

The European Commission

Where now? Where next?

Research Briefing 7: Mapping pathways into the European Commission. A cross-national comparison

The staff of the European Commission needs to be drawn from all member states, but how similar is the route taken by nationals from across the EU?

Background

The underrepresentation of certain member states among the staff of the European Commission has become a salient issue. A [report](#) from the Commission to the European Parliament and Council in 2018 addressed the issue. It set out the legal context, discussed approaches taken at the time of rounds of enlargement, reviewed the level of representation of nationalities, and considered a minimal presence for the member states.¹

Recruitment and the various pathways into the Commission has been a concern in each of our three studies 'The European Commission in Question', in 2008, 'The European Commission: Facing the Future' in 2014 and 'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' in 2018. Routes into the Commission has been a particular interest. In this briefing, we look at the pathways taken by different nationals into the organisation. We look in particular at educational and

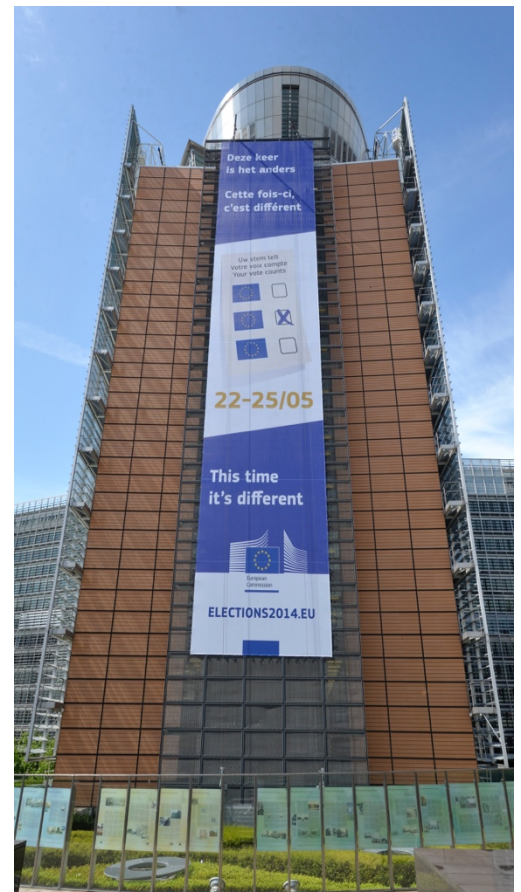
professional backgrounds, where we find considerable diversity. We also compare the motivations of nationals from underrepresented members states to those of all staff.

Although we do not believe that the answer to mitigating the underrepresentation of nationals from the states concerned is to be found in analysis of these factors alone, we do consider that they contribute importantly to the understanding of national profiles, which is a first step.

Why does underrepresentation matter?

Nationality is in many ways a difficult issue for the Commission. The mission of the Commission is to represent the general interest of the European Union and to that extent to stand beyond nationality. Hence, members of the Commission, are nominated by national governments, but take an oath of independence on taking up office. Also, as an administration, the Commission is meritocratic. In contrast to other international administrations, Commission staff are not appointed or seconded to specific posts on the basis of their nationality. The Commission is a career civil service.

states include Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal,



For further information:

Project website:

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/political-social-international-studies/research/the-juncker-commission>

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Please cite as: Connolly, S. and Kassim, H. (2019) 'Mapping pathways into the European Commission. A cross-national comparison', *The European Commission: Where now? Where next? Research Briefing 7*

¹ According to the Commission report, the underrepresented

Finland, Sweden, Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as the UK.

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At the same time, however, the Commission can only carry out its responsibilities if it has at its disposal expertise – political, economic, legal, cultural and linguistic – covering all its member states. For their part, governments have been concerned since the Communities were created that

member countries should be represented in rough proportion to their size or respective share of the population of the European Communities. Moreover, for reasons of democratic legitimacy citizens need to be able to look at the institution and see their compatriots in all

parts and at all levels of the organisation.² None of these considerations point to *active* over *passive* representation, but they do underline the importance of recruitment to the Commission from all EU member states.

