ‘EAC only’. Parliaments where the EAC is clearly taking the lead but sectoral committees are occasionally consulted or where the EAC sometimes organises joint meetings are classified as ‘occasional consultation’. ‘Regular consultation’ refers to systems where (1) either the consultation of sectoral committees is optional, but in practice this is regularly done, or (2) the consultation of sectoral committees is mandatory, but the final decision (or recommendation to the plenary) rests with the EAC. The last category corresponds to a fully mainstreamed system, and sectoral committees are in charge of adoption decisions (or making the recommendation to the plenary) within their subject area. Here, EACs only have a coordination function and are in charge of institutional and cross-cutting issues. Sectoral committees play an independent role in EU affairs.

Table 1 shows that the Europeanisation of national parliaments is by no means limited to the creation of EACs and occasional debates and questions in the plenary. Sectoral committees play some kind of role in almost all national parliaments, with the exception of the Slovenian Upper House. The EACs of 12 chambers occasionally consult sectoral committees. In 15 chambers the consultation of sectoral committees is either mandatory or a regular occurrence. Finally, eight chambers are fully mainstreamed. This division corresponds to two different logics of EU affairs scrutiny: Some parliaments pursue a strategy of ‘centralisation’, where the responsibility for EU affairs is allocated to a specific body. The advantage of the high degree of centralisation sought by the 13 parliaments in the first two categories of the table

is that the allocation of tasks is clear, that the EAC can specialise in EU procedures and that EU issues are not eclipsed by domestic issues. On the other hand, the 23 parliaments in the last two categories emphasise the importance of the substantive expertise of sectoral committees for the scrutiny process.

On the whole, there is a trend towards the strengthening of sectoral committees in EU affairs. Firstly, as the number of EU issues increases, the substantive expertise of sectoral committees is a welcome addition to the scrutiny process. Secondly, the introduction of the Early Warning System in the Treaty of Lisbon has triggered revisions of rules of procedure and served as an opportunity to include sectoral committees in the process. For example, the Austrian Constitution was amended to introduce an annual debate on the national priorities and positions in the sectoral committees, and the rules of procedure were changed in 2012 to grant sectoral committees the right to organise EU debates within their remit. The Belgian Lower House strengthened the role of sectoral committees in the EWS and in the scrutiny of the government's position in the Council of Ministers. In Greece, the Political Dialogue led to a marked increase in joint meetings between the EAC and sectoral committees. Hungary improved the flow of information to sectoral committees, Sweden delegated the EWS to sectoral committees while keeping the EAC in charge of mandating and the Irish parliament and both Dutch Houses moved towards a fully mainstreamed system of EU affairs scrutiny. Conversely, there are only two cases of increased centralisation that were reported in the study, namely the decision of the Italian Senate to centralise the EWS in the hands of the EAC in 2018 and the Bulgarian decision to put the EAC in charge of controlling the spending of EU funds in 2009.

It should be noted that the table underestimates the role of sectoral committees, as it illustrates the distribution of tasks 'in general'. However, not all sectoral committees are equally affected by European Affairs. For example, the introduction of the European Semester usually led to the Europeanisation of the committees responsible for the budget. Similarly, a number of responses emphasised that the Foreign Affairs Committee was in charge of the EU's CFSP and CSDP regardless of the degree of mainstreaming that existed in other areas (e.g. Croatia, the Czech Senate, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Slovakia).

Finally, the transposition of EU legislation rests in most cases almost exclusively with sectoral committees. There are only a few cases where EACs play a monitoring role to ensure correct transposition (e.g. Bulgaria, Croatia, the French Senate, Greece, the Italian Senate, Lithuania, the Romanian Senate). This is unsurprising as the process usually relies on the normal legislative procedures, or on a combination of government decrees and normal legislation.

## The Europeanisation of parliamentary administrations

The organisation of EU affairs scrutiny can be expected to have an impact on the Europeanisation of staff. In parliaments where EU affairs are largely centralised in the hands of the EAC, staff with EU expertise is likely to be concentrated either in the secretariat of the EAC or a central unit that mainly serves the EAC. Sectoral committees in this model do not necessarily require extensive EU expertise, as their main role is to support the EAC by providing occasional substantive assessments of how well a particular EU proposal fits into the domestic approach to the policy area. They will not need EU procedural expertise, as the task of formulating decisions will fall to the EAC. In addition, the main EU affairs unit can be expected to assist the committees on those occasions.

