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**THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SECRETARIAT IN PERSPECTIVE:**

**A DISTINCTIVE PARLIAMENTARY ADMINISTRATION, AND HOW IT HAS RESPONDED TO NEW CHALLENGES**

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**This paper is an updated version of an article by the same authors on the European Experience of parliamentary administrations in comparative perspective published in Volume 27, 2021 Issue 4 of the Journal of Legislative Studies. In abridged version it also forms the entry on the European Parliament in the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Parliamentary Administrations**

**Introduction**

Any study of national parliamentary administrations needs to look at the special case of the European Parliament (EP).  In some respects the EP administration faces the same challenges and constraints as those of European national parliaments, how to increase the accountability of the executive, how to maximize its legislative, budgetary and other powers, how to increase its professional capacity at a time when resources are often constrained and how to adapt to new conditions and problems, most recently that of Covid.

On the other hand the EP administration has many unusual features. The staff of the European Parliament is exceptionally large by national parliamentary standards. They also operate in a unique institutional context. The European Parliament has been the world’s largest democratically elected parliament, is the only true multinational parliament, the world’s most multilingual parliament,  and is obliged by the Treaties to work in three main locations in three different countries.

This paper examines these various factors and their implications for the EP Administration.

The first part of this paper looks briefly at the EP’s evolution. It then goes on to examine the main ways in which the European Parliament differs from national parliaments and the implications of these differences for the work of the EP Secretariat, some of them obvious and familiar and others less so.

The second part of the paper looks, instead, at some of the specific features of the EP administration assessing how the Institution has responded to new challenges, including how the EP administration has attempted to respond to the Covid pandemic and to other new challenges.. There are then some conclusions, with some indications of areas requiring further research.

**Evolution of the EP’s role and powers**

The European Parliament has been part of the European institutional structure since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (1952). Its role has evolved greatly over that time, passing from having a symbolic and marginal role to becoming an arm of a budgetary authority, and then, progressively, to becoming a co-legislator in most policy areas.

The Assembly of the ECSC and Rome Treaties, was modelled on the experience and traditions of the Parliaments of the six Founding states. The same was also true for the administration supporting this parliamentary work.

The Members of the Assembly were aware, from the very beginning, of the importance of an efficient administration supporting their work. The ECSC Treaty assigned a real influence over the decisions on administrative expenditures of all Institutions to the President of the Assembly.

Among the Assembly’s first battles with the Council, which held all budgetary powers, was to gain the right to control its own administrative expenditures as a way to support its institutional independence and autonomy.

It was only with the Treaty of 1970, that Parliament was given limited budgetary powers, which increased its influence on administrative expenditure, even if the bulk of the decisions remained in the hands of the Council. To reduce the Parliament‘s dissatisfaction with its limited budgetary power, the Council adopted a Resolution committing itself not to modify the administrative expenditures of the Parliament, with the only exception being  for ‘serious reasons’ .

With the extension of the budgetary competences of the Parliament in the 1975 Treaty the situation changed and the Council became worried that Parliament could interfere in its own administrative expenditure.  The Council and Parliament then reached a so called ‘Gentlemens’Agreement’ whereby both arms of the budgetary authority committed  themselves not to interfere in their respective administrative expenditures.

Since the first direct elections of the European Parliament, in 1979, its role in the EU institutional context has evolved greatly.  The changes in the EP role have not been limited to the formal modifications in the Treaties but also evolved by means of soft law, primarily through inter-institutional agreements, which gradually expanded the influence of the directed elected institution of the European Union.

In less than 40 years the EP has evolved from only having a modest budgetary power, covering around 30% of EU expenditure to becoming a co-legislator in most EU policies, including on the entire budget.  It has also become more fully involved in the whole legislative cycle.

The change has not been only formal. The perception of the Parliament’s legislative influence has grown, and now, everyone who has a stake or interest in European legislation, including Member States,  and regions but also in the  private sector, needs to follow and, where appropriate, seek to influence, the decision-making process within the European Parliament. The European Parliament is now a very powerful Parliament, with its biggest remaining weakness being in the fiscal area, where it is only consulted on EU own resources and is not in a position to raise taxes.

**Some distinctive features of the Parliament**

To understand the European Parliament, it is necessary to highlight some of the ways in which it is most distinctive.

(i)An exceptionally large Parliament

The European Parliament is a very large Parliament. The Lisbon Treaty provides for it to have 751 members, which would make it the world’s largest directly elected Parliament.  Even after the departure of the UK, it still has 705 members, second only in size to the German Bundestag. It could again increase in numbers in the future, either in the case of further EU enlargement or if an additional transnational European constituency is also created.

Another unusual feature is the extraordinary number of political parties represented in the EP, which, on occasion, has exceeded 200. These are currently organised within 7 political groups each with their own secretariats besides the non-attached members who do not have group staff but are given some permanent secretarial support..

 The consequences of this large size are self-evident, with large buildings required to house the MEPs and an exceptionally large Parliament staff. Besides the permanent staff, the number of MEPs, political groups and parties all help to push up the overall numbers of staff.

(ii) A multinational Parliament

The European Parliament is directly elected every 5 years in 27 EU Member States and is thus one of only a handful of multinational parliamentary bodies. Of these it is both the largest and the only one with real powers. Both its MEPs and staff come from many different countries, and this is reflected in a wide range of different parliamentary traditions and cultures which have also given rise to different elements of Parliament’s rules and procedures. The Parliament was initially most influenced by the French administrative tradition but this has been significantly modified over time. The extent to which individual Member States have influenced the EP’s development and the extent to which a blended and common institutional and administrative culture and ethos within the EP Secretariat ethos have also emerged are not explored in the current paper but would fully merit further research.

 (iii)A multilingual Parliament

 Having MEPs from 27 Member States also implies a large number of official and working languages, the most used in any Parliament in the world. The right for all elected Members to speak their own language and the obligation to legislate in all languages of the Union are fundamental principles of the European Union, and are strongly defended within the Parliament.