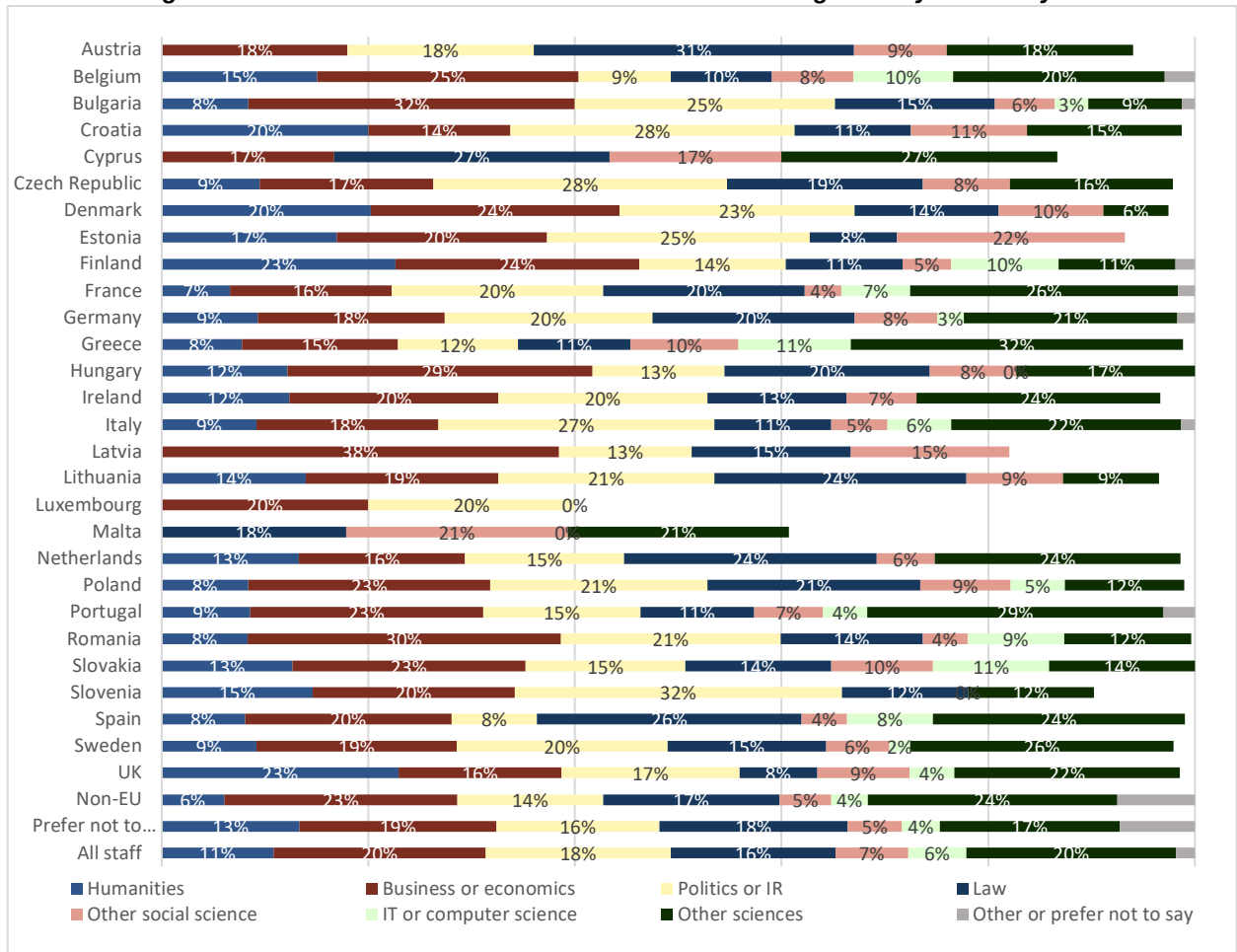
Educational backgrounds

In the online survey, we asked staff the subject of their highest qualification. The breakdown by nationality, shown in Figure 1, makes

fascinating reading. Staff from the UK, for example, are more likely to have a background in the humanities than any other subject group. Among Hungarians, meanwhile,

business and economics is most likely, while among Commission staff from France and Germany, it is a qualification in science.

Figure 1. Commission staff: breakdown of educational background by nationality



² Murdoch Z., Connolly, S. and Kassim, H. (2018) 'Administrative

legitimacy and the democracy deficit of the European Union',

Journal of European Public Policy, 25(3), 389-408

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Looking at particular subject backgrounds, Figures 2, 3 and 4 show breakdowns for business and economics,

law, and politics and international relations graduates. Among Latvians business and economics is

the main route, for Austrians it is law, and for Slovenes politics and international relations.

Figure 2: Commission staff reporting highest qualification in business and economics. Breakdown by nationality

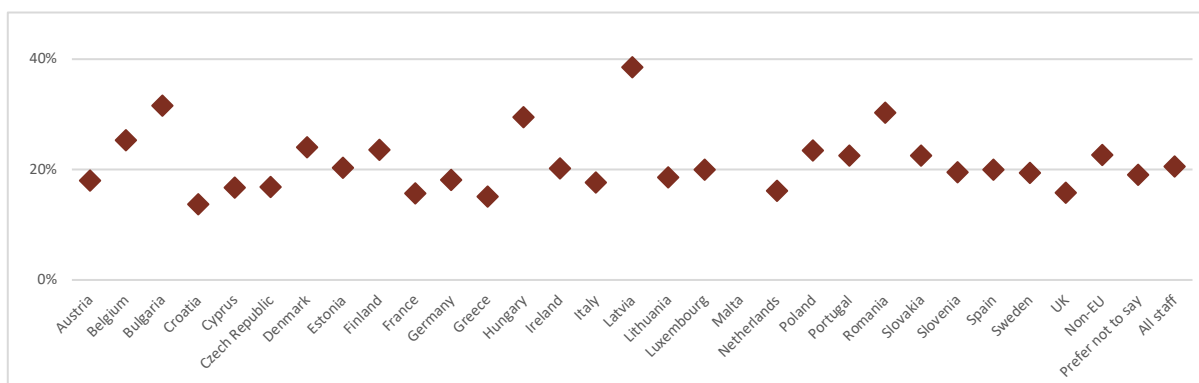


Figure 3: Commission staff reporting highest qualification in law. Breakdown by nationality.