On the other hand, sectoral committees that are routinely consulted on EU affairs, that either take decisions or formulate draft opinions and that participate in the selection of key issues do require support similar to that of an EAC. Thus, in those cases, the Europeanisation pressures on the administrations are distributed more broadly and the organisation of EU support becomes more challenging than when there is a single committee. [Table 2](#) provides an overview over the forms of support. It contains information for the 11 Upper Houses and 23 Lower Houses that participated in the survey, and on the Dutch Lower House, which is well-documented in the literature.

The first observation in [Table 2](#) should be that it is a simplified representation of staff support which focuses on the main features. In practice, some parliaments where sectoral committees have their own EU experts or where a joint EU unit supports all committees often also have a unit in charge of

**Table 2.** Staff support for sectoral committees.

	Only EAC	Mainly EAC	Regularly sectoral	Fully mainstreamed
No access to EU experts		Austria* (occasionally support from EAC); Latvia; Malta	Poland Upper;	Dutch Upper
Eac staff and/or research/legal support sectoral	Slovenia Upper	Poland Lower; Slovenia Lower	Bulgaria (some); Estonia; France Upper; German Upper; Italy Upper; Portugal; Slovakia	Belgium Senate; Ireland (normal sectoral staff receive training); Luxembourg
A joint central eu unit		Croatia; Czech Lower; Hungary; Romanian Senate; Spain	Cyprus; Czech Upper; Denmark; Greece;	Belgium Lower; German Lower;
Sectoral have own eu experts			Bulgaria (some); Finland; Lithuania	Dutch Lower**; Sweden

\*Both Houses scrutinise jointly.

\*\*information based on Högenauer et al. (2016).

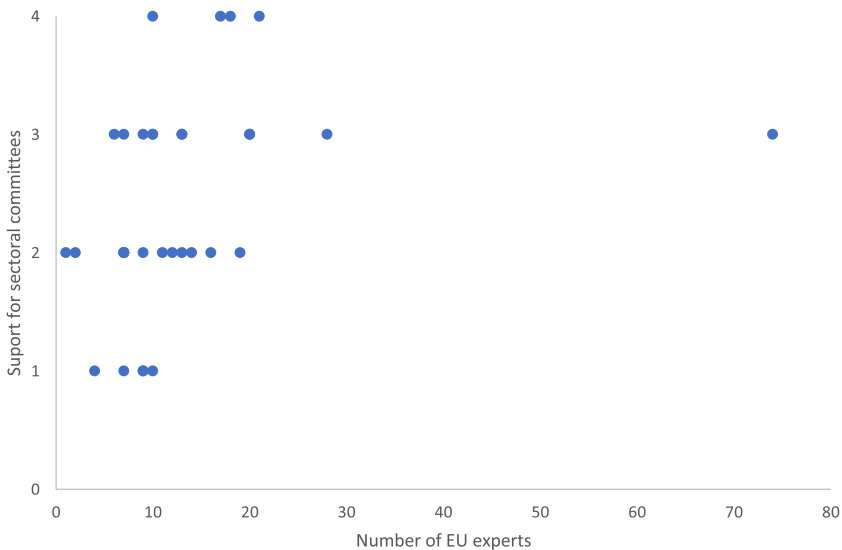
interparliamentary relations and/or a research or legal service that provides specific types of additional support. The capacity of those units to provide EU expertise varies strongly across parliaments, as their total staff can be very small (four researchers, Lativa) or quite extensive (96 researchers, Polish Lower House). However, research and legal services usually only intervene on request. Research or Library services in particular focus in part on background work (documentation of EU activity; production of general reports), but are also an important source of information for individual MPs who can address questions to them. There are thus at times multiple sources of expertise. Secondly, while the table is meant to rank the four categories of staff support for sectoral committees roughly from lowest to highest, this is not an exact science and the devil is in the detail: For instance, one can argue that the Belgian House of Representatives with its central unit of 2.5-3 EU experts is less well supported than the Swedish parliament, where sectoral committees have an EU expert. However, the German Bundestag has a central unit with 74 EU experts which includes a number of people with expertise in specific policy areas and thus clearly has the capacity to provide sectoral committees with extensive advice.

