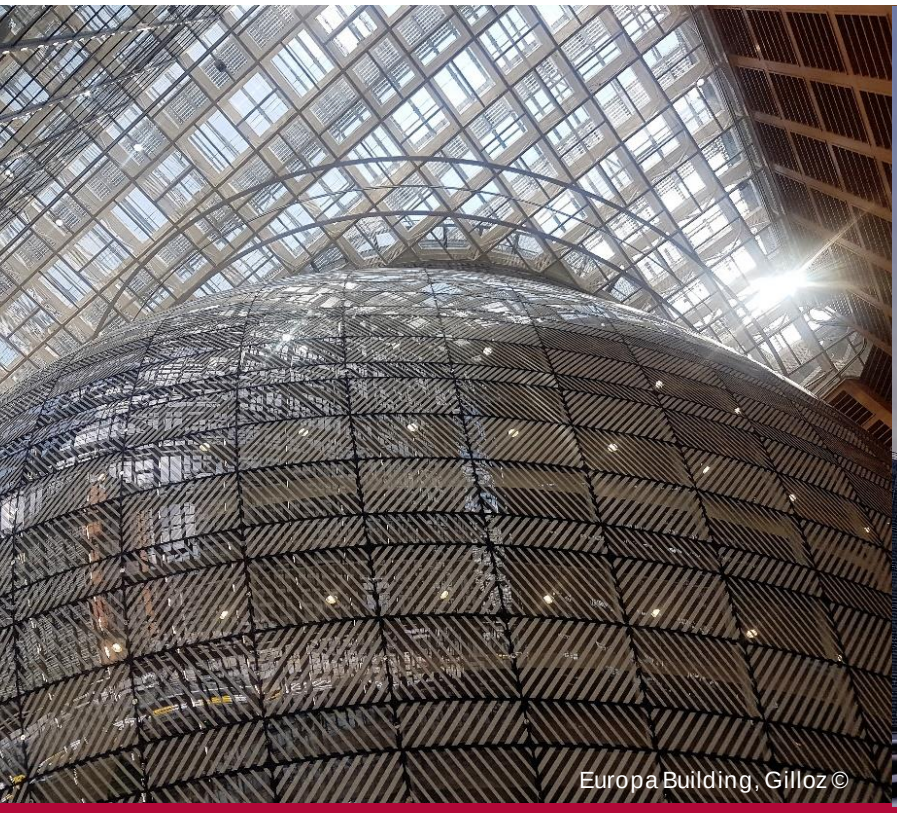
# ‘The Making of European Harmony’: Coordinating Activities in the European Council after the Lisbon Treaty

## A sociological analysis of the interactions between the General Secretariat, the sherpas, and the cabinet of the President of the European Council

Oriane GILLOZ



Europa Building, Gilloz ©

Rue de la Loi, Gilloz ©

EUSA 17th Biennial Conference, Miami - May 19-21, 2022

Panel 3K: “Out of the shadows? New perspectives on the Secretariats General of EU institutions. Council, Commission and Parliament”

Institutional affiliation: College of Europe

**ORIANE GILLOZ**

Oriane GILLOZ is an Academic Assistant at the European Political and Governance Studies Department of the College of Europe (Bruges campus). She holds a Franco-German double master's degree in Applied Political Science (Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg and the Institut d'Études Politiques of Aix-en-Provence) and a MA in European Political and Governance Studies from the College of Europe (Bruges). Her research focuses on the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, public administration reforms, and EU institutional change. Address for correspondence: Oriane Gilloz, College of Europe, Dijver 11, 8000, Bruges. Email: oriane.gilloz@coleurope.eu

**ABSTRACT**

This paper represents a first and thus preliminary account of an ongoing research project on coordinating activities of the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (GSC). The objective is to explore how these activities interact with political and administrative actors within the Council(s). The present contribution focuses on the European Council's sphere of activities and its actors, notably the GSC's civil servants, the Cabinet of the President of the European Council, and the political advisors of the heads of state and governments (sherpas). The complete study aims to extend the analysis to the Council of the EU and its actors, notably the COREPER, the rotating presidency, and national civil servants. In summarizing, the aim is to map out the Councils' actors and understand the relationship between the political and the administrative sphere by capturing its dynamics and evolutions.

**KEYWORDS**

European Council; Council of the EU; General Secretariat of the Council of the EU; President of the European Council; political advisors; sherpas; coordination; political sociology.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to a high-level member of the cabinet of the PEC for supporting my research project and taking the time from their busy schedule to answer my questions. The richness and authenticity of our discussion have been crucial to gathering qualitative background information, testing hypotheses, and reorienting lines of research.

**NOTE TO THE READER**

In this paper, I only present preliminary reflections with all the imprecisions that an exploratory study might entail. Therefore, I welcome constructive exchanges of opinions, new ideas, and recommendations that would bring fresh perspectives to a complex but fascinating research topic. I also welcome any methodological advice and factual corrections.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** ..... **i**

**INTRODUCTION** ..... **1**

**The Lisbon Treaty and Institutional Changes within the Council(s): a Well-known Story** ..... 1

**The Administrative Impacts of the Lisbon Treaty: The Great Unknown** ..... 3

**Studying the European Council through the Lens of the Administration** ..... 4

*Epistemological Position: The Cultural Construction of Politic and Administration* ..... 4

*Objective of this Contribution and Research Questions* ..... 5

**PART I - THE GENERAL SECRETARIAT AND THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL: 'FORMALISING THE INFORMAL'** ..... **7**

**Empowerment of the Secretariat and Gradual Influence on the European Council** ..... 7

**After the Lisbon Treaty: the necessary Resetting of Coordinating Activities** ..... 10

**PART II - TWO 'ADMINISTRATIONS D'ETAT MAJOR': OVERLAPPING OR COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES?** ..... **14**

**'Sherpas': the Black Box(es) inside the Black Box?** ..... 14

*Studying 'Sherpas': The Challenge of Making the Invisible Visible* ..... 14

*Sherpas and Permanent Representative: Structural Rivalries or Synergy?* ..... 16

**GSC officials, PEC cabinet, and Sherpas: Who Sets the Tone?** ..... 18

*Actor's Position within a Field: Permanence vs. Intermittence* ..... 19

*Socialisation: National-based Culture vs. EU Corporate Culture* ..... 20

**CONCLUSIVE REMARKS** ..... **22**

**The Council Ecosystem or the Making of European Harmony** ..... 22

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ..... **24**

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| COREPER | Comité des représentants permanents |
| DG | Directorate-General |
| (DG) GIP | (Directorate-General for) General and Institutional Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| EUCO | European Council |
| FAC | Foreign Affairs Council |
| GAC | General Affairs Council |
| GSC | General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union |
| PEC | President of the European Council |
| SGAE | General Secretariat for European Affairs |
| UK | United Kingdom |

# INTRODUCTION

## The Lisbon Treaty and Institutional Changes within the Council(s): a Well-known Story

Innovations and changes introduced by the Lisbon treaty have been widely studied and discussed. One may find brilliant publications on its impacts on the EU's external policies, such as development cooperation, trade, and foreign policies (Missiroli, 2008, 2010; Woolcock, 2010). There is also a plethora of studies on the Treaty's impact on the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU and the new institutional balance, both from a political and legal perspective (Piris, 2010; Craig, 2010; Christiansen, 2011, 2013).[1] According to most observers, the European Council (EUCO) became the nexus of EU political governance and integration, thus relegating the Council of the European Union to the background (Puetter, 2014; Wessels, 2011; Foret/Rittelmeyer, 2014). From an institutional point of view, the Lisbon Treaty brings two significant changes to the Council(s).[2] The most visible one being the fact that the European Council's presidency is no longer held by the member state holding the 6-months rotating presidency. Instead, the EUCO is chaired by a permanent and full-time president elected by the head of states and governments. This new leadership figure epitomises a stronger politicisation and personalisation of the EU's institutional setup (Rittelmeyer, 2011). The second change lies in the enshrinement of an EU "dual executive system" (Fabbrini, 2017; 2021): the European Commission, on one hand and the European Council, on the other hand. The former remains the day-to-day Community's executive arm, whereas the latter embodies the political executive at the centre of decision-making, i.e., "the alpha and omega of executive power in the EU" (Curtin, 2014, p. 5).