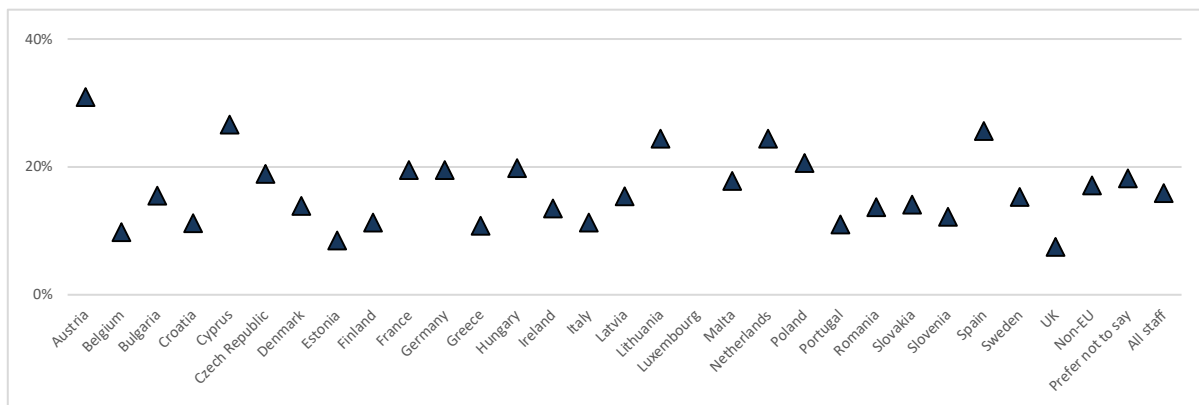
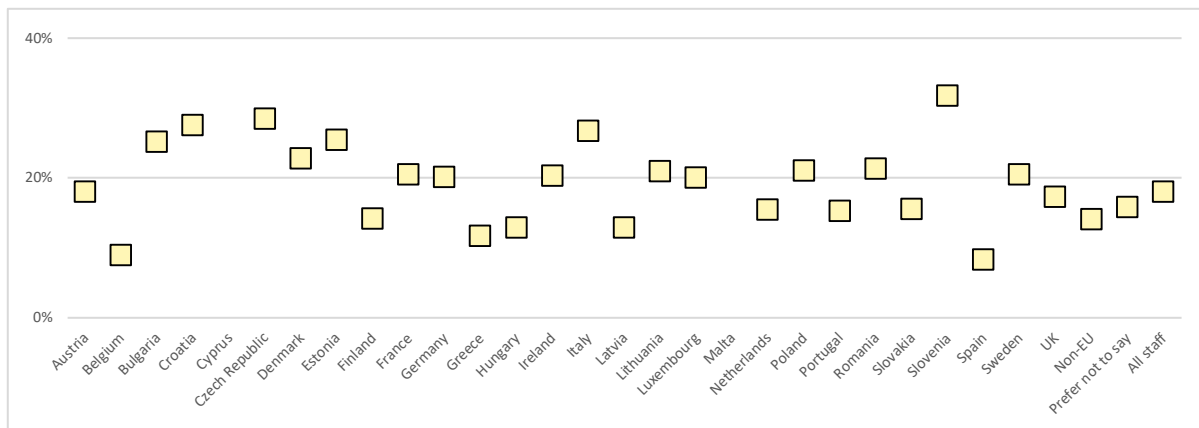


Figure 4: Commission staff reporting highest qualification in politics and international relations. Breakdown by nationality



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Professional backgrounds

We also asked staff about their professional experience before joining the Commission. Cross-national comparisons of backgrounds in business and in public administration reveal striking contrasts (Figure 5). While

Commission staff from Belgium are most likely to have a commercial background, while those from Slovenia are least likely. Figure 6, meanwhile, show that Commission staff from Latvia are most likely to have worked in public

administration, those from Belgium and Portugal are least likely. The comparison is instructive, because it highlights that different dynamics are at work in national labour markets, but also between sectors or areas of employment.