Nevertheless, [Table 2](#) illustrates that it is in practice relatively rare that sectoral committees have their own EU experts. What is more common is that a central EU unit supports all committees. However, a majority of sectoral committees have to rely primarily on their normal staff with assistance from EAC staff and/or from a legal or research unit. In six cases sectoral committees have to rely (almost) exclusively on their 'normal' staff.

What is even more striking is that – contrary to our first expectation – there is no clear link between the organisation of political scrutiny and the organisation of support. This is particularly striking in those cases where political scrutiny is fully mainstreamed, but administrative support for sectoral committees ranges from 'only normal staff' to 'own EU experts'. There appear to be two factors at play: administrative capacity and the political capacity of the parliament. Political capacity refers to the size of parliament in terms of number of MPs, whether being an MPs is a full-time job, the frequency of committee and plenary meetings and then also strength in terms of the scrutiny powers of the parliament in general and EU affairs in particular. Thus, the low level of support for the sectoral committees of the Dutch Senate make sense in the context of a chamber that is part-time and has only 75 MPs and 61 civil servants in total. As committee staff is often responsible for several committees at a time, it is not surprising that there is no expert specifically for EU environment and energy policy, for example. Similarly, the Luxembourgish parliament and its committees (and overall staff) are relatively small (Högenauer et al., 2016) and the Belgian Senate and Irish parliament are also among the smaller parliaments, have comparatively weak scrutiny powers and few EU experts (Auel et al., 2015). One can thus

argue that there are two motivations for mainstreaming with different effects on staffing: some parliaments mainstream because they are strong in terms of scrutiny powers, generally active (high motivation) and want to increase their influence further (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the German Lower House, the Dutch Lower House ...). They have at least an average level of administrative capacity and they try to maximise its usefulness for political scrutiny either by equipping sectoral committees with EU experts or through a central unit with EU experts specialised in different (key) areas. Other parliaments mainstream in order to resolve a problem of *political* capacity (few MPs, small committees, less frequent committee meetings, limited capacity of the EAC), but due to their lower administrative capacity they cannot match this model with specialised staff. Thus, [Figure 1](#) shows that sectoral committees that have to rely on their normal staff tend to be in parliaments that generally employ few EU experts (10 or less), whereas sectoral committees that employ their own EU experts are located in parliaments that have 10 or more EU experts. In some cases (e.g. the Dutch Lower House), a small number of committees share an EU expert. The second expectation, that larger staff is likely to result in sectoral committees having their own experts, is thus also not correct.

Nevertheless, when mainstreaming and a lower administrative capacity coincide, this creates an expectation that normal staff will receive training in EU affairs (Ireland) and make EU affairs part of their normal duties



**Figure 1.** Administrative capacity and the support for sectoral committees. Note: 1 = have to rely on normal staff, 2 = supported by EAC/research/legal staff, 3 = supported by central EU unit, 4 = own EU staff.

(Dutch Senate, Poland). Indeed, the smaller size of parliamentary administrations (compared to ministries) and resulting limits on administrative capacity have often simply resulted in the Europeanisation of the tasks of sectoral committee staff regardless of the presence of EU experts (cf. [Table 3](#)).

Overall, 19 of the 32 respondents provided information that the secretariats of sectoral committees play a role in EU affairs, and comparable data are available for the Dutch Lower House from previous studies. In addition, those respondents that represent systems where sectoral committees are not routinely involved in EU affairs indicated that the question was not relevant for their parliaments. There is some missing data on cases like the Polish Senate or Bulgaria, where sectoral committee staff should support their committees in EU affairs, but there is no information on their precise role.

On the whole, [Table 3](#) shows that the EAC staff or main EU unit usually performs the whole range of support tasks. This confirms the earlier findings of Högenauer et al. (2016) whereby most core EU units perform the roles of agenda-shaper (including assistance with the pre-selection of documents, drafting and extensive advice) or at least advisors (no pre-selection but extensive advice and assistance with drafting), albeit subject to political debate and confirmation in the committees/plenary. Where the roles of EU staff are very limited this has often something to do with limited resources (e.g. in the case of the Belgian Senate and the Dutch Senate) or with the role of the EACs themselves, for example in Sweden, where the EAC does not deal with the EWS (and therefore the staff does not provide related advice).