If the principles are undisputed, there is often flexibility in their practical implementation, and the system that has been developed is often referred to as “controlled multilingualism”. For example, no full translation/interpretation is guaranteed in each parliamentary committee but only according to prior agreement on the languages actually required; Similarly there is no full and automatic translation of the verbatim record of the Parliament plenary, but only on demand. There are also language restrictions in political group meetings.

Parliament’s administration has adapted its structures to overcome the problem of multilingualism and to diminish the disadvantages faced by MEPs who do not master a vehicular language. A service of interpretation on demand has been created to allow individual MEPs to have meetings with colleagues or representatives of other Institutions. An editorial service, which improves texts written by non-natives, has been created. Last but not least,  MEPs assistants, who support MEPs activities,  also help to ensure a flexible use of multilingualism.

Informally a number of languages have been far more used than other, both by MEPs and by Parliament staff.. French used to be the dominant language in the Parliament Secretariat, particularly in the more administrative services which were typically in Luxembourg rather than in the more political services in Brussels where the use of English spread quickest. At one stage a Parliament Secretary-General (Julian Priestley) tried to ensure linguistic fairness within the Secretariat by having a rule for internal staff meetings that only English and French could be used, but that no native English or French-speaking officials could use their own language and that any other officials could choose which of the two they wished to use.

In spite of this English gradually displaced French as the dominant language both in texts sent for translation and in staff and parliamentary meetings, and this was greatly reinforced as the result of successive enlargements. The departure of the UK from the EU has not reversed this trend, mainly because it was too deeply entrenched but partly because English is now perhaps a more “neutral” lingua franca as it is not the native language in any of the larger Member States.

In spite of these informal trends, and in spite of the”controlled multilingualism” described above and the other organisational measures taken to facilitate MEPs work, the linguistic services of the Parliament (and the financial resources required to underpin full written and oral multilingualism) are still on a very significant scale. Of the 5.400 permanent staff of the Parliament direct linguistic services amount to about 25% of the total..

Linguistic constraints also have other practical effects on the workings of the Parliament, such as by slowing down the adoption of Parliament texts both in committee and then in plenary..

A final point to note concerns the possible longer term impacts of the development of machine translation (and to a much lesser extent interpretation). It is not yet clear how this will affect the use of languages within the EP and also on those employed in the EP’s linguistic services.

(iv)A Parliament with several places of work

A second major constraint on EP organisation, and one now imposed by the Treaties, is its dispersion over three working places, with most EP permanent staff divided between Luxembourg and Brussels, political group staff and most EP committee meetings in Brussels and most plenaries but practically no EP staff in Strasbourg.  All this has a number of practical consequences.

The two seats of EP administration

The Founding Fathers of the EEC took about 10 years to make a decision on the seat of the Institutions. At the beginning the ECSC was based in Luxembourg and the Commission of the EEC in Brussels. It was only with the agreement on the so called Merger Treaty in 1965 that the problem of the seat of the Institutions found a (provisional) solution.

Over time the Parliament’s political group staff mainly moved to Brussels and a considerable part of Parliament’s permanent secretariat, which had almost entirely been based in Luxembourg, also moved, particularly those services most linked to committee work and to communications.

The geographical dispersion of its staff has had a clear impact on EP organisation, which has been only partly mitigated by videoconferences and other technological aids.  There are two particular sets of rigidities, the political agreement between Parliament and the Luxembourgish authorities which obliges  the EP to maintain a minimum number of staff based in Luxembourg; and Parliament’s policy to only transfer its staff on a voluntary basis, which has limited both the geographical and functional mobility of its staff.

 This has been compounded by  the development of a different administrative culture in the two cities,  often more political in Brussels due to the need to work closely with MEPs,   and more administrative in Luxembourg where staff very often have little contact with members. Although much less than in the past, there has also been a considerable financial and human cost in all the travel between the two working places.

The plenary sittings in Strasbourg

The European Parliament holds 12 part sessions a year in Strasbourg, the seat of the Council of Europe. The decision was formalised in 1965, in a wider compromise on the seat of the Institutions. The informal arrangement that the EP holds its plenary sessions there was first formalised in 1965, confirmed in the conclusions of the European Council in Edinburgh, and later included in a binding Protocol to the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The fact that the most important activity of the Parliament is held almost 500 Km from the centre of its core activities has an impact on its organisation. EP must maintain a small number of permanent staff in Strasbourg for the maintenance of the buildings, and for other purposes. Much more significant, however is that services that deal mainly with the organization of the plenary and provide assistance to and with Members have needed to have a sufficient presence in Strasbourg. About 1.000 EP staff have typically travelled, therefore, to each plenary in Strasbourg.

The migration has not been limited to EP staff (MEPs, their assistants, political groups and secretariat staff)   but also to Commissioners and their staff, Council Ministers, journalists, interest groups as well as visitors.

While the EP has done its best to mitigate this, for example by greatly reducing the number of physical documents transported, the human and financial (and environmental) costs of this migration remain significant not least to maintain buildings which are only used four days per month.

 Although MEPs are divided on the question, a majority within the Parliament have questioned the costs of all this travelling and continued to contest the inability of the Parliament to have the freedom to choose its own organisation and working place. Modification of the legal status quo will be difficult, but this issue will continue to be raised in the future.

A more recent factor, however, has been that of the longer-term impacts of the Covid crisis on the working methods of the Parliament, as mentioned later on in this paper. Clearly the longer-term balance between in-person, remote and hybrid working methods could have a big impact not just on MEPs butt also on the various categories of EP staff working for them.

Other locations for the Parliament

The overwhelming majority of EP staff are based in Brussels and Luxembourg. Parliament is highly unusual, however, among parliamentary administrations in having branch offices in each of the Member States (and two in each of the larger states) which deal with information and communications. They are generally small but have up to 20 officials in the largest countries. In some countries the political groups also have office space in the same buildings. These offices also gained a new role during the Covid crisis, as they were used to facilitate national MEPs contributions and votes in plenary sessions, as an intermediary solution between in-presence voting in Brussels and Strasbourg and technically difficult remote voting from each one of the 705 MEPs home offices.

All these offices are within the European Union, but the Parliament now also has liaison offices in Washington DC and also in. London within the European Union’s EEAS Delegations to the US and the UK.