Beyond these institutional innovations, the Treaty of Lisbon also enshrines a trend starting in the mid-1990s, which is the rise of the EUCO as the "new centre of EU politics" (Puetter, 2013). The European Council has moved steadily from a "fireside chat club to a key decision-making body".[3] Already in the early 2000s, Peter Ludlow described the European Council as

[1] For an extensive (yet not exhaustive) list of readings, please refer to the list compiled by the Council of the EU Library for the 10th Anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty. The bibliography includes resources related to the Treaty's history and its subsequent impact on EU law, policies, and institutions. The list of publications is available here: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41428/treaty-of-lisbon.pdf.

[2] The Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the European Council "shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof" (article 15 TUE), while the Council of the EU "shall carry out policy-making and coordinating functions as laid down in the Treaties" (article 16 TEU).

[3] 'From fireside chats to key decision-maker' is the title of a documentary tracing the history of the European Council. Available online: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/history/?filters=2031.

"the arbiter of systemic change, the principal agenda-setter, the ultimate negotiating body and the core of the EU's executive" (2004, p. 12). Furthermore, crises that have shaken the EU over the last twenty years have accentuated the "great return of Europe's Nation-States" (Novak, 2014). This return is no longer limited to crisis situations: the EUCO has now become the ultimate forum of political discussion and plays a central role in the day-to-day running of the EU (Puetter, 2013). The direct corollary of this trend is the multiplication of informal arenas of negotiations. Informality has always been a core feature of the EUCO since its first summit. It remains a central aspect of the Council despite its gradual formalisation and increasing demand for transparency.[4] 'Informal summits' on the fringes of regular summits, 'informal contacts' with other institutions, and 'informal working lunches' are standard practices. The rise of the sherpa class (i.e., the closest political advisers to the heads of state and government) also reflects the further politicisation of the EU setting and the importance of the informality:

> "Although informal and scattered, [the sherpa network] has gained considerable power as presidents and prime ministers have needed to concern themselves more and more intensively with ongoing crises. (...) The sherpa network, powerful and invisible, reinforces the executive power of Europe's system of government" (Kelemen et al., 2019, p. 25).

With the reign of informality, coordinating activities are of utmost importance: informal decision-making cannot work without horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms. The network of sherpas, for example, require coordination at the highest level. Therefore, this function is managed by the cabinet of the PEC, which is itself, assisted by the GSC. Both "the PEC cabinet and the GSC act like a transmission belt and the interface between politics and administration".[5] Despite this central role, little is known about the consequences of the Lisbon Treaty on the Council's administration and its staff. Yet, any institutional reform has side effects on administrative structures. For example, the newly created post of President of the European Council (PEC) led to "administrative struggles and an unprecedented sharing of competences both in scope and speed to such an extent that one can speak of a bureaucratic war" (Mangenot, 2010, pp. 115-116). Therefore, eliminating the administrative dimension obscures actors and dynamics which might explain the current setting.

[4] See, for example: European Ombudsman, "Administration of the European Council (SI/8/2017/KR)", Correspondence, 15 December 2017; European Ombudsman, "Ombudsman asks President Tusk to publish meetings with lobbyists"; Press release n° 11/2017, 18 December 2017. Available at: https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/search-inquiries?institutions=59.
[5] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.

## The Administrative Impacts of the Lisbon Treaty: The Great Unknown

The implications of the Lisbon Treaty are considerable for the Council's administration. Before Lisbon, the GSC wore a double hat (*dédoublement fonctionnel*): it supported the Council of the EU (including its presidencies, the COREPER and the other committees) and the European Council. Since Lisbon, the GSC wears a third hat as it also became the administration of the President of the European Council and his cabinet. This new role led to additional tasks and required new coordination structures to be put in place. Furthermore, the PEC fulfils a position previously held by the national administration of the member state holding the presidency.

Hence, the cabinet of the PEC represents a new coordination structure, a European and permanent one, which works alongside 27 national administrations and the rest of the GSC. These structures all aim to coordinate activities within the Council and support decision-makers. They can be likened to "*administrations d'Etat major*" (Quermonne, 1985, 1991), i.e., impulse and coordination structures without which decision-makers cannot carry out their tasks. Quermonne defines these bodies through three main characteristics: their proximity with the Executive (closest political advisor), their appointment (at the discretion of the Executive), and their constant oscillation between the political and the administrative spheres. Within the European Council, one may find this type of structure at two levels.

On the one hand, at the level of the head of state or government, through the sherpas who are the closest political advisors on EU affairs of the head of state or government. They are appointed at the leader's discretion, which means their career is not linked to classic administrative logics prevailing in national administrations. The sherpas' main task is to prepare the European summits by representing their leaders in the discussions and ensuring a permanent dialogue with their counterparts in other member states.

On the other hand, the cabinet of the PEC represents another '*administration d'Etat major'*. It is composed of individuals chosen at the discretion of the President. Its members are generally civil servants from the Council and other EU institutions as well as seconded national experts. Their main task is to advise the PEC, coordinate activities (e.g., organisation of meetings, drafting of briefings), and act as a transmission belt between the PEC and other actors. In this regard, the cabinet of the PEC is in charge of coordinating the sherpa network.

Therefore, two '*administrations d'Etat major'* evolve in the European Council arena.[6]

*Table 1 - The European Council Ecosystem*

| | **National sphere** | **EU sphere** |
|---|---|---|
| **Political Executive** | Heads of State and Government of the Member States (*National Executives*) | Permanent President of the European Council (*EU Executive*) |
| ***'Administration d'Etat major'*** | Sherpas (*advisor of the national Executives*) | Cabinet of the PEC (*advisor of the EU Executive*) |
| **Administrative support and coordination services** | National administrations based in the capitals and permanent representations in Brussels | General Secretariat of the Council (Directorate-Generals, units, etc.) |

Source: own representation.

The entourage of decision-makers plays a central - albeit discreet - role in the EU decision-making process. The GSC, by becoming the sole administration of the PEC, now fulfils a role "previously endorsed by the Prime Minister's cabinet in the capital" (Cloos, 2021, p. 991). By linking the PEC and the Council, the Secretariat can be equated to a glue bringing together a myriad of actors to create consensus. Therefore, it is regrettable that the Lisbon treaty's administrative consequences are relegated to the background or even absent from research.

## Studying the European Council through the Lens of the Administration

### *Epistemological Position: The Cultural Construction of Politic and Administration*

Studying the European Council through its administration inevitably leads to questioning what belongs to the political sphere and what belongs to the administrative one. In most cases, these spheres are studied from a national perspective, and authors distinguish them by their core function *vis-à-vis* the central state (Picq, 1997). On the one hand, the 'Politic' refers to the top executive leading the country, i.e., defining the general political direction and giving the necessary impulses for its development. On the other hand, the 'Administration' encompasses activities ensuring the country's running, i.e., operational delivery, resource

[6] Despite different theoretical foundations, the terms "field", "arena", and "social space" will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this study. These terms all designate the social environment in which individuals and groups evolve depending on resources they have (status, positions, cultural capital etc.).

management, and implementation of political decisions. "Leading the country is the work of politicians [whereas] managing the country is the work of civil servants" (*ibid*., p. 127). However, claiming to clearly distinguish both spheres is a pious hope: every administrative action entails political aspects and vice versa. In 1936, the then French President of the Council of Ministers Léon Blum stressed:

> "Administration, as soon as it goes beyond the daily routine and the management of urgent matters, presupposes an orientation, the inflection of institutions and people in a particular view, that is to say, a political direction. Therefore, politics and administration are always inextricably connected".[7]

Nowadays, the porosity of boundaries is even more remarkable given the increasing complexity of public policy decisions. The technicality and intricacy of the issues to be dealt with leads administrative agents to interfere in the sphere originally restricted to policymakers:

> "The role of high officials is not descriptive but predictive: the various forms of their activities go beyond the simple description of possible options and consequences. They place themselves in the field of influence (…)" (Eymeri-Douzans, 2003, p. 14)

Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the obsolete politics-administration dichotomy restricting civil servants to an implementing role. Instead, one needs to "grasp the interactions and processes of cross-regulation between these two spheres" (Fortier et al., 2016, p. 76). Nevertheless, the reader should not be surprised that the cultural construction of politics and administration is called upon in this study. The objective is not to typify these notions into fixed categories but to start from these "primitive classifications" (Durkheim/Mauss, 1903) and to overcome them, thus creating a more holistic perspective. Such an approach is the condition *sine qua non* to explore how actors produce these categories and blur the boundaries.