More remarkably, the work of sectoral committee staff has become Europeanised in a majority of EU national parliaments. Compared to the EAC staff, there is more variation in both the breadth of tasks performed by sectoral committee staff and in the type of tasks performed. This variation stems from two sources: firstly, the interpretation of what constitutes a purely 'political' task varies across parliaments, but some reserve the discussion of subsidiarity or the identification of relevant EU policies for scrutiny exclusively for politicians. In addition, in some parliaments the political groups have considerable resources themselves, so that some elements of support that are deemed 'political' are left to party group staff. This is the case in the German Bundestag. However, it should be noted that it is not that common for party groups in other countries to have multiple EU experts at their disposal. The second source of diversity is the division of labour between committees. Thus, in Sweden the EAC is in charge of mandating and of controlling the government's behaviour in the Council of the European Union, whereas sectoral committees are responsible for the EWS. This is reflected in the responsibilities of sectoral committee staff (subsidiarity advice and the drafting of opinions). By contrast, in Italy, the Senate EAC is in charge of the EWS, whereas committees can deal with other types of

**Table 3.** The role of staff in EU affairs scrutiny.

		(Pre)selection	Subsid. adv.	Procedural adv.	Drafts
A	EU	x	x	x	(x) assists political groups
B Lo	EU	x	x		(x) on request
	SC	x		x	
B Up	EU	x		x	
	SC	(x) mostly MPs		x	
BG	EU	x	x	x	x
HR	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x	x	x	
CY	EU	x	x	x	x
CZ Lo	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x			x
CZ Up	EU		x	x	x
DK	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x	x		x
EST	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC			x	x
FIN	EU		x	x	x
	SC		x	x	x
F UP	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC			x	
D Lo	EU	x	x	x	
	SC	x with group staff		x	x with group staff
D Up	EU	x		x	
	SC			x	
GR	EU	x	x	x	x
H	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC		x		x
IRL	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC		x		x
I Up	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x		x	(x) only Pol. Dialogue
LV	EU		x	x	x
LT	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x	x	x	x
L	EU	x	x		x
	SC	x	x		x
M	EU		x	x	x
NL Lo	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x	x	x	x
NL Up	EU			x	x
	SC			x	x
PL Lo	EU	x	x	x	x
PL Up	EU		x	x	x
P	EU			x	(x) on request
	SC	x	x	x	
RO Up	EU	x	x	x	x
	SC	x	x	x	x
SK	EU	x	x	x	x
SL Lo	EU	x	x	x	x
SL Up	EU	x	x	x	x
E	EU	x	x	x	x
S	EU			x	x (not EWS)
	SC		x		x

Note: EU refers to the EAC staff or the main EU staff unit; SC to the staff of sectoral committees.

\* Based on Högenauer et al. (2016).

scrutiny like the Political Dialogue with the European Commission. As a result, sectoral committee staff does not provide subsidiarity advice and only drafts opinions when they are for the Political Dialogue.

Another area where the work of sectoral committee staff has become Europeanised, albeit less than that of EAC staff, is interparliamentary cooperation. Almost all parliaments reported that their EAC staff (or main EU unit staff) was now in contact with staff from other national parliaments on a regular basis. Most said that such contacts occurred on a weekly basis or at least a monthly basis. There are few exceptions, and most of these are parliaments from Eastern Europe. Thus, the Slovenian chambers, the Croatian parliament, the Bulgarian parliament, the Polish Senate and the Romanian Senate reported that interparliamentary contacts occurred only from time to time. The only Western European chamber with a low level of contacts was the French Senate.

The role of sectoral committee staff in interparliamentary cooperation is more modest. Sectoral committee staff are mostly involved on the occasion of interparliamentary conferences or joint committee meetings that affect their committees. Thus most parliaments report 1–4 contacts per year. Their network is thus less dense. In addition, even parliaments where EU affairs scrutiny is mainstreamed are no exception to this. In the vast majority of parliaments, the burden of interparliamentary cooperation thus rests on EACs and, depending on the internal organisation, on central units for interparliamentary relations. In addition, the parliaments cited the national parliamentary representatives in Brussels as a key resource in this respect. In line with the argument by Neuhold and Högenauer (2016) that the NPRs play a key role in the coordination of yellow and orange cards under the EWS and in the regular exchange of views on EU issues, the survey showed that the NPRs are the main source of information on the positions of other parliaments. They are particularly important for those sectoral committees with scrutiny powers, precisely because their administrative capacity in EU affairs tends to be lower and because their staff also have many other responsibilities.