The European Parliament also owns the Jean Monnet House in Bazoches close to Paris, which has been increasingly used by EP staff and occasionally others for strategic meetings and for temporary training courses. The EP also runs the Museum of European History in Brussels and inter-active visitor centres in Brussels, Strasbourg and a steadily increasing number of European capitals, with the intention to have them, if possible, in all EU member States by the 2024 elections.

(v)A Parliament operating in an unusual and rapidly evolving institutional framework

Besides the above, the EP administration is distinctive in other respects as well.  It has had to operate in a rapidly changing institutional framework, much more fluid than that of most national parliaments, and has thus had constantly to adapt its working methods to new powers and procedures.  It has also operated in a separation of powers system more akin to that enjoyed by the US Congress than that facing all European national parliaments.

 This latter feature has also given the EP much greater autonomy than most national parliaments. This is reflected in the work not just of the EP leadership but also that of EP “backbenchers” who have more independence than their national parliamentary counterparts.

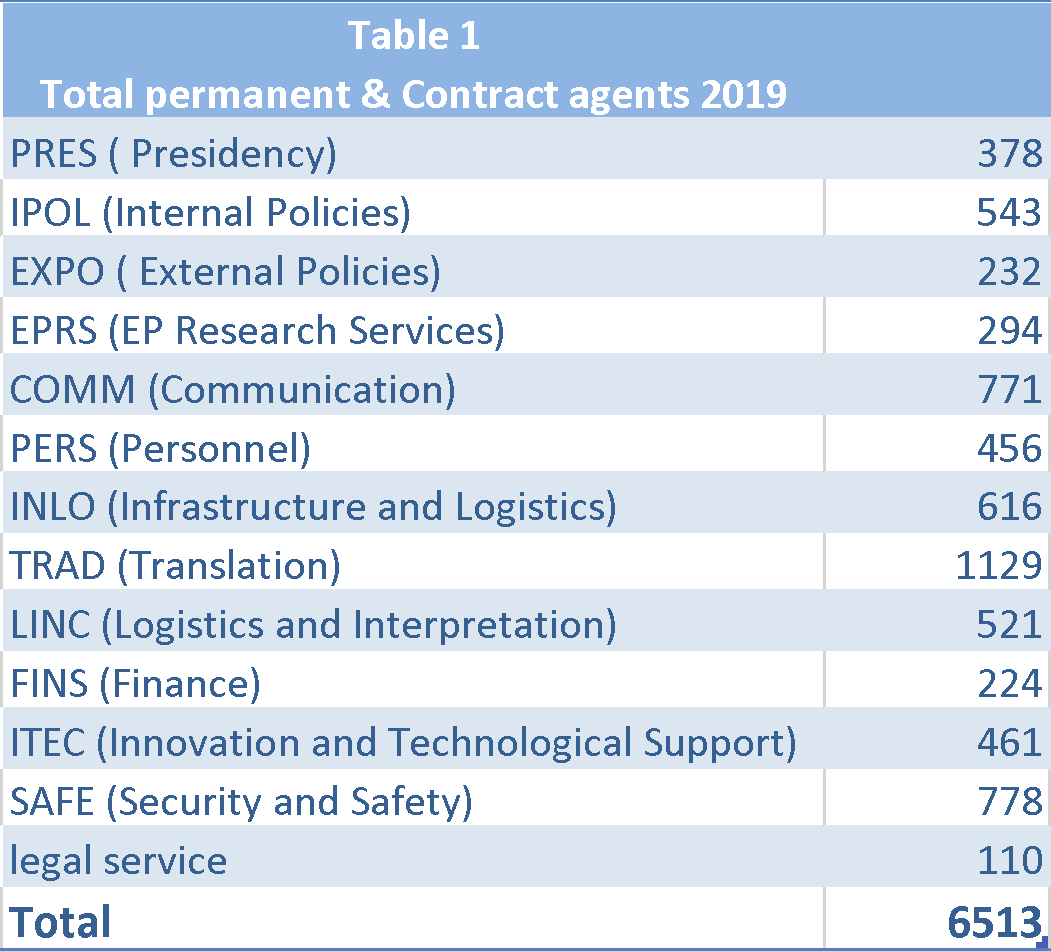
The above features of the European Parliament have had implications for its staff and for their relations with the MEPs that are mentioned in the conclusions of this paper.

**The three pillars of EP structure**

The next section of the paper begins by looking at the main features of the EP Secretariat, in particular the structural differentiation (Goetz). The functioning of the EP, as many other Parliaments, is based on the interconnection of three pillars:  the staff of the Administration, the secretariat of the political groups and the Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs).

**EP Administration**

The EP permanent staff has grown over time from 1.800 in 1979 at the time of the first direct elections, to about 5.400 in 2021, more than 6.500 if we add contract agents. The increase is due, in particular, to successive enlargements and to increases in EP competences.

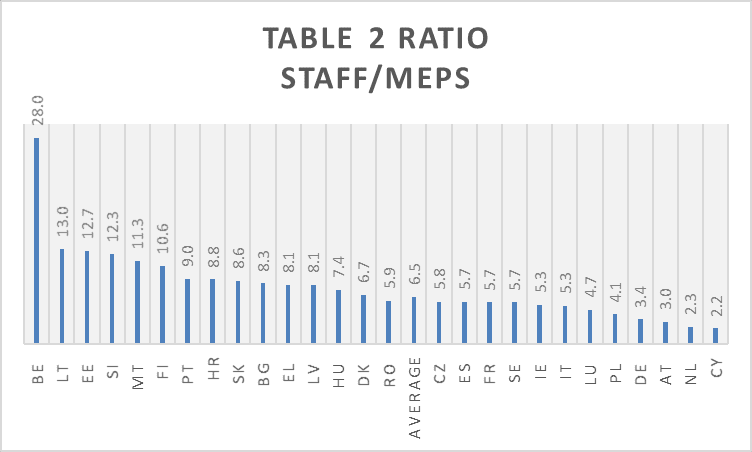
The EP Administration is divided in 12 Directorates Generals and a Legal Service. Table 1 gives the total number of permanent & Contract agents in 2019. The functional differentiation within the EP (Goetz) shows that 25 % of EP administration is devoted to purely linguistic functions (DG TRAD & LINC); almost 36% to administrative and logistic support (DG PERS, INLO, FINS, ITEC & SAFE); about 17% devoted to the direct support to MEPs (DG PRES, IPOL, EXPO) and 18% indirect support to MEPs activities (DG EPRS, COMM & Legal Service).