Figure 5: Commission staff with a background in businesses. Breakdown by nationality

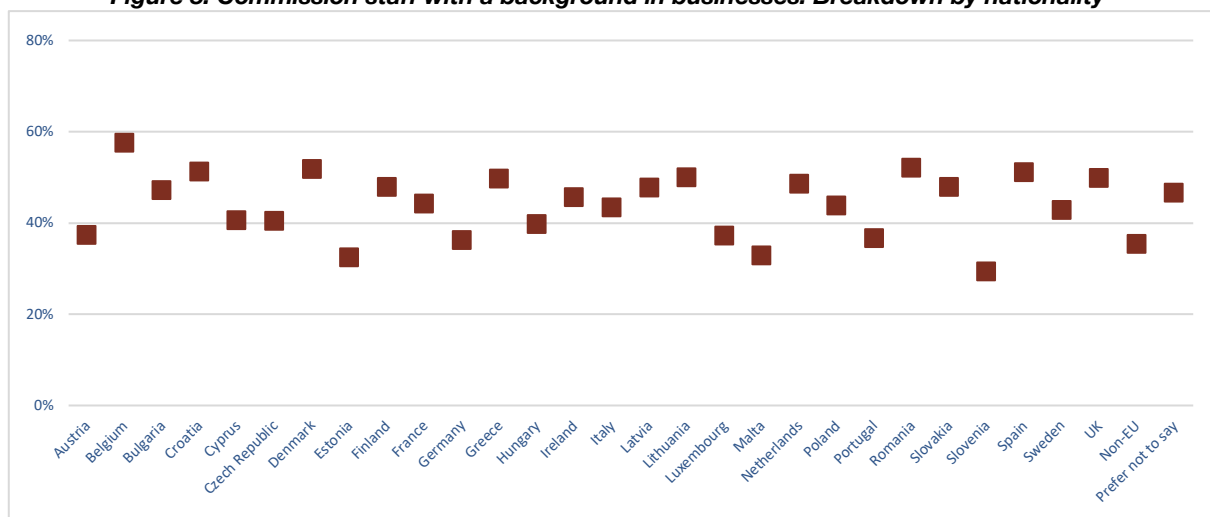
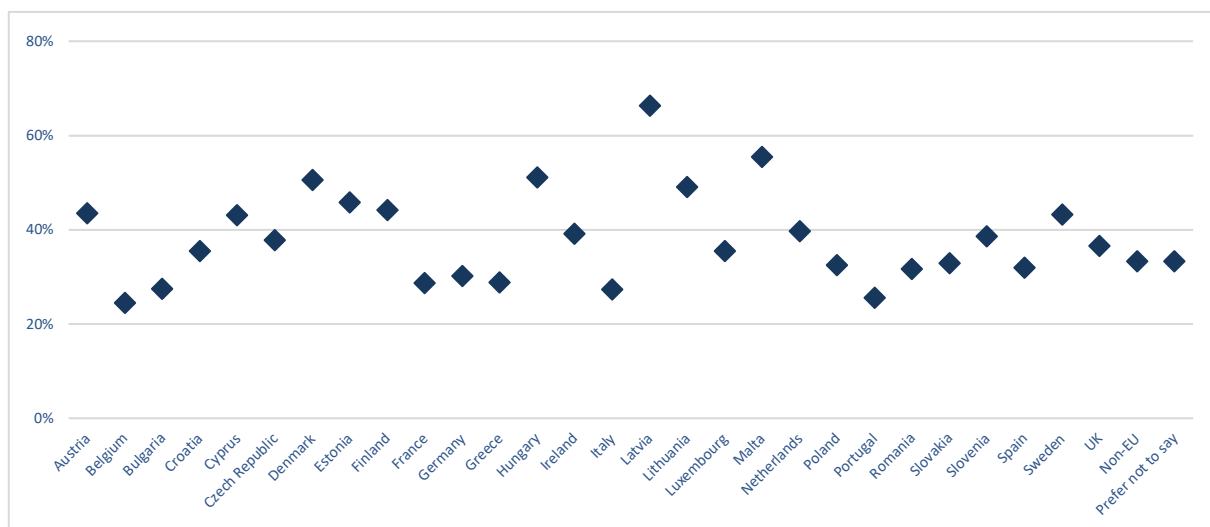


Figure 6: Commission staff with a background in public administration. Breakdown by nationality