Finally, just as some parliaments have moved towards a greater role for sectoral committees, there have also been changes in the level of staff support. In the case of the Austrian parliament, the number of EU experts in the research service has doubled in the course of the past decade, and a Parliamentary Budget Office was created that provides useful support also on issues related to the European Semester. The Belgian House of Representatives created a central EU desk in 2009. Since 2015 the Bulgarian Legislative and Legal Directorate supports committees with the selection of priorities from the Commission Annual Work Programme. Cyprus created a unit dealing with legal issues in the committee service in 2017. In 2013, the parliamentary administration supporting MPs in EU affairs was reorganised. The German Bundesrat bundled all relevant EU divisions under a joint directorate on European



Affairs (Directorate PE) in 2013. Ireland generally expanded the administrative capacity of its committees in the context of the Draft Constitutional and then Lisbon Treaty. It notably established a Library and Research Service in 2006, hired policy advisors to support committees, created a Budget Office in 2016 and expanded the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisor. The Polish Lower House hired more research staff with EU expertise, while the Upper House identified 25 external EU affairs consultants that support committees. The Swedish parliament reported an increase in the EU experts available to sectoral committees. Finally, several chambers that did not yet have NPRs created these positions after Lisbon, like the Polish Senate (2008), Spain (2010), the Maltese Parliament (2012) or the Dutch Senate (2019).

Thus, while the administrative resources of parliaments are still small compared to ministries, many parliaments have improved their capacity for EU affairs scrutiny over the last 10–15 years. In many cases, sectoral committees obtained better access to a central unit with EU expertise or benefited from a greater legal and/or research capacity of the parliament. In some cases they were strengthened directly through an increase in their staff (with or without specific EU expertise).

## Conclusion

To conclude, the 2021 survey of national parliaments shows that the trend towards the involvement of sectoral committees in EU affairs scrutiny continues. In many cases, sectoral committees play a supporting role and are meant to provide policy area specific substantive expertise to the EAC. In other cases, EU affairs scrutiny follows a mainstreamed model where sectoral committees are responsible for scrutiny (or certain types of scrutiny) in their policy areas.

This trend has affected the Europeanisation of parliamentary staff, albeit not always as systematically as one might have expected. The greatest discrepancies exist in the organisation of support, where not all parliaments with decentralised scrutiny models provide sectoral committees with access to EU experts. An important obstacle appears to be low administrative capacity on the part of parliaments with few MPs, small committees and often weak scrutiny powers. Thus, parliaments that mainstream in order to improve a low political capacity for EU affairs scrutiny often have limited administrative resources and are unable to provide each committee with specialised support. By contrast, powerful parliaments that seek to increase their role further can usually match the political mainstreaming with administrative support in at least some core policy areas. Thus, the growing role of the EU creates a challenge both for committees and for the parliaments support structure.

On the other hand, in those cases where sectoral committees play a role in EU affairs, their staff usually becomes Europeanised whether there are EU

experts or not. Thus, the sectoral committee staff of a majority of EU parliaments plays a role in EU affairs scrutiny. The tasks are usually more limited than those of the EAC staff or main EU unit, but they nevertheless show that the EU affects an increasing number of parliamentary staff. In addition, sectoral committee staff now plays a role in interparliamentary cooperation alongside the main EU unit, the national representatives in Brussels and the interparliamentary cooperation units that exist in some parliaments. The contacts are usually limited to a couple per year compared to weekly or monthly contacts in the case of the main EU unit, but parliaments note a slow increase over time.

Finally, many parliaments have reported a reinforcement of their administrative capacity for EU affairs scrutiny since the mid-2000s, and no parliament has reported a decrease. These investments take different forms, from the hiring of NPRs, via a reinforcement of the EAC staff to the hiring of policy experts for sectoral committees or a strengthening of the research and legal units.

On the whole, the Europeanisation of staff – like the Europeanisation of parliaments themselves – is a process that highlights diversity and complexity. It is evident that traditions and pre-existing models influence this process, for example with regard to the emphasis on committee staff or central units, the role of research and legal units (whose size and existence depend on prior practices) and the division of labour between units. In the same vein, while some parliaments report that party group staff take on specific roles, the presence of such staff also varies greatly across countries. There is thus a need for further research, especially into the number and role of personal assistants and party group staff in different parliaments and the division of labour between ‘political’ staff and the general administration.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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