There is no obligation to have a balance among the various nationalities (let alone formal quotas) and no posts of the EP are reserved for nationals of individual Member States. In spite of this, and as described above, the EP staff retains a strongly multilingual character and efforts are made to recruitment on the broadest possible geographical basis from among nationals of Member States.

The table below shows, however, a certain imbalance between individual nationalities within the EP staff. This is due to various factors, such as the nationality of laureates on EPSO lists, the scarcity of posts for external recruitment and the overall attractiveness of the EP as a working place, which seems to differ considerably between nationalities.

Unsurprisingly Belgian officials have always been very numerous, but certain other nationalities have often been under-represented. Again unsurprisingly this was the case of the UK when it was still an EU member but also for nationals of some of the founding EU Member States, such as the Netherlands and Germany. To what extent is this due to such factors as lack of salary differentials with jobs at home, to negative perceptions of the EU civil service or even to a degree of Euro-scepticism in some cases? Conversely there have many recruits from the new Member States of Central and Eastern Europe, not just because of special efforts to recruit them but because of attractive salary differentials as well.

Table 2 gives an overview of the ratio of all Staff per MEPs of the same nationality.



**EP recruitment policy**

The first 30 years of the direct elected EP were typically characterised by strong relations between MEPs and the EP Administration. MEPs had little personal support and relied on the administration for most of their parliamentary activities. The ‘modest’ role of the EP attracted less attention from interest groups, which only became greater in line with the increasing legislative competences of the EP.  In the meantime, MEPs and EP Staff had a common goal of reinforcing the competences of the Parliament by a variety of different means.

This approach was enhanced by the nature of EP recruitment policy until 2000, when the EP, like all the other Institutions, organized competitions by Institutions and in all languages. Successful laureates had to have a motivation to work for the European Parliament and to prepare for the competition by learning about its specific role, powers and structures.

The creation in 2003 of the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), to prepare for the recruitment of staff from the countries joining the EU in 2004, obliged all EU institutions to centralise recruitment procedures. This had the effect of reducing candidates’ knowledge of the specificity of the EP in favour of more general knowledge, not always focused on Parliamentary needs. EPSO facilitated the creation of a European civil service but at the expense of parliamentary staff at the service of MEPs (Fasone). EPSO’s competitions have thus tended to reduce the parliamentary culture of complicity and common mission which was present in the first 30 years of the elected Parliament.

Gender equality is nowadays one of the key objectives of EP recruitment and great progress has been made in this respect over the last decade. Table 3 shows the targets set for 2024 and the situation 2020.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3 Gender equality in the**  **EP management** | | |
| **gender equality** | **target2024** | **situation 2020** |
| HoU | 50% | 39% |
| Directors | 50% | 50% |
| Directors general | 40% | 23% |
| AD9 |  | 50% |

It is interesting to note that the share of women in the AD 9 grade, the last step before acceding to managerial positions, has already reached 50%. This should increase the possibility of reaching the ambitious targets that have been set for 2024.

In order to help the EP administration to attain its targets of greater geographical balance and gender equality, but also to recruit staff more knowledgeable on parliamentary culture than those recruited from general EPSO competitions, the Bureau approved the organization of in-house competitions to fill vacant posts before recruiting from EPSO lists.

The internal competitions were of two kinds: AST towards ADs posts and political groups towards the administration. The latter raises the issue of the politicisation of EP administration which we discuss below.

Despite the possibility to recruit via internal competitions, more than 75% of staff recruited during the period 2018-2020 were recruited from EPSO lists, 15% from internal competitions and less than 10 % from the ‘passerelle’ competitions for staff of the political groups.

The politicisation of EP Administration

The politicisation of  the parliamentary administration is linked to the  existence of different administrative cultures (see Fasone); It would be interesting to look at this in more detail as national practice is clearly so different. In certain EU Member States it is considered normal for staff to have political preferences or even formal party labels (whether genuinely held or in order to gain promotion) whereas in others civil servants are expected to be completely neutral. It is unsurprising, therefore, that staff within the European Parliament have had a whole spectrum of views on this issue, and it would be valuable to explore how these different cultures have co-existed within the EP Secretariat and how has this has evolved over time.

Initially, however, the prevalent approach was that the EP administration should be neutral and not influenced by the political groups.

The Secretary General is appointed by the Bureau, which takes also *financial, organisational and administrative decisions on matters concerning the internal organisation of …..its Secretariat and its bodies* (Rules 25 Rules of Procedure). One or two Vice Presidents are delegated to follow staff issues, which includes the appointments of senior and middle management. This interference of a political body in appointments might create tensions between the Secretary General and the Bureau but it is also a procedure which guarantees a certain political balance in the senior and middle management appointments.  It does, however, lead to an increased politicization of the EP Administration and an increase in the number of top jobs, which are often created not for functional reasons but only to facilitate a balance among the political groups.

The politicization of EP administration is not limited to the top jobs but it also affects lower grades, although the extent to which has increased over time is still a moot point.. The Bureau, on the requests of the Leaders of political groups, regularly authorizes the organization of so called ‘*passerelle’* competitions opened to staff of political groups, who have served at least two terms in their political group. although, as indicated above, the percentage recruited via the passerelle remains below 10%.