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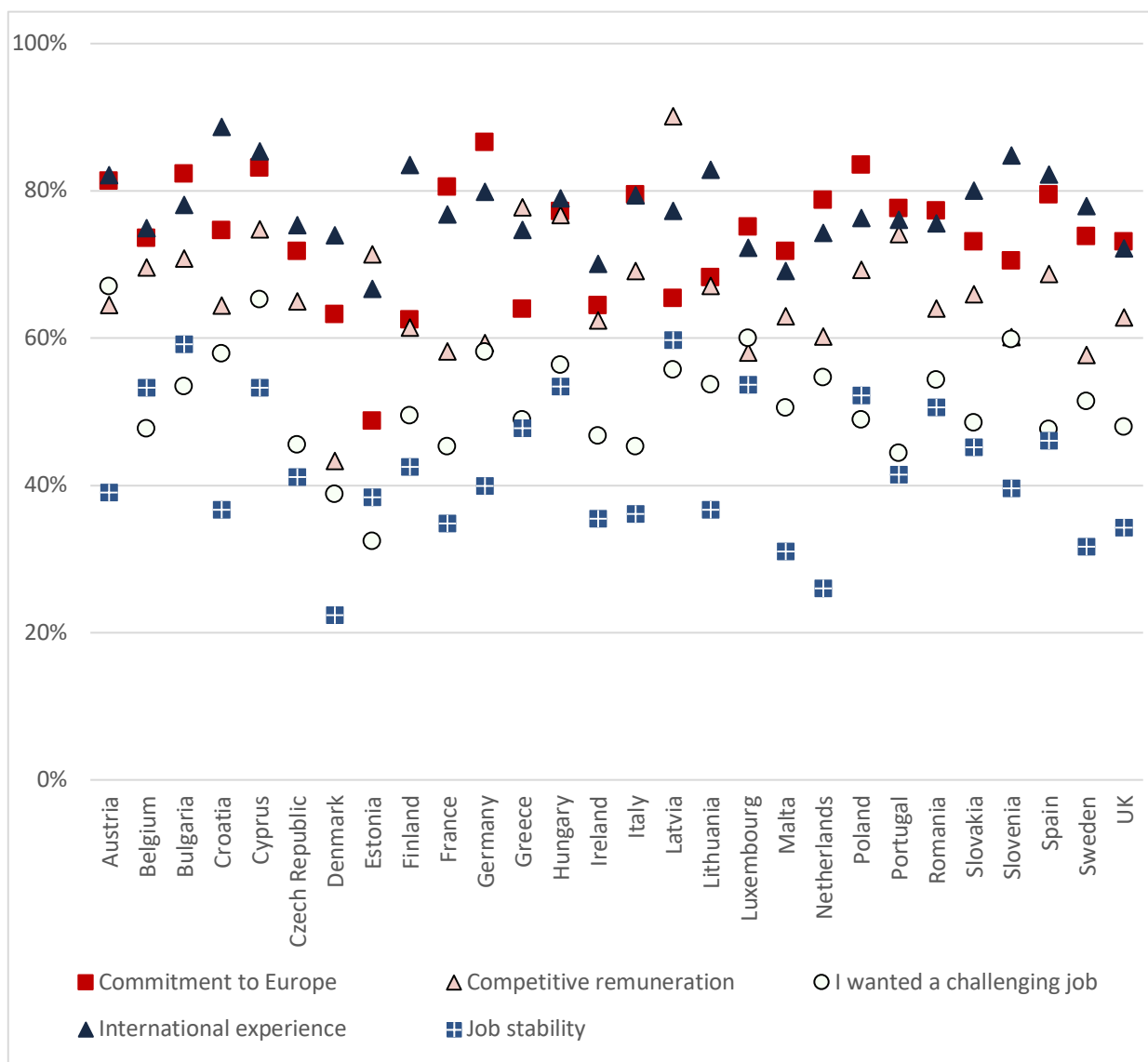
Motivation

Background characteristics are important, but motivation is also a key part of the picture. In the online survey, we asked Commission staff why they chose to pursue career in the institution. The results,

which are shown below in Figure 7, show that staff from different member states have very different reasons and ranking of reasons for deciding to work for the Commission. Pursuit of international

experience features most strongly among Commission staff from Croatia and commitment to Europe is highest among Commission staff from Germany.

Figure 7: Motivation for deciding to pursue a career in the Commission. Breakdown by nationality