*Objective of this Contribution and Research Questions*

The main objective of this contribution is to define the nature and the form of the relationships between actors within the European Council, particularly between the PEC cabinet, the sherpas, and the GSC officials. In other words, it is about understanding the modus operandi of this *'ménage à trois'*, which is all but common. Indeed, the rise in power of the European Council "does not come without problems or contradictions. The more we give depth

[7] Léon Blum (1936) quoted by Pierre Soudet in : "L'administration vue par les siens et par d'autres", Editions Bergers-Levrault: Paris, 1960, p. 50.

to the European Council and its President, the more its position within the EU institutional setting needs to be clarified" (Vimont, 2021, p. 994). From a national perspective, the rise in power of the EUCO requires the cabinets and political advisors of the Executives to take up a more substantial leadership role in EU affairs coordination. This new centrality also raises the question of what it entails for the administrative structure: "What does it mean to be 'at the service of the Council'?".[8] This question that was initially raised about the Council of the EU also equally applies to the European Council.

Therefore, we will explore how coordinating activities of the GSC, the PEC cabinet, and the sherpas overlap or combine: what are the nature and the types of the relationships between them? Are rivalries to be observed? Does the GSC manage to act as an autonomous conductor, or does it act as a mere transmission belt? What are the resources at the disposal of the administrative and political actors? To answer these questions, one first needs to elevate the thinking toward the big picture. It requires "one to think relationally; one must see that the real is the relational, something which 'requires a conversion of one's entire usual vision of the social world, a vision which is interested only in those things which are visible".[9]

Hence, we will combine a socio-historical and a political sociological approach. The socio-historical lens will enable us to understand the current position of the Secretariat within the European Council and the various aspects of institutionalisation of its coordinating activities (PART I). The sociological perspective aims to map out actors' power dynamics and their interactions within the Council arena (PART II). Combining both approaches allows one to "give up thinking about single, isolated substances and start thinking about relationships and functions" (Elias, 1991, p. 18-19).

[8] Wallace, Helen (2002) quoted by Mangenot, Michel (2003), p. 136.
[9] Bourdieu, Pierre (1982, 1990). Translated and quoted by Hilgers, Mathieu and Mangez, Eric (2014). Introduction to Bourdieu's social fields. In: Hilgers/Mangez, *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields. Concepts and applications.* London: Routledge, p. 1.

## PART I - THE GENERAL SECRETARIAT AND THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL: 'FORMALISING THE INFORMAL'

We will first explore how the General Secretariat has empowered itself overtime to gain legal and political legitimacy (section 1). Then, we will focus on how the GSC has innovated and streamlined its coordinating activities to become the Council's pivotal structure (section 2).

### Empowerment of the Secretariat and Gradual Influence on the European Council

At its inception in 1951, the GSC was an instrument of the Council with purely technical functions. Nicolas Hommel, Secretary-General from 1973 to 1980, points out its "very weak technical structure" and the general suspicion of the member states *vis-à-vis* a Secretariat that "might become a rival".[10] The Secretariat archives reveal a glaring lack of human, material, and financial resources. In a letter dated 7 November 1952, Konrad Adenauer, who chaired the first Council of Ministers, asked the Secretary-General to provide him with some information about the current development of the GSC. In his reply, Secretary-General Christian Calmes referred to the "urgent need for staff", the "excessive workload," and the "lack of contact with the Assembly and the High Authority" (p. 1).[11] He added that "the Secretariat is not in a position to complete the most basic administrative work" (*ibid*., p. 2) and he concluded his letter with the following request to the German Chancellor:

> "Naturally, the question of the organisation of the Secretariat depends on the policy of the Council of Ministers and its relations with the other bodies of the Community. (...) You have been kind enough, Mr. President, to offer me your personal assistance in organisational matters. I urgently need this help, and I would be very grateful if you would grant me an audience" (*ibid*., p. 2).

Therefore, in its early days, the GSC was close to the Kelsenian model of public administration, i.e., a model in which the administration was seen as a mere executing structure (*Vollzug*) without any agency (Kelsen, 1929). Niels Ersbøll, Secretary-General from 1980 to 1994, recalls that "the Member States seemed to be dominated by the view that the Secretariat's basic

[10] Allocutions, messages de fin d'année de Monsieur Nicolas Hommel, Secrétaire Général du Conseil des Communautés Européennes, 1973-1980. [s.l.]: [s.d.].
[11] Letter from Christian Calmes to Konrad Adenauer (Luxembourg, 17 November 1952). CM/S/(52) 327. [s.l.]: 17.11.1952. 7 S. Archives historiques du Conseil de l'Union européenne, Bruxelles, Rue de la Loi 175. Fonds CECA, CM1. CM1 1953. Organisation administrative des services du Conseil, CM1/1953-38.

role was to do as it was told and to 'know its place' in the order of things. 'Knowing its place' meant being efficient and largely invisible — like any good old-fashioned servant".[12]

However, overlapping trends allowed the Secretariat to empower itself beginning in the 1980s and continued into the following decades. These changes include the intensification of inter-institutional contacts between the Council and the Parliament, the increase in the Union's competencies, and successive enlargements. At that time, the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Klaus von Dohnanyi even considered that the Secretary-General should be "the alter ego of the President of the Council, someone to be his closest collaborator (…) who could stand in for him in absence, for instance in contacts with representatives of third countries" (*ibid*., p. 2). Although this idea did not materialise, the Member States nevertheless recognised the need to strengthen the GSC. As a result, the Secretariat gained legal recognition through the enshrinement in the Treaties and political legitimacy through the official acknowledgment of its role as political advisor to the Presidency. These trends enable the GSC to play a crucial role in the "development of the special and unique procedures and working methods of the European Council" (*ibid*.), as illustrated below:

*Table 2 – Evolution of the coordinating activities of the GSC in the European Council*

| | BEFORE THE 80's | AFTER THE 80's |
|---|---|---|
| **Preparation of European Council meetings** | European Council meetings are prepared on an *ad hoc* basis and are limited to the bare minimum. Most of the time, they are prepared in a purely formal and consist of the Council of General Affairs taking note of the agenda proposed by the Presidency. | The President directly and personally prepares the meeting in liaison with the other members of the European Council. The preparation based itself on detailed proposals resulting from close cooperation with the President of the Commission and the Secretary-General of the Council |
| **Working time and meeting schedule** | Absence of planning regarding the use of the available time during a European Council meeting (two half days and a working dinner). Lack of time to discuss items on the agenda in an orderly manner and according to the priority. | The General Secretariat establishes a scenario specifying the use of working time. Then, intensive work by the PEC, the Commission and the GSC in the evening and night of the first day to provide draft conclusions ready for examination by Heads of State or Government early next morning. |

[12] Niels Ersbøll, The General Secretariat of the Council (5 October 1998). Le Secrétariat général du Conseil, SN 4593/98. Bruxelles: Conseil de l'UE – Secrétariat général, Direction générale F, Politique de l'information, transparence et relations publiques, 05.10.1998. 6 p.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Drafting of the conclusion** | A committee of national officials follows the summit to write down the content of the agreement. There was not necessarily a concordance between the debate and the texts submitted by the officials. | During the summit, the General Secretariat takes notes that form the sole basis for the draft conclusions. These draft conclusions are submitted to the European Council for detailed examination and approval. |
| **Receipt of findings** | The Presidency's conclusions carried little weight and were often ignored by the Council and subordinate levels. | The leaders' detailed examination and explicit approval of the draft gave the final text an authority that Jacques Delors described to the Parliament as equivalent to that of the Treaties. |

Note: the information included in this table comes from the following archive: Ersbøll, Niels, *op. cit.*, 1998. Quotation marks have been removed for easier reading.