The political Groups secretariats

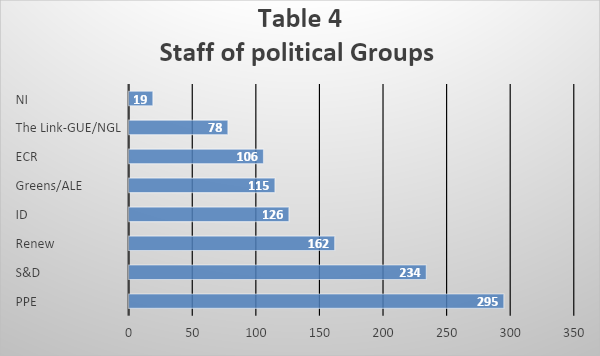
The political groups’ secretariats are the second pillar of the EP structure.  Their main task is to assist MEPs coming from different cultures to operate successfully within a multinational parliament and to help promote political group unity and coherence of decision-making.. To achieve these broad objectives the groups have recruited multinational staffs able to work in different languages but at the same time capable of understanding the heterogeneous political cultures and background of the different national delegations.

As the political work of political group staff is inspired by the culture of ‘compromise’ this principle is also applied in their inter-group relations. They have created, for example, a body to ensure Political Coordination. This body is, not mentioned in the EP Rules of Procedure, group, and is chaired, in rotation, by one group. This body deals with a wide range of common problems from technical organisational issues to the more political and legislative issues needed to prepare the Conference of Presidents of the political groups.

The staff

The Staff of political groups are earmarked in the EP Establishment plan published yearly in the EU budget. In the last 20 years staff numbers have doubled (532 posts in 2000, 1135 in 2021), mainly due to enlargement, but t has remained stable over the last three years.

 The distribution of posts between the groups follows a formula, agreed among the groups. This is based both on a fixed component and on a variable share which is linked in proportion to the number of MEPs and nationalities in each respective group. The same mechanism is used to divide the financial envelope (€ 65 mio in 2021) among the groups.



At each election, a group can gain or lose posts and the staff of the secretariat has to be adjusted to the post-election situation. There is a certain solidarity among the groups and so, if a group has to reduce its staff, the other groups might offer to recruit at least some of their technical staff (i.e. finance and human resources). There is of course no obligation to do this. This solidarity was manifested in 1999 when the Socialist group lost 15% of its Members. The ‘passerelle’ competitions mentioned above is another mechanism to absorb redundant staff  from the political groups within the EP Administration.

When a new group is created, the total envelope in the Establishment plan has to be shared with the new group. Each group remains responsible for its own recruitment.

The non-attached Members also have a fixed secretariat essentially for  administrative tasks.

MEPs personal assistants

The most recent development affecting the EP’s staff structure relates to changes in the number and status of MEPs personal assistants. The MEPs are entitled to two type of assistance,  from Local Assistants and from Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs).

Local Assistants are based in one of the EU Member States and have a contract of employment governed by private law which is concluded directly with the Member, who has to comply with the relevant national legislation. They are meant to assist the MEPs in their parliamentary activities in the constituency.

The role of accredited assistants was regulated in 2008, enhancing the transparency of their working conditions and governing the allocation of funds. The specific task with which they are entrusted is ‘*supporting members in carrying out their duties’.* MEPs are free to select the Assistant of her/his choice, but the subsequent contract is concluded directly by the Parliament. Assistants must be based in one of the Parliament working places and assist MEP directly in his/her work. The activities of Accredited Assistants have sometimes come under the scrutiny of the EU anti-fraud office (OLAF) since abuses have been detected, with, for example, Assistants not residing in one of the working places of the EP or carrying out activities not linked with European parliamentary work.

Over the last decade, the role of the Assistants has evolved considerably. Assistants are often requested to represent the MEP in preparatory meetings, to negotiate compromise amendments with other groups and to participate to inter-institutional negotiations.  In addition, Assistants might interpret for their MEP in informal meetings without interpretation and often manage the social media activity of their MEPs. This gives an idea of the evolution of their role and of the importance that they have gained in the organization of the EP.

The interaction of the three pillars in the decision-making process

The impact of the three pillars which form the EP support structure has evolved considerably.

As noted above, the EP administration was particularly influential over the political choices of the EP during the first two decades of the directly- elected Parliament. During this period the main objective was the reinforcement of the powers of the Parliament, an objective shared between MEPs and staff. The staff was always ready to suggest the best legal routes to expand EP’s influence. This ‘complicity’ between MEPs and staff was particularly successful in contributing to the increase of EP’s powers.

With the increase of the role of Parliament in the institutional architecture, the secretariats of political groups increased their influence as the EP was expanding  its own  influence over EU legislation. The coherence of political groups was an important factor of development of the political credibility of the Parliament as a legislator.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty coincided with the definitive approval of the Statute of the Accredited Parliamentary Assistants, helping to reinforce their role and influence on the decision-making process, and, in parallel reinforcing the role of individual MEPs.

The last decade has also been marked by the profound digitalisation of many key parliamentarian activities, such as the presentation of legislative and budgetary amendments,   and improvements in the structure of legislative texts to facilitate translation and quality control. The EP Administration has also developed its role  as a service provider. These transformations have impacted  on the role of EP staff, in particular the committees’ secretariats. These changes have enhanced their technical support role, and reduced their political influence, and all this during a period when the politicisation of the EP secretariat (see above) has increased.

The change in the balance of power between the three pillars of the EP staff structure is still evolving and is another area which could require more in depth analysis.

***New challenges: Drivers for Change***

The European Parliament is constantly confronted by a set of new challenges. These include becoming a more professional legislator, improving its performances across the whole legislative cycle and tackling important new non-legislative challenges, building on its levels of expertise (through enhanced internal and external expertise) and strengthening its management capacity and internal coordination.  The EP administration has thus had to adapt in order to support the evolution of the Institution.

An ambitious attempt to modernize EP administration was initiated a decade ago, under the direction of a group of MEPs, who decided that the US Congress, with its constitutional role, was the closest to the activities of the EP and should be considered the most appropriate benchmark and model.

Further pressures to modernize the EP Administration have been accentuated by budgetary restrictions ‘*Save and Innovate’* which led to a reduction of staff of about 5%.  In 2014 the EP Secretary General thus launched a new “*Strategic Execution Framework”* seeking tomove from a system based on rules to a culture more focused on results and on client satisfaction. All services of the European Parliament started to follow a long term vision and goals, endorsed by the Political Authority, and adapted over the years. The Strategic Execution Framework continues to increase the level of professionalization and responsibility of the project managers. The Strategic Execution Framework, revised every 2,5 years, defines the EP’s long-term goals as an administration and outlines the execution strategy to accomplish them. This approach not only sets the objectives, but also, provides more accurate measurement of progress over time (keys performances indicators), as well as establishing decentralized managerial structures for each project, in order toovercome existing silo-structures and to strengthen matrix organisation.