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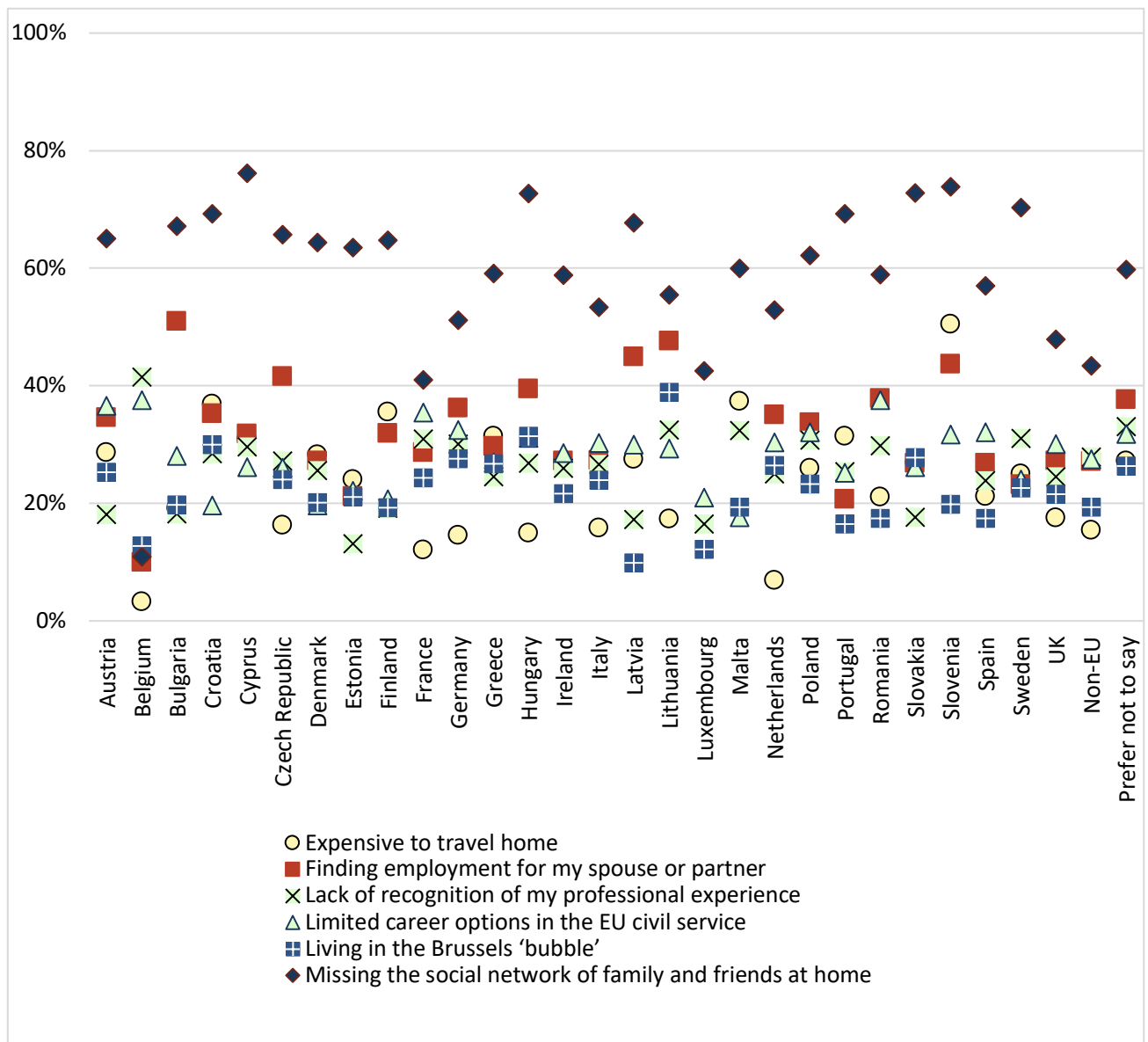
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Downsides

Although the sample is, of course, biased since the question was only put to staff who work for the institution, we thought that it might be possible to gain insights into the hesitations that some nationals feel about working the Commission by asking about the downsides that had concerned our respondents. ‘Missing the social network of family and friends’ unsurprisingly tops most lists, while ‘finding employment for my spouse or partner’ is second for some nationals and ‘expensive to travel home’ a particular concern for Commission staff from Slovenia, Malta, Croatia, and Finland.

Figure 8. Downsides in pursuing a career in the Commission. Breakdown by nationality



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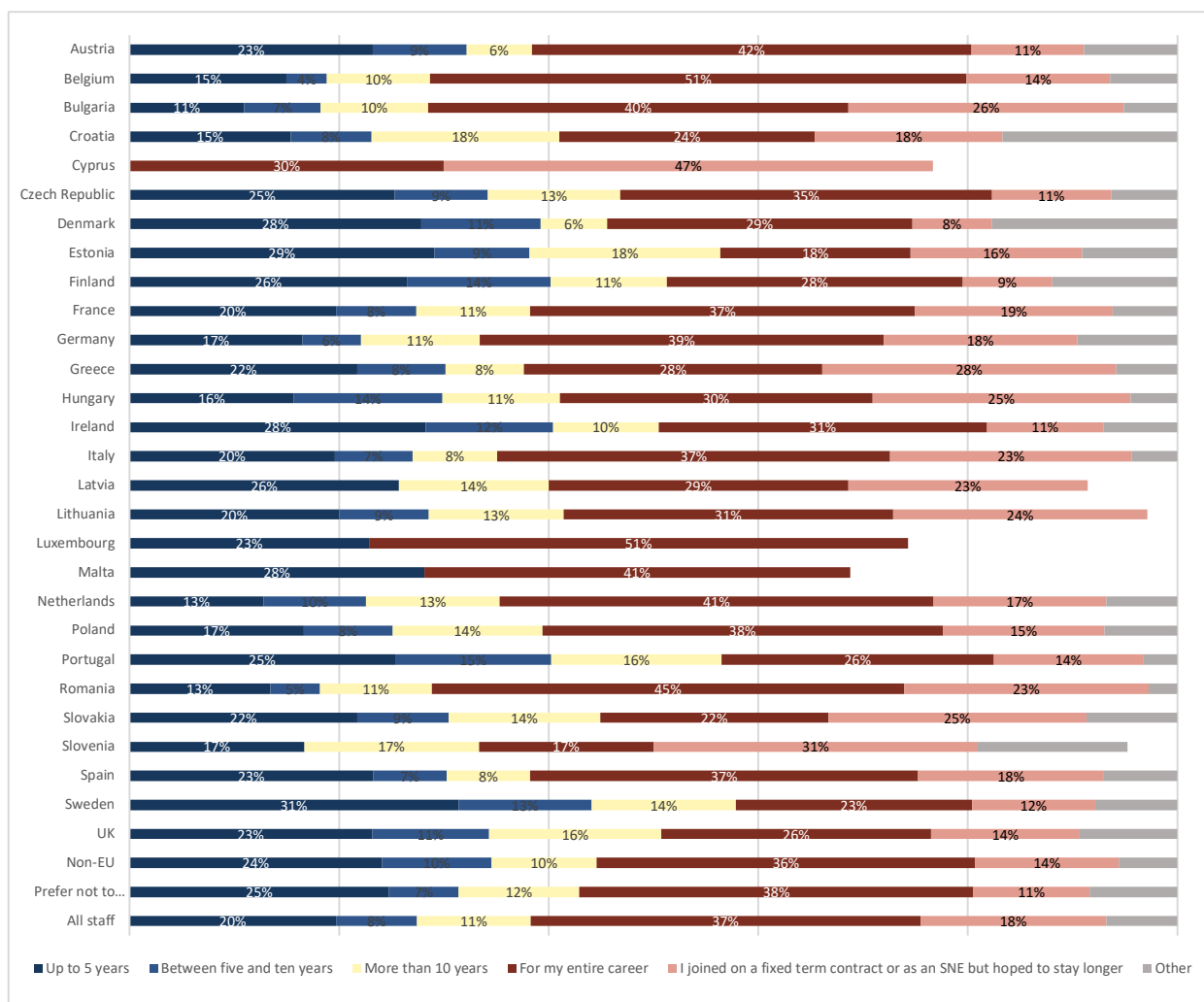
Career expectations