In his detailed account of the coordinating activities of the Secretariat, Ersbøll added that the establishment of briefing notes was a major innovation enhancing the Presidency/Secretariat relationship. Briefing notes are prepared by the Secretariat and enables the President to be the best-informed person in the meeting room: "best-informed as regards the views and interests of the Member States and the Commission, best-informed on the substance of the agenda, and prepared to make proposals for agreement" (Ersbøll, *op. cit.*, p.3).

The Secretariat's coordinating activities also sped up at the pace of the enlargements. During the Helsinki summit in December 1999, the Council's Rules of Procedure were updated to reinforce the GSC's role. [13] Article 23(3) stipulates that the Secretariat "shall be closely and continuously involved in the organisation, coordination and monitoring of the consistency of work" and that it shall assist the Presidency in finding compromises". The Secretariat's contributions to Council activities continue to raise to the point that its role "goes well beyond the traditional role of assistance".[14] Its increasing legislative activities, both in terms of proposals and meetings, further strengthen the GSC's position as "it is mainly the Presidency, COREPER and the General Secretariat that are absorbing these efforts" (*ibid.*, p. 2).

Two years before the 2004 enlargement of the EU, Javier Solana aimed to refocus the European Council on its main tasks.[15] Among the suggested measures, Solana called for a better

[13] Presidency Conclusions, Helsinki European Council, 10-11 December 1999. Annex "An Effective Council for an Enlarged Union - Guidelines for Reform and Operational Recommendations".
[14] Rapport de la Présidence et du Secrétariat général du Conseil sur la procédure de codécision (4 décembre 2000). PRESS OFFICE/NEWSROOM. [EN LIGNE]. [Bruxelles]: Conseil de l'Union européenne, [30.08.2001], p. 8. Press Release 13316/1/00. Disponible sur http://ue.eu.int/newsroom/main.cfm?LANG=2.
[15] Rapport de Javier Solana, Préparer le Conseil à l'élargissement (7 mars 2002). Rapport de M. Javier Solana, Secrétaire général du Conseil de l'Union européenne, S0044/02. Bruxelles: Conseil de l'Union européenne, Secrétariat général, 07.03.2002. 5 p. http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/FR/reports/69890.pdf

organisation of the European Council meetings and the "replacement of the current conclusions with a brief summary of the decisions adopted and the strategic guidelines agreed upon" (p. 2). He also stressed the importance of providing the Council with "all the information it needed to debate the issues before it and to also allow it to make fully informed decisions" (*ibid*.). These proposals provided the GSC staff with an even more significant role as they were the ones in charge of gathering information. In parallel, GSC's political legitimacy was further strengthened from 1999 to 2009 when the post of Secretary-General matched with the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs.

On the eve of the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the GSC enjoys an influence, legitimacy and recognition that go far beyond the initial project of the founding fathers:

> "The increased role of the Presidency since the 1974 Paris Summit, with its wider and more diversified tasks, has certainly led to a parallel expansion of the role of the General Secretariat. The latter has become the secretariat and the assistant of the presidency, the main coordinator, institutional memory, and adviser to the Council. That is what the General Secretariat can claim to be today" (Hommel, *op. cit.*, p. 2).

**After the Lisbon Treaty: the necessary Resetting of Coordinating Activities**

A few months before the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty, the role of the General Secretariat in the renewed institutional setting remained unclear. The draft text only mentioned that the General Secretariat would assist the president. In an information report, the French Senate observed that there was no clue about "the creation of a specific service which would be at the disposal of the President of the European Council".[16] The authors asked themselves if the President would end up "being a general without an army" (*ibid.*, p. 64). The GSC clarified the situation by publishing a note on the organisation of the European Council one month before the entry into force of the treaty. A section entitled 'Supporting Structures' states:

> "The European Council is assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council (i.e., there will be no new administrative structure). The staff of the General Secretariat is, therefore, at the disposal of the President, including the Directorate for General Political Affairs, the Legal Service, the Directorates-General (the Economic and

[16] Sénateur Jean François-Poncet, Rapport d'information n°188 fait au nom de la commission des Affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées sur le traité de Lisbonne. Session ordinaire de 2007-2008.

> Financial Affairs Council, the Justice and Home Affairs Council etc.), the Translation Service, the Protocol Service, the Press Office, etc.".[17]

Therefore, some of GSC's resources were mobilised to carry out the actions of the PEC and its cabinet. These new missions included, for example, the systematic running of meetings between the Directors-General and the PEC's Head of Cabinet before EU summits and the introduction of thematic papers on priority issues drafted by the policy Directorates-General (DG) and forwarded to the PEC and the Secretary-General. A senior Council official confirmed that, before Lisbon, "much of the work carried out for the PEC was done from the capital".[18] Now, "with the permanent President of the European Council, there is no other administration than ours. His cabinet is small. So, the Secretariat continues to be the administration of the Council and the European Council, but it also became the administration of its President. It is another type of job, it is an additional one" (*ibid*.).

In addition, several trends complexified the activities of the GSC. The number of European Councils increased (20 in 1967, 88 in 1996 and 138 in 2015) while the number of staff declined (3 237 in 2009, 3 068 in 2011, and 3 020 in 2015). [19] The Lisbon Treaty was partly responsible for cutting back staffing at all levels, as the Council military staff was transferred to the newly created European External Action Service (EEAS).[20] Therefore, the evolution of the GSC's role had not gone hand in hand with its numerical importance. It remains a small administration when compared to the EU administrative giants (around 33 000 officials in the Commission and 7 500 in the Parliament). In this regard, Secretaries-General have steadily shown a willingness to modernise and homogenise working methods to meet these challenges. One EU official emphasised that "Secretaries-General do a lot to modernise the administration. Of course, it also depends on the personalities of the Secretary".[21] Another EU official confirmed this and further went on to say:

> "I knew Pierre de Boissieu, who was French. He shaped the SGC when [the EU] underwent the biggest reforms and then... Uwe Corsepius, who was German, and now Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen, who is Danish. I saw the differences. The whole

[17] Secrétariat général du Conseil de l'UE. Note d'information du SGC sur le fonctionnement du Conseil européen (Novembre 2009). http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/fr/ec/111403.pdf
[18] Interview with a previous member of the cabinet of the Council's Secretary-General, online, 19 May 2021.
[19] Conseil de l'UE, 'Le Conseil européen et le Conseil de l'UE au fil du temps – Pouvoir décisionnel et pouvoir législatif dans l'intégration européenne', Luxembourg: Office des publications de l'UE, 2016, pp. 61-63.
[20] See: European Commission, 'Another step in the establishment of the EEAS with the transfer of staff on 1 January 2011', press release, 21 December 2010.
[21] Interview with a previous member of the cabinet of the Council's Secretary-General, online, 19 May 2021.