In the next section of this paper we would like to draw attention to three areas of particular development in recent years which are the achievements of strategic projects: Expertise, Communications and Technology.

**The development of greater expertise**

There has long been a perceived need for Parliament to obtain its own independent background information and expertise, in addition to that provided by the European Commission and   by national administrations, let alone by the countless interest groups lobbying EP decision-makers.

In addition to the back-up by committee staff (who, while particularly expert on rules and procedural matters, may develop considerable knowledge in some policy fields) more specialised research functions have also existed within the EP secretariat. For a long time there was a separate Directorate-General for Research and Documentation. This was considerably weakened when most of the committee staff moved from Luxembourg to Brussels whereas many of the researchers remained based in Luxembourg. The DG was later abolished as part of the Raising the Game initiative mentioned above but with some of its functions either subsumed within the continuing Library services or placed within the Committees in the form of Policy Departments. Committees were also given expertise budgets, by which they could commission external research on matters related to their legislative and other priorities.

In 2013 the Bureau created the European Parliamentary Research (EPRS) which together with the Policy Departments increased the expertise offered to MEPS to carry on their parliamentary activities.

Policy Departments

Created to provide direct support for the legislative work of the committees, they provide tailor-made analyses to parliamentary bodies (Committees, Delegations, the President and the SG) following their political priorities. This service works closely with committee secretariats and provides insight into specific subjects either directly or by outsourcing studies. The Policy departments are activated upon request of the Coordinators of a committee, and the experts, when necessary, are selected, following an EU call for tenders. They manage the ‘budgetary expertise’ funds which allow them to outsource some of the research to external consultants. Briefing and studies are also produced in-house.

Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)

Created in 2013, the European Parliament's new Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services (EPRS) provides tailored briefing and research for individual MEPs, as well as a range of synoptic publications for Members as a whole, but also for the general public.

The EPRS’s aim is to be independent, objective and authoritative in its work; to provide a comprehensive service, supported by specialist knowledge in all policy fields; to be client-oriented and to offer rapid and tailored responses to Members’ needs; including provision of a range of products and services with a single entry-point for their requests, and in-person briefings.

The main target of EPRS is thus the individual MEPs who can address questions to the service via a dedicated hotline on the intranet. Parliamentary committees can also address requests to it, notably to the Directorate working on impact assessment and European added value, which conducts ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of EU legislation to enhance EP scrutiny and oversight of the executive and identify the benefit of common action at European level. The service has also a proactive policy of anticipating requests by carrying out studies at its own initiative.

The creation of the new DG has helped to promote an interesting experiment of inter-institutional cooperation. An agreement has been concluded between the EP and the Committee of Regions (CoR) and the Economic and Social Committee (EcoSoc): whereby the two committees agreed to transfer a certain number of staff to the EPRS in exchange for which EP has opened its services to the Members of the two committees. This agreement, the first of its kind, could open the way to further inter-institutional cooperation.

The EP Research Service has raised the profile of the EP administration. It has not only constituted an important support for MEPs activities but also contributed to the spreading of information on EU and EP activities among journalists, scholars and students. The EP Research Service has become a point of reference for all those who want an informed view on European affairs.

An open question, however, is how the EPRS will co-exist in the future with the Policy Departments in the Committees.

**The improvement of EP Communications**

While often very critical of their national systems, citizens of individual Member States are much more familiar with their structures than they are with those of the European Union institutions. The European Parliament, therefore, has placed a big emphasis on neutral EU communications, notably every 5 years during European Parliament election campaigns, to complement the work done by the political groups and by individual MEPs and candidates.An additional 27.5 million Euros have recently been provided for this purpose for the 2024 elections.

The EP thus has an exceptionally large staff in this area, both in Brussels and in each of the EU Member States. There are thus now around 650 posts in its Communications Directorate-General, with services in Brussels dealing with written media and press reviews, websites and social media audiovisual services, events management and visitors (including a dedicated visitors facility or Parliamentarium) as well as information offices in each of the EU Member States. *.* Until recently the individual offices in each country were headed up by a national of that country but this has now begun to change, although linguistic considerations will always be a constraining factor in this respect.

An important new initiative has been to create interactive visitors’ centres (“Europe Experiences”) not only in Brussels and now Strasbourg, but also in other EP external offices, for example in Berlin, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Tallinn and Ljubljana. The idea is that they should be established in all EU Member States by 2024.

The arrival of social media has had a major impact on all Communications’ activities and the EP Administration has adapted to this new challenge in a very dynamic way.  An increasingly strong social media presence has helped to focus attention on the work of the Institution*,* The increase in turnout in the 2019 EP elections, the first time that this has occurred since the first direct elections in 1979, has also been  helped by a successful institutional campaign #thisTimeI vote

The increase in the social media profile of the Parliament has generally been very positive, although it has also posed the question as to how the Parliament should seek to tackle the ever-increasing spread of disinformation and hate speech via social media platforms;

The use of social media has also changed the role of EP Communications staff who have had to interact with EU citizens in a much more direct way than in the past..

**Developments in Information Technology**

The IT department has been at the forefront of modernization of the EP administration. Not only it has guaranteed a secure informatic environment but it has also promoted the transition to a paperless Parliament.: All documents pertinent to plenary or committee meetings are  now accessible to MEPs from anywhere and using any device. Applications to introduce budgetary and legislative amendments have simplified procedures both for MEPs and for the services, and also reduced their human and financial costs.

The modernization of the EP administration was being gradually and successfully implemented when the pandemic crisis started in March 2020. In a few weeks the IT department achieved progresses that would normally have taken years, overcoming the normal great resistance of MEPs and staff to innovations.

 The IT Department’s work has been crucial in developing the necessary infrastructure, in finding the solutions to allow MEPs to participate and vote in meetings from remote locations, as outlined in the next section of this paper..