Another dimension is whether the decision to work for the European Commission is considered to be for work or for a career. Especially at a time when the conventional wisdom holds that labour market entrants are no longer looking for a job for life, we thought it important to explore how long staff

thought that they would work for the Commission when they first joined. In another research briefing, we noted that there was indeed evidence of inter-generational differences. Figure 9 shows that there is also cross-national variation. Interestingly, significant numbers report that they planned to spend

their entire career in the organisation, but even here there are striking differences. There is also cross-national variation among Commission staff planning to spend up to five years working for the institution. Finding what lies behind these figures is an important question for future research.

Figure 9. Responses to: 'When you first joined, how long did you think you would work for the Commission?' Breakdown by nationality



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Competitive remuneration

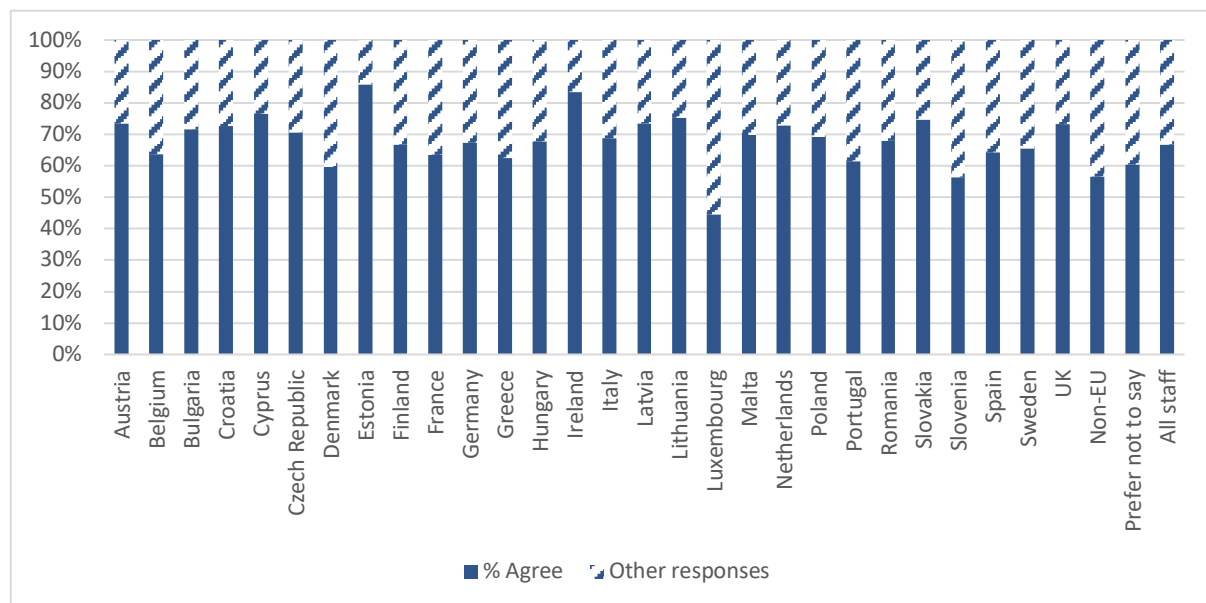
Given the diversity in labour market conditions and salaries, the linkage between domestic earning possibilities and pay in the European Commission is important to investigate.

In the online survey, we asked staff whether they

believed that, compared to people doing a similar job in other organisations, they received a fair remuneration package. The responses are shown in Figure 10. Although remuneration is likely to affect whether a career in the Commission is regarded as desirable, the

relationship is not mechanical.³ Rather satisfaction with levels of pay interacts with professional opportunities, as well as with values, political and cultural factors.