> organisation of the Secretariat has evolved from the ... I would say from the heaviness of the French diplomacy to a less rigid system. You can feel that it is more direct".[22]

Therefore, if the GSC can adapt to changing institutional settings, it is primarily through regular internal reforms conducted at all levels (Gilloz, 2021). When Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen took over the function of Secretary-General in 2015, one of his primary ambitions was to conduct reforms. After a process of collective reflection, he presented an action plan in 2016 entitled 'For a more dynamic, flexible and collaborative GSC'.[23] In the introduction, he highlighted that the European Council's centrality was likely to increase, hence there was a need for the GSC "to continue to adapt to these developments to stay relevant" (p. 1). Tranholm-Mikkelsen acknowledged the challenges posed by the Lisbon Treaty and suggested adopting a more political approach to the Presidency. Four priority measures were identified under the heading 'The GSC as an effective administration for the PEC and the European Council' (p. 4).

*Box 1: Overview of the first priority of the Action Plan 2016*

**Priority 1: the GSC as an effective administration for the PEC and the European Council**

"Rotating and other permanent presidencies rely on their own administrations in addition to the services of the GSC. The PEC has his own cabinet, but we, in the GSC, constitute his only and unique administration. Many efforts have already been undertaken to take account of this fact since the introduction of the permanent President of the European Council in 2009. But more can and should be done. This is about taking a more political approach, it is about 365/24/7 alertness as well as about the nature, speed and character of written briefs. To ensure continuous learning in this respect, the ongoing contacts between members of the PEC cabinet and GSC staff are being reinforced" (p. 4).

**Related actions** (pp. 7-8)

1. Develop further the analytical capability in the GSC (action relevant for all GSC work, not only for supporting the PEC);
2. Strengthen the link between EC and Council;
3. Improve the implementation and follow up of EC conclusions;
4. Briefings to PEC.

The first set of measures aimed to "develop further the analytical capability in the GSC to improve planning for the European Council" (p. 7). It included, for example, the establishment

[22] Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 26 June 2019.
[23] General Secretariat of the Council, "Action Plan for a more dynamic, flexible and collaborative GSC", 2016.

of brainstorming and thematic meetings in which relevant Policy DGs and even external experts participate. GSC officials were also tasked with drafting *dossiers* on specific files.

The second sets aimed to "strengthen the link between the European Council and the Council of the Union" (p. 8). Each policy DG had to provide a note prior to each new Presidency with recommendations for a possible role for the European Council in the fields it covered.

The third set of measures related to EUCO conclusions' implementation. After each summit, the Directorate-General for General and Institutional Policy (DG GIP) goes through the conclusions and identifies the different elements for implementation and tasking. The document compiling these elements would then be sent to the General Affairs Council (GAC)/COREPER for discussion. In addition, DG GIP drafted an internal document to track the EUCO conclusion implementation, which was shared with the PEC cabinet.

The fourth and last series of measures concerned the briefings to the PEC. The main objective was to strengthen and improve coordination between Policy DGs, DG GIP and the PEC cabinet. Policy DGs were asked to enhance internal procedures to provide DG GIP and the PEC with briefings in a more responsive way.

This brief overview epitomises the desire to 'formalise the informal'. In other words, it aimed to homogenise and rationalise coordination mechanisms to ensure better efficiency. Therefore, it was less about rigidifying practices than formalising working methods resulting from decades of experience in the service of the Council.

***

Over the decades, the General Secretariat had thus achieved a genuine *tour de force*. It started as a structure lacking financial and human means; then, it gradually gained autonomy and influence until it became a central coordinating feature of the Council of the EU, the European Council, the PEC and its cabinet. However, one of the consequences of the rise in power of the EUCO is the growing influence of political advisors (sherpa). Therefore, two '*administrations d'Etat major*' evolve in the Council arena. On the one hand, the PEC cabinet and the GSC that strive to rationalise and homogenise practices to guarantee the Councils' work continuity. On the other hand, the sherpas who best operate within an informal framework. This configuration calls into question the interactions between all these actors. It also questions to what extent did/does the GSC adjust its coordinating activities.

## PART II - TWO 'ADMINISTRATIONS D'ETAT MAJOR': OVERLAPPING OR COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES?

In this chapter, we will first explore how the institutional consecration of the EUCO has strengthened the influence of leaders' closest political advisors, aka the sherpas (section 1). Second, we will see how the GSC and the PEC cabinet have managed to structure and keep the sherpa network under control without questioning the latter's core function (section 2).

### 'Sherpas': the Black Box(es) inside the Black Box?

*Studying 'Sherpas': The Challenge of Making the Invisible Visible*

The new centrality of the EUCO and the consequent "return of politics" to the European stage (Luuk van Middelhart, 2016) have contributed to the rise of a category of actors: the closest political advisers to the heads of state and government also known as 'sherpas'. Initially, this denomination referred to the spiritual and mountain guides in the Himalaya who accompany climbers to the summit. In the EU setting, the term refers to those heads of state and government representatives and advisors who smooth the path toward European Councils. Sherpas are responsible for the EU summit's preparatory process and oversee the negotiations. They are also experts on European issues, trusted advisors to political leaders, coordinators, and negotiators during discussions with other EU sherpas. Like the permanent representatives, sherpas act as a "trouble-shooter structure" (Constantinesco/Denys, p. 8) operating between the political and technical levels. A member of the PEC cabinet explains that "the sherpa has both an advocacy role in defending national positions and a coordinating role in playing the interface between the position of their leaders and those of EU sherpas in other national capitals".[24] To this extent, sherpas have a different position from the permanent representatives based in Brussels as they have a certain autonomy *vis-à-vis* the national administration.

The sherpa's position between political leaders, diplomatic apparatus and the administrative structure confers them a central role in the decision-making process. Since the Treaty of Lisbon, this small club has gained considerable influence, as underlined by a former sherpa:

> "The most important business when preparing European Councils is done by the sherpas, who go out to Brussels to do it personally, physically, and there is a network

[24] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.

> of sherpas. All of that really dates from the early century and increased once you got a permanent President of the European Council [in 2009]".[25]

Like for the EUCO functioning, the informal dimension lies at the core of the sherpas' *modus operandi*. First, the sherpa is appointed at the leader's discretion and rarely appears on the organisational chart under that specific name. Then, negotiations among EU sherpas take place in the greatest of secrecy. We can refer to them as the 'black box inside the black box' as the 'sherpas' always remain behind the scene. They are shadowy advisors who "primarily operate through informal, bilateral or trilateral meetings, email, and call with other EU sherpas" (Smeets/Zaun, p. 869). The informal dimension of the sherpa work is maintained on purpose. The 1999 Trumpf-Piris report acknowledged this functioning and the need to keep it this way:

> "[It is necessary to] ensure that negotiations are adequately prepared. Therefore, do not formalise the role of the existing unofficial "European sherpas" network; this is useful for exchanging information and formalising its task and structure would carry a serious risk of cutting the European Council off from the institutions and rules established by the Treaties, ultimately weakening the force of its conclusions" (p. 7).

Depending on the member states and the period considered, on can observe significant variations in seniority, background, and status of sherpas.[26] In Germany, the EU sherpa is usually the European Affairs Director-General of the Federal Chancellery. These (often senior) political advisors have authority over around fifty people. In some other member states, the EU sherpas are much younger. This is a common practice in the French system. When Clément Beaune became Emmanuel Macron's Sherpa in 2017, he was 36. Unlike the German sherpa, the French sherpa "only has a few people working with him/her on a daily basis, but one must not forget that nearly 200 people work for the General Secretariat for European Affairs (SGAE) and provide great resources to the sherpa".[27] Some countries like Portugal recruit the EU sherpa from the diplomatic corps, "often a junior diplomat while senior diplomats tend to hold the

[25] Quoted by Bevington, Matt, "Whitehall in Brussels: The UK permanent Representation to the EU", 10 March 2021, 61 pages. Full report available at https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Whitehall-in-Brussels.pdf
[26] The information on the profile, background, and status of sherpas come from the interview with a member of the PEC cabinet (online, 26 April 2022).
[27] *Ibid*.

position of Permanent Representatives".[28] While Sherpas' profile, status, and position vary from country to country, a common feature is their proximity to the political leader:

> "Despite the diversity of systems, there are commonalities between EU sherpas: it is someone who has earned the full trust of the political leader and has legitimacy to represent national positions during negotiations. They all have a strong personality, even when they are young. Also, they are very familiar with the functioning of the EU. So, as there is both this aspect of trust and connection, all EU sherpas treat each other in the same way". [29]

For all these reasons, the sherpa network is an invaluable resource for GSC officials preparing and coordinating EU summits. It allows them to identify potential deadlocks and common ground in national positions to build consensus.