**An unexpected challenge: The pandemic**

The decision of the EP to guarantee business continuity despite the cancellation of all in person meetings and the obligation for all staff to work remotely obliged MEPs, EP and political group staff to change their normal ways of working. This objective was achieved both through the development of technological infrastructure and through the adaptation of the legal framework.

The years 2020 and 2021, will not be easily forgotten. The EP, which by nature is spread over three working places and functions on the basis of constant travelling all across Europe, was particularly affected by these restrictive measure ,which have had a great effect both on the MEPs and on the EP Secretariat..

The decision taken by the EP President with the political groups to ensure “business as usual” to the maximum extent immediately raised a number of problems that could only gradually be solved..

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| --- | --- |
| **Figure 5  Remote activities in the EP in 2020** | |
| Plenary days | 112 |
| Remote interventions in plenary | 160 |
| Items voted in plenary | 762 |
| Remote meetings | 1600 |
| Participants in remote meetings | 130 |
| Number of single votes in committees | 540 |

Source: own elaboration on data transmitted by DG ITEC

Table 5 shows how in the period March – December 2020 EP continued to legislate and to ensure the entry into force of important measures to tackle some of the economic consequences of the pandemic.

In dealing with the new challenges to its traditional working methods the EP had to confront two problems. First its existing Rules of Procedure did not envisage such a situation. Second any new ways of working posed a potential threat to the key principle of equal treatment of all MEPs.

The adaptation of the EP Rules of Procedure

The evolution of the pandemic and the necessity to take immediate restrictive measures left little time for any adjustments. The adaptation of the Rules of Procedure to allow EP to permit these adjustments was thus one of the first concerns of MEPs.

In March 2020 EP President and the Bureau took the decision, with the support of the Conference of Presidents, to organize remote plenary and committee meetings, including the possibility to vote from remote locations. A formal modification of the RoP was necessary to achieve such a radical change in the EP’s working methods. The responsible committee (Constitutional Affairs, AFCO)  produced a report for the plenary which included a new title in the rules covering ‘*Extraordinary Circumstances’*: This proposal foresaw a number of potential situations which required immediate responses. The approach of the AFCO Report was to leave the ultimate decision on the measures to be taken to the plenary.

This approach raised some concerns.   In December 2020,  when the plenary voted on the  committee report, it was amended to provide for  the President to be entrusted to take urgent measures, with the approval of the CoP,,  but also for a political group or a number of Members to be able to request a vote in plenary. Such a vote would then be taken at the first possible date without debate and without amendments.

Ensuring the equality of MEPS

The equality of MEPs was undermined by the restrictive measures. Among the major aspects creating discrimination among MEPs was a new linguistic and digital divide, as well as the extent to which individual MEPs could take the floor in plenary.

The organisation of all EP work, all by remote instead of in person, reduced the capacity of interpretation and multiplied informal contacts among MEPs without interpretation. MEPs with limited linguistic capacity were automatically marginalised, especially in any preparatory discussions.

The same applied for MEPs living in areas with weak or no internet connections.  The EP administration provided those MEPs with 4G sim cards, but not all such problems could be solved. Moreover, not all MEPs were necessarily IT literate which added a supplementary obstacle to their participation in remote activities.

As regards the possibility of taking the floor in plenary all spontaneity was disrupted by the necessity to announce in advance any request for speaking time. MEPs who did make such a request were then obliged to be present either in the Chamber or in one of the European Parliament Liaison offices in their own country, a significant constraint in larger countries, in particular, or in countries where there were severe Covid-induced restraints of freedom of movement even within one country.

Follow-up to the Covid crisis

At the moment of writing the Covid crisis is gradually abating. It has, however, posed important new questions for the Parliament and for its Secretariat as to how its longer-term working methods should be adapted. In July 2021 the European Parliament set up five Focus Groups of MEPs on “Rethinking Parliamentary Democracy -a stronger EP after Covid” and which issued a set of recommendations for the future. The last of these Focus Groups, consisting of 14 MEPs, was on “facilitating internal organisation*”* . This looked at some of the positive and negative aspects of the EP’s response to the crisis, and which of the changes needed to be retained, dropped or cut back..

On the positive side the EP had demonstrated remarkable resilience and a capacity to adapt during the pandemic crisis. COVID-19 had also been a catalyst to quickly develop new tools and services such as digital tools for Members and hybrid events, as well as online activities such as the “Citizens virtual tour” of the EP that had started to be built to compensate for the loss of in-person visitors.

The Focus Group report reiterated this. It *“welcomed Parliament’s very high level of agility during the pandemic, which showed that it was able to organise its work completely remotely if needed,*” and further “*noted that the European Parliament was the only international institution to achieve continuity in multilingual meetings”.*

On the other hand Members and staff have discovered the advantages a but also the disadvantages of remote working. The latter were emphasised in the Focusd Group report which concluded that “Politics in democracies cannot only be done remotely” and that in-person presence and networking remained absolutely vital for many core functions of the Parliament. In particular there needed to be a return to in -presence voting in plenary. Moreover, remote working also posed practical problems, such as those for full interpretation.

It is unclear at the moment of writing how this will all evolve. Besides the move towards in-person plenary sessions apart from in certain well-defined exceptional circumstances, there is likely to be a strong push towards primarily in-person committee meetings. On the other hand some of the facilities that have been developed for remote working may be maintained in the future. The Focus Group noted *“the need to find the right balance between physical presence and the flexibility of remote participation via hybrid meetings”* some elements of which should be retained since, cutting down on travel was good both for carbon emissions and for work-life balance. This may be the case, for example, for a number of preliminary and preparatory activities such as committee hearings or meetings of committee coordinators.

As regards some of the the longer-term consequences of teleworking not only for MEPs but also for the Parliament Secretariat these were also looked at by the Focus Group. It pointed out that the nature of the tasks of staff working for the Parliament were very different in nature and that a “one-size-fits-all” approach could not be applied in the interests of the service. In this context it suggested the drawing up of a set of basic principles, such as that teleworking *“should be offered to all categories of staff on a voluntary basis, without discrimination based on age, gender, grade, function, seniority etc” and that “minimum and maximum teleworking days per week could be calculated on a monthly or annual basis, as an entitlement for all categories of staff”* . A new way of management, based on trust and more results-oriented, should also be developed to accompany this more autonomous and flexible way of working while also maintain a sense of “esprit de corps” within a given service.