Figure 10. Responses to: 'Compared to people doing a similar job in other organisations, I feel I receive a fair remuneration package?' Breakdown by nationality



Values and outlooks

A final comparison concerns values and outlook. Background characteristics, motivations, and career prospects may all be important, but values may also have an influence. In the online survey, we

asked staff to locate themselves on a spectrum from 0 to 10 where 0 was a preference for the EU as a union of sovereign states and 10 a single EU.

The results, shown in Figure 11, are interesting, precisely

because they do not show a clear correlation between the preferences of nationals from underrepresented member states and all staff on their favoured view of EU governance.

³ Kassim, H. et al (2013) *The European Commission of the*

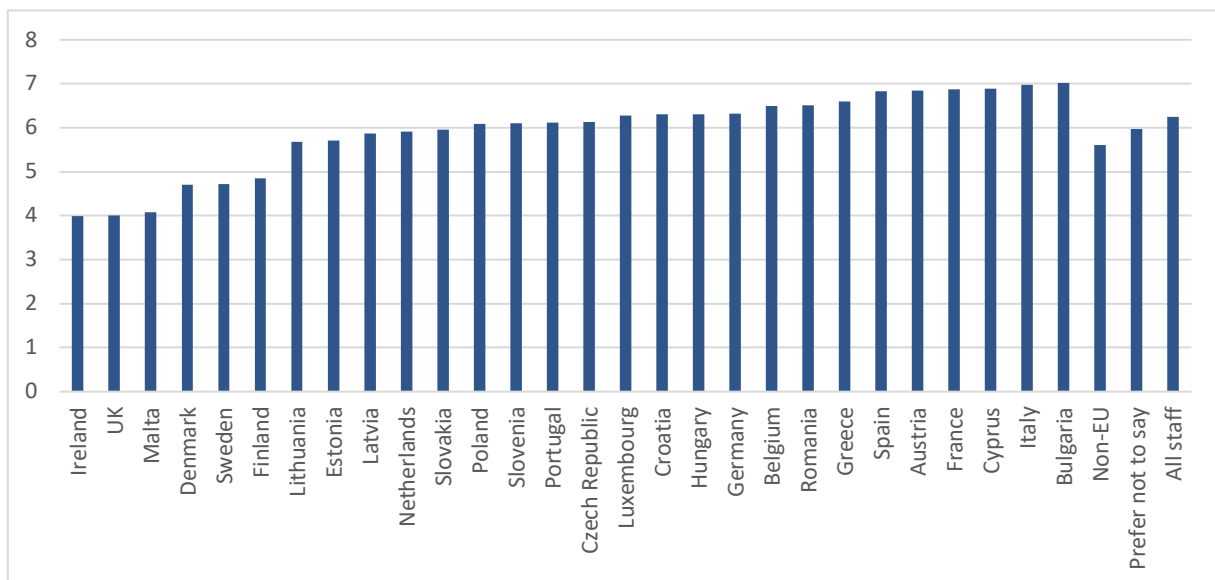
Twenty-First Century, Oxford University Press, p. 57)

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Figure 11. Responses to: ‘Where would you locate yourself on a scale where 0 is a preference for the EU as a union of sovereign states and 10 a single European Union?’ Breakdown by nationality



Conclusion

This briefing has compared the backgrounds, motivations, career expectations and values of Commission staff by nationality. The aim is to highlight the very different and distinct pathways into the Commission from the member states, but also to

give an insight into the complexities of recruiting from very different labour markets and different national publics. Although the elements described above represent only a first step towards an analysis of how best to address the issue of

underrepresentation, the briefing shows that any solution will need to be based on more than an appraisal of the salary rates and market opportunities in the member states of the European Union.

Hussein Kassim and Sara Connolly
29 November 2019

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About the project

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' is a multinational academic research project, undertaken by a multidisciplinary team. It investigates the internal structure and operation of the Commission, with a particular focus on of the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'. It looks also at the background, beliefs and experience of the people who work for the Commission. The project is informed by data drawn from three sources: responses to an online survey from around 6500 respondents from across and at all levels of the Commission; a programme of more than 200 interviews, including with Commissioners, cabinet members and senior managers; and five focus groups with staff in non-managerial positions. For further information, see our [project website](#)

The project is the third to be undertaken by a team led by Professor Hussein Kassim, following '[The European Commission in Question](#)' in 2008-09 and '[The European Commission: Facing the Future](#)' in 2014. The surveys in 2014 and 2018 were circulated to all staff and the 2008 survey was sent to administrators in policy DGs and members of cabinet. Where we make comparisons across surveys, we attempt to present like-for-like results for all staff in 2014/2018 and for administrators and members of cabinet in 2008/2014/2018.

Funding for the project comes from the European University Institute, the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer, and the University of East Anglia. Although the European Commission allowed us to undertake the project and offered practical help, they provided no financial support or funding.

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'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' Research Briefings are edited and produced by Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim.

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