*Sherpas and Permanent Representative: Structural Rivalries or Synergy?*

The main (internal) criticism opposed to the rise of influence of the sherpa lies in the supposed rivalries between the members of COREPER and the Sherpas. During the financial crisis of 2007-2008, their meetings became so regular that "it raised the fear that COREPER's role would be cut off" (Vimont/Cloos, 2021, p. 990). However, this fear is unfounded both for structural and cultural reasons.

In terms of structure, the COREPER is the only appropriate forum to make the EU legislative machinery work: the sherpas cannot replace the COREPER as the latter is better equipped to discuss legislative and technical texts (Vimont/Cloos, 2021). The main advantage of relying on the sherpa is that they "are best able to ensure that political sensitivities do not clash".[30] Consequently, one can hardly compare a permanent and institutionalised structure (the COREPER) with an informal network (the sherpas):

> "Sherpas are, by definition, closer to their bosses than permanent representatives. There are some permanent representatives who demonstrated that they were as thick as thieves with the sherpa and knew their leader's instincts. There were others who were just not really at the races with where their sherpa was, and you knew

[28] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.
[29] *Ibid*.
[30] *Ibid*.

> you needed to nab the sherpa if you wanted to get a clear view on what their position was" (Bevington, 2021).

In terms of EU corporate culture (European socialisation), sherpas and permanent representatives also distinguish themselves. As one of the interviewees describes it:

> "Sherpas are primarily based in the capital, close to their leader. So, the environment in which they evolve is quite specific: the issues they deal with are much more political and more national too. As the ambassadors are permanently based in Brussels, it has an impact. The socialisation among its members is constant: they meet twice a week, so, of course, it helps to reach a compromise".[31]

Like the GSC officials, the COREPER characterises itself by its permanence and stability (status, geographical anchoring, network, etc.). "The ties of friendship developed within this arena constitute the foundations for establishing informal and long-lasting micro-groups" (Van Rompuy, 2011). In 1980, the Italian permanent representative Eugenio Plaja stressed the COREPER's "unique and irreplaceable character"[32] that makes it the cornerstone of negotiation processes. Therefore, one should insist on complementarity rather than rivalries between the sherpas and the permanent representatives. Interactions between both figures form an integral part of the EU decision-making. In addition, one should not forget that "many Sherpas have been members of the COREPER and vice versa. We should not consider them as two disconnected worlds. Under [Donald] Tusk, there were many physical meetings of sherpas in Brussels. In the meeting room, the ambassadors sat directly behind their sherpa".[33]

Opposing both figures is even more erroneous when seeing how closely the sherpas and the permanent representatives work together to prepare for EU summits. Indeed, each EUCO preparatory meeting brings together the COREPER and the sherpa. On paper, these meetings are coordinated by COREPER II and the GAC. In fact, the latter does not fulfil this coordinating role since the Lisbon Treaty changed its structure by establishing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). While the FAC latter brings together ministers of foreign affairs, the GAC gathers EU ministers at a state-secretary level. This new setting profoundly changed the role and influence of the GAC:

[31] *Ibid*.
[32] Farewell speech by Eugenio Plaja as Permanent Representative of Italy (18 September 1980). Historical Archives of the European Communities, Florence, Villa Il Poggiolo. Archives, DEP. EG-45.
[33] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.

> "Foreign ministers have shifted their attention to the FAC and no new set of ministers has been assigned the responsibility of coordinating the national EU positions. This has left a vacuum" (Kaczyński/Byrne, 2011)".

As a result, the sherpa network has gradually taken over the GAC's coordinating role in preparing EUCO, hand in hand with permanent representatives. A senior UK official illustrates this close relationship through the tandem Ivan Rogers (UK Permanent Representative, 2013-2017)/Tom Scholar (EU sherpa, 2013-2016):

> "It was a very close working relationship, partly because they had both known each other for a long time, but also because Tom hugely respected Ivan's knowledge and expertise. Between Scholar - with his close familiarity with the Prime Minister's thinking and his connections in national capitals in the EU Sherpa network - and Rogers - who had contacts with the key figures in the institutions - this tandem developed a thorough view of what would and would not work in negotiations "[34].

Hence, one cannot oppose the Sherpas and the COREPER as this tandem "has always been the key channel for getting stuff done in Europe" (Kelemen et al., 2019). Both participate in breathing life into the Council's ecosystem.

However, the rising influence of sherpas raises questions about its impact on the GSC: do sherpa activities compete or overlap with GSC coordinating activities?

**GSC officials, PEC cabinet, and Sherpas: Who Sets the Tone?**

The Council arena is neither a fixed nor a homogenous arena. Its shape results from constant interactions between actors with (competing) interests and systems of beliefs. Therefore, like any social structure, the European Council should be seen as a dynamic arena in which some spaces are strongly structured, while others are poorly structured (Georgakakis, 2008). Actors intend to structure this arena depending on their perception, position, and the resources at their disposal. The point here is not to oppose EU officials to sherpas. Instead, it is about understanding how actors intend to exert influence within the Council and their resources. In this regard, two sociological core concepts will be called upon: the actor's position within a field (Bourdieu, 1966, 1971) and phenomena of socialisation.

[34] Quoted by Bevington, Matt, op. cit., p. 49.

*Actor's Position within a Field: Permanence vs. Intermittence*

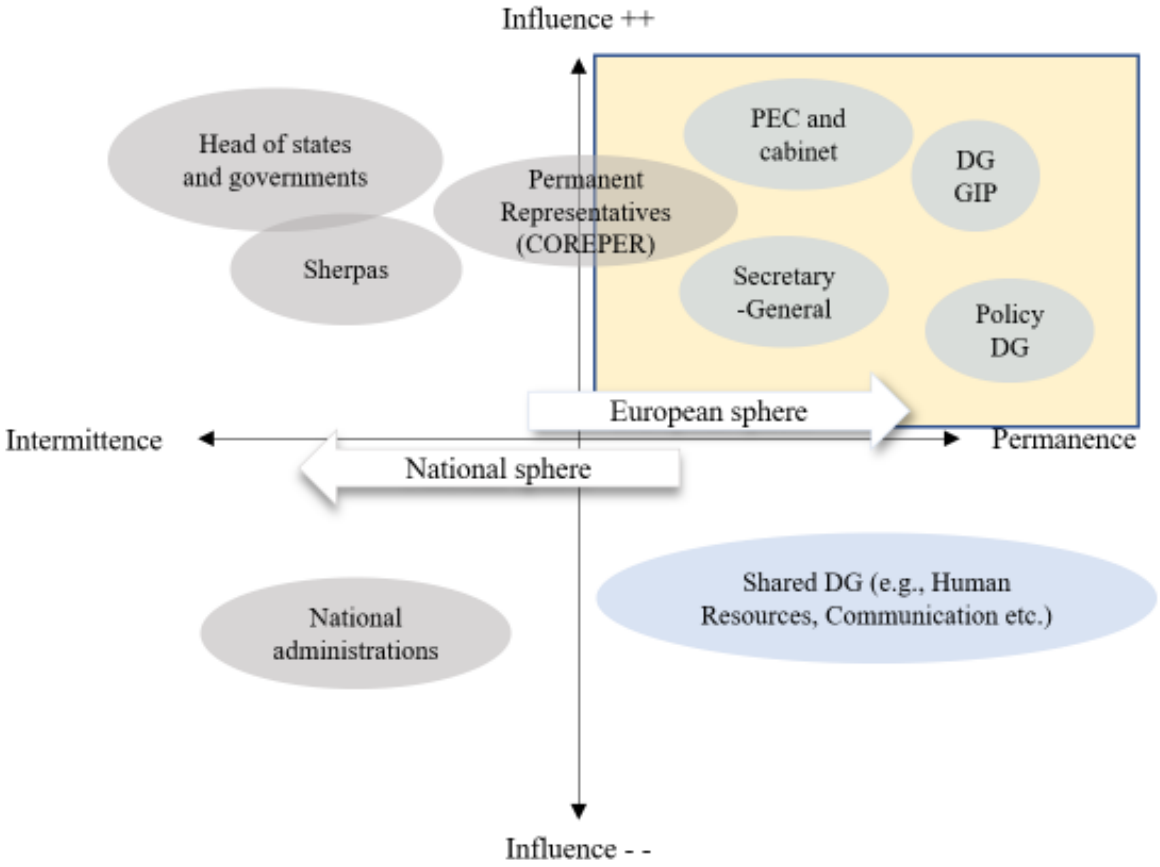
The core idea of the actor's position within a field is that our social world is a relational space. It encompasses a diversity of fields, each of which has specific rules, norms, and systems of beliefs that define the relations among actors (Hilgers/Mangez, 2014). An individual may belong to different fields: its influence depends on its resources and anchoring. The more resources an individual has (in terms of status, position, social capital, etc.), the more it can exert influence. Similarly, the more permanent an individual is anchored in a field, the more able it will be to accumulate resources. The more accumulation there is, the more it allows it to enlarge its social surface within the field and, thus, enjoy greater influence.