All this will constitute a significant challenge for the European Parliament and its Secretariat over the next decade.

Other recent challenges for the EP Administration

The capacity of the EU Administration to adapt rapidly to new and unforeseen circumstances has been demonstrated in several recent contexts.

EU responded to the pandemic with an unprecedented Plan for Recovery and Resilience (NPRR), but this decision excluded any formal role for the EP. In spite of this the EP obtained in a Joint Declaration(OJ C 444 of 22 12 2020)the establishment of a procedure whereby it was able to scrutinise the implementation of the NPRR. This new EP activity also required a significant input from the EP Secretariat which had to provide detailed analysis of the various National Plans to support MEPs in their monitoring role.

[*https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/research/advanced-search?textualSearch=recovery+plan*](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/research/advanced-search?textualSearch=recovery+plan)

Another challenge for the EP Administration related to the recent Conference on the Future of Europe on which the EP played a crucial role both in launching the Conference and then in supporting its activities. The Administration had a twin role to play in the Conference, firstly helping to provide its Joint Secretariat along with the Commission and Council, and secondly to back up the work of the 108 MEPs who took an active part in the Conference’s plenary sessions and other activities.

Last but not least, the events following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 have also had an impact on the agenda of the EP and of its Administration. An impressive number of policy briefings and background analysis have had to be provided by EP staff, in particular from its EP Research Service and Policy Departments, and which have helped MEPs to take informed decisions.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/home

**Conclusions**

The European Parliament’s organisational model, both for MEPs and the administration, was initially shaped by the parliamentary tradition of the 6 founding Member States, all with a relative strong and independent secretariat. The secretariat then played an important role, notably before direct elections when MEPs were only part-time and primarily focused on their own national parliaments, in ensuring continuity and coordination of the European Parliament’s activities.

 This situation has changed greatly over the years notably since the introduction and extension of legislative co-decision, and the other major increases in the Parliament’s powers. Political groups secretariats have been reinforced, European Political Parties have emerged as another source of information for MEPs and perhaps even more important has been the increase in the number of  personal assistants to MEPs. As mentioned above, the introduction of the accredited assistants has been a significant step in the provision of back-up to MEPs and led to a potential shift of power even away from the groups towards individual MEPs..

The role of the Parliament has become more political and more technical at the same time. The management of procedures has been simplified, notably by IT developments but also made more rigid (ie by the way in which legislative or budgetary amendments are introduced).

Other changes have also had an impact: the greater accessibility of information, via internet, the transparency of EU Institutions, staff mobility which has somewhat reduced staff specialisation, and other factors.

 A question of particular interest is that of the impact of EP staff on organisational and other developments within the EP and the extent of EP staff influence on EP decisions. One factor of relevance is the very high turnover among MEPs (typically 50% after each election, much higher than that in almost all national parliaments), and thus conferring on the EP Secretariat considerable advantages of institutional memory and continuity and helping them to influence procedural and other changes.

Another factor has been that the EP staff has operated in a Parliament without a government and opposition, nor fixed majorities or minorities, and where committees have had their own corporate cultures.

Moreover, the Parliament has had less of a conventional hierarchy than the Commission, not least because of the unusual nature of MEP, EP staff interaction in many areas. A closely- related question to this is the extent to which some of the distinctive features of the EP that were mentioned above, such as its constantly changing powers and procedures and institutional autonomy, have led  to the development of an entrepreneurial spirit within an EP staff. At the very least , MEPs and the EP Administration have often appeared to share a common  ‘mission’ that the parliament has had for most of its existence, namely to democratise the EU and thereby  to expand its own powers.  The EP staff  have thus often shared this ‘missionary zeal’, creating an esprit des corps that is unique for a parliamentary administration and aligning  the EP Secretariat with a political (though not party-political)  conception of their role that would be unusual, if not unheard of, for staff working for national parliaments.

There is some evidence, however, that there is already less institutional fluidity  than in the past. If this is confirmed in the future, there may be a shift towards greater emphasis on better implementation of the EP’s powers, rather than on continually expanding them. Moreover, the individual MEPs are more powerful than ever before and MEPs offices are becoming closer in character to small and medium size enterprises, managing information and delivering reasoned and expert positions in many subjects. In addition, the number of EP staff members with an overall view of what is happening within an ever larger and more complex administration are becoming ever rarer.

Might all these trends further modify the institutional and administrative culture within the EP Secretariat.? Might the latter become less political and more of a service provider, and perhaps become a more “normal” parliamentary administration?

In the comparative study mentioned above, the joint working group Bureau-BUDG concluded that the EP had similarities to the model of the US Congress, with a large number of staff for its members, If such trends are confirmed for the EP Administration it might, in the future, have a reduced committee secretariat, mainly in charge of clerical functions, and, on the other hand, have a larger and independent Research Service and Budget Office who can serve Members as well as committees.

 Other influences of national and administrative cultures on day-to-day procedures within the European Parliament require further study. Some influences, however, seem fairly clear, such as the rapporteur system which is so strongly entrenched in the EP committee structure (from French parliamentary practice) and question time in the plenary (introduced after UK MEPs joined the EP)

Another matter worthy of note concerns the changes in relations between the European Parliament and national parliaments, including the development of deeper institutional and staff linkages ( the  growth in relations with National Parliament officials based in EP buildings,  the creation of a dedicated European Parliament Directorate for relations with national parliaments, the close links between respective secretariats in inter parliamentary meetings and in common structures such as the Conference of Speakers and COSAC) )   More comparative work would be welcome on these points as well,  including comparisons of  numbers of staff in the respective committees,  and of differing structures such as in the Bundestag model of small committees and a big Library, etc).

The European Parliament administration should thus provide considerable scope for further academic research, not least in examining those areas where it has been distinctively different from other national parliament administrations and those where it has been more similar. The present paper does not explore these important research questions in more detail, but seeks to pose them for future researchers.