The EU institutional arena is a social space where competition between permanent and intermittent actors occurs (Georgakakis, 2008). Therefore, the temporal feature of an arena is essential in assessing the influence an actor can exert within it. At the European Council level, one can observe different types of spatial and temporal anchoring depending on the actors:

- The President of the European Council: 2.5-year term (renewable); their official residence is the Europa building in Brussels, the main seat of the European Council and the Council of the EU. It is a figure highly anchored in the EU institutional arena.
- The PEC Cabinet is also a stable network located in the Europa building.
- Sherpas: their presence in Brussels is irregular and *ad hoc*; despite the stability of the sherpa network, the individuals composing this club frequently change as their nomination depends on the political leader that in currently place.
- Council officials: the status of their function ensure a lifelong career within EU institutions. Ersbøll underlined that "the greatest asset of the GSC lies in continuity and memory" (*op. cit.*, 1988). As the institutional memory of the Council, EU officials enjoy a strong spatial and temporal anchorage.

In the European Council arena, sherpas are the prime example of intermittent actors as they primarily go to Brussels when preparing for EU summits. The rest of the time, they stay in their capital, close to the head of state or government. In contrast, the GSC's staff is permanent. Because of its permanent and historical position in the EU landscape, the GSC "possesses a knowledge of procedures, a general view of the mechanism, and a capacity for objective assessment of the attitude of other Member States which even the most powerful national administration cannot match" (Report on European Institutions, 1979, p. 20).

*Figure 2 - Mapping of actors in the Council arena*




Source: own representation based on an idea from Georgakakis, Didier (2013).

Therefore, the GSC gains considerable influence since its permanence provide it with an opportunity to structure the Council's arena on a daily basis. Although "the members of the Council and the European Council are endowed with great political powers, they find themselves in a field marked by intermittence" (Georgakakis, 2013). This position prevents them from accumulating social resources within this arena. Council officials do not enjoy any political power, but they have the advantage of being permanent. One of the direct consequences of sherpa's intermittent presence is that their accumulated resources (Bourdieu's capital) are weaker than those of EU officials. The latter is in the capacity to build and nurture stable networks of relations within the EU arenas and to draw resources from them.

*Socialisation: National-based Culture vs. EU Corporate Culture*

Like any social organisation, the GSC acts as a forum for socialisation, i.e., an instance where a common and specific identity is structured from individual and heterogeneous subjectivities. This socialisation happens both at the professional level (e.g., daily work, trade union, etc.) and

private (European schools, after-work, etc.). The standard recruitment process, common status and principles, and the existence of an 'esprit de corps' accentuate the EU corporate culture. The Sherpa network, on the other hand, is more fragmented: no common status, no standard profile, no nomination for life, and no permanent anchorage in Brussels. Here again, there is a significant difference when compared to the permanent representatives:

> "COREPER is a real club, a family. We know the partner of each member and we organise farewell dinners where the family is invited. At the beginning of each presidency, there is also a COREPER excursion to the capital of the presidency. All of that creates extremely strong links".[35]

The same interviewee pointed out that "it is not so useful to move the sherpa to Brussels because he or she lacks the internal Brussels culture which is a core feature of the EU decision making".[36] Therefore, the European socialisation within the Sherpa network is less than that which takes place between EU officials and COREPER. In this regard, the GSC coordination role is even more crucial as a PEC cabinet member underlined: "A Sherpa will try to bring together as many people as possible to reach a consensus. [As the PEC cabinet], we take into account all these positions to understand what everyone thinks and ensure a consensus".[37] It brings us back to the central function of the Secretariat, which is to ensure coordination and coherence of the Council's work, whatever the level is. The PEC Cabinet coordinates and manages the sherpa network with the same spirit. However, the Covid 19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the coordination of this network, as observed by an EU official:

> "Diplomacy means, above all, discussion with other people. It is about convincing, being informal, going for lunches, learning from each other etc. The pandemic impacts the future of our work as lots of group meetings take place from the capitals now (...) We need ministers and national civil servants to come to Brussels to listen to each other and better understand the position of everyone".[38]

Given the difficulty of bringing together the 27 sherpas in this context, the PEC cabinet set up "a completely new system of coordination between small groups of sherpas, 5-6 small groups as heterogeneous as possible to continue to expose the sherpas to positions different from their

[35] Interview with a permanent representative, online, 16 March 2020.
[36] *Ibid*.
[37] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.
[38] Interview with a member of the cabinet of the Council's Secretary-General, online, 27 May 2021.

own".[39] Coordination activities of the PEC require the constant support of the SGC since the cabinet has only about 15 members. The cabinet, therefore, does not have the administrative and human resources necessary to carry out its missions:

> "We have very close contact with the rest of the GSC. It's like in a French ministry: the minister and his administration. So, we work constantly with them, which allows us to make informed decisions. DG GIP is our main point of contact and acts as a transmission belt with the other policy DG".[40]

The PEC cabinet and the rest of the GSC act as the coordinating structure of the Council arena, hence structuring and consolidating the Council's ecosystem.

## CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

### The Council Ecosystem or the Making of European Harmony

This article aimed to define the nature and form of the interactions between two '*administrations d'Etat major'*: on the one hand, the political entourage of the heads of state and government, and on the other, the PEC cabinet and the rest of the General Secretariat.

While the rise in the influence of sherpas represents a trend towards further politicising the EU institutional arena, sherpas do not possess the GSC's horizontal perspective. Although sherpas have a political mandate allowing them to engage their leader during high-level negotiations, only the GSC can provide them with solid coordination channels and mechanisms. This position confers GSC officials with an overseeing role within the system, hence strengthening their influence. As early as 1976, Hommel stated that the GSC is "a sufficiently *sui generis* structure to develop its own rules and behaviour" (*op. cit.*, p. 2). This statement is even more accurate today with the rising centrality of the European Council, the PEC, its cabinet, and the political advisors. Given the multiplication of actors and fora of negotiations, the GSC is able to develop and institutionalise its own coordination frameworks to ensure the continuity of the Council's work. The GSC's multifaceted functions ease this institutionalisation: advisor both to the Presidency and to the PEC, permanent position, accumulation of social resources, strong EU corporate culture, and horizontal and vertical knowledge of files and rules of procedures.

[39] Interview with a member of the PEC cabinet, online, 26 April 2022.
[40] *Ibid*.

Therefore, the coexistence of two '*administrations d'Etat major'* is not hindering the functioning of the Council machine. In other words, GSC coordinating activities does not overlap nor compete with the activities of other actors. On the contrary, these activities complement each other and ensure the smooth running of the Council's ecosystem. Hence, one can say in an attempt to answer the question formulated in the introduction: being at the service of the European Council means creating harmony between actors having diverging interests. The metaphor of the orchestra conductor superbly illustrates this coordination role:

> "The conductor's first and primary task is to ensure the coordination of the various players and the overall coherence of the interpretation. Therefore, its initial work consists of carefully reading the musical score to elaborate a sound harmony that integrates the composer's intentions but is original in its essence. The conductor remains close to the text (the ideal is to know the work to the point of being able to rewrite it from memory) but takes advantage of open structures left by the author to propose a personal interpretation" (Denizeau, 2015).

As the conductor of the Council, the GSC take into account the member states' intentions, coordinates the actions of various players (sherpas, permanent representatives, PEC), and ensures that the outcome is coherent. The GSC also master the rules of the EU game as it is the Council's institutional memory. Although the Secretariat remains close to the score (e.g., national positions, procedures, treaties), it can nevertheless take advantage of the room to manoeuvre left by the Member States to offer a personal rendition (i.e., to develop and institutionalise its own practices). One can only stand in awe of this relatively small EU administration that sets the tempo and coordinates the overall dynamics while ensuring that the framework grants its founders the freedom to improvise.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives historiques des Communautés européennes, "Discours d'adieu d'Eugenio Plaja comme représentant permanent de l'Italie (18 septembre 1980)". Florence, Villa Il Poggiolo. Dépôts, DEP. Emanuele Gazzo : L'évolution des institutions et organes de la Communauté, EG-45

Bevington, Matt. 2021. "*Whitehall in Brussels: The UK permanent Representation to the EU*", Full Report, 10 March 2021, 61 pages, URL: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Whitehall-in-Brussels.pdf

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1966. "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur", *Les Temps modernes*, n° 246, pp. 865-906.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1971. "Genèse Et Structure Du Champ Religieux", R*evue Française De Sociologie* vol. 12, no. 3.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1971. "Champ du pouvoir, champ intellectuel et habitus de classe », *Scolies*, n° 1.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.

Calmes, Christian. 1952. "Letter to Konrad Adenauer (Luxembourg, 17 November 1952)". CM/S/(52) 327. [s.l.]: 17.11.1952. 7 S. Archives historiques du Conseil de l'Union européenne, Bruxelles, Rue de la Loi 175. Fonds CECA, CM1/1953-38.

Christiansen, Thomas. 2012. "The European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: An Elusive 'Institutional Balance'?". In: "EU law after Lisbon". Biondi, Andrea, Piet Eeckhout, and Stefanie Ripley (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Christiansen, Thomas. 2013. "Delegated Powers and Inter-Institutional Relations in the EU after Lisbon: A Normative Assessment", *West European Politics*, vol. 36, n° 6, pp. 1159-1177

Cloos, Jim and Vimont, Pierre. 2021. "Les rouages du Conseil et du Conseil européen", Echanges avec Mangenot, Michel et Van Middelaar Luuk, *Revue Française d'Administration Publique* n°180, pp. 979-994.

Conseil de l'Union européenne. 2016. *Le Conseil européen et le Conseil de l'UE au fil du temps – Pouvoir décisionnel et pouvoir législatif dans l'intégration européenne*. Luxembourg: Office des publications de l'UE.

Constantinesco, Vlad and Denys, Simon. 2000. *Le COREPER dans tous ses Etats.* Centre d'Etudes internationales et européennes. Presse universitaire de Strasbourg, collection de l'Université Robert Schuman.

Craig, Paul. 2010. *The Lisbon Treaty: Law, Politics, and Treaty Reform*. Oxford: OUP.

Curtin, Deidre. 2014. "Challenging Executive Dominance in European Democracy", *Modern Law Review*, vol. 77, n°1, pp. 1-32.

Denizeau, Gérard. 2015. "Le chef d'orchestre, acteur capital de la légende musicale", April 2015, blog article, URL : https://www.leducation-musicale.com/index.php/paroles-d-auteur/5767-le-chef-d-orchestre-acteur-capital-de-la-legende-musicale

Durkheim, Émile and Mauss, Marcel. 1903. "De quelques formes de classification - contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives". *Année sociologique VI*, rubrique " Mémoires originaux ". Les Presses universitaires de France (1901-1902), pp. 1-72.

Elias, Norbert. 1991. *La société des individus*. Paris: Fayart.

European Commission. 2010. "Another step in the establishment of the EEAS with the transfer of staff on 1 January 2011", press release, 21 December 2010.

Ersbøll, Niels. 1998. "The General Secretariat of the Council" (5 October 1998). Le Secrétariat général du Conseil, SN 4593/98. Bruxelles: Conseil de l'UE – 05.10.1998. 6 p.

Eymeri-Douzans, Jean-Michel. 2003. "Frontière ou marches ? De la contribution de la haute administration à la production du politique". In : *La politisation*, Belin, Paris, pp. 47-77.

Fabbrini, Sergio. 2017. "The dual executive of the European union: a comparative federalism's approach". Paper submitted at EUSA biennal conference, Miami, 4 May 2017.

Fabbrini, Sergio. 2021. "Who Holds the Elephant to Account? Executive Power Political Accountability in the EU", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 43, issue 8, pp. 923-938.

Foret, François and Rittelmeyer, Yann-Sven. 2014. *The European Council and European Governance. The Commanding Heights of the EU*. London: Routledge studies.

Fortier, Isabelle, Emery Yves, and Roldan Rachel. 2016. "Des conditions et enjeux de la politisation de l'administration publique au regard de l'ethos public : une étude comparée (Canada/Suisse) de l'expérience des cadres dirigeants", *Gestion et management public*, vol. 4, n° 4, pp. 75-98.

General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, "Action Plan for a more dynamic, flexible and collaborative GSC", 2016.

Georgakakis, Didier. 2008. "La sociologie historique et politique de l'Union européenne : un point de vue d'ensemble et quelques contre points", *Politique européenne*, n° 25, pp.53-85.

Georgakakis, Didier. 2012. *Le champ de l'eurocratie: une sociologie politique du personnel de l'UE*. Paris, Economica.

Georgakakis, Didier. 2013. "Reflection Group on the Future of the European Civil Service", *cahier du GRASP n° 21*, URL: https://graspe.eu/document/grasp21.pdf.

Gilloz, Oriane. 2021. "Le Secrétariat général du Conseil de l'Union européenne : entre transformations politiques de long terme et réformes néomanagériales", *Revue française d'administration publique*, 2021/4 (N° 180), pp. 995-1014.

Gilloz, Oriane. 2022. "Le personnel du secrétariat général du Conseil au prisme des réformes néomanagériales : entre désingularisation et dédifférenciation", *Revue française d'administration publique*, 2022/1 (N° 181), pp. 109-125.

Hommel, Nicolas. 1976. "Allocation à l'occasion de la remise des médailles commémoratives pour 20 ans de service européen" (Bruxelles, 19 novembre 1976). [s.l.] : [s.d.].

Hilgers, Mathieu and Mangez, Eric. 2014. "Introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's social fields". In: Hilgers/Mangez E, *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields. Concepts and applications*. London: Routledge.

Kaczyński, Piotr Maciej. 2011. "How to Assess a Rotating Presidency of the Council Under the Lisbon Rules", *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

Kaczyński, Piotr Maciej and Byrne, Andrew. 2011.The General Affairs Council: The Key to Political Influence of Rotating Presidencies". CEPS Policy Brief n° 246, July 2011.

Kelemen, Daniel, Van Middelaar, Luuk, Eleanor Spaventa, and Anne Thies. 2019. "The EU's political and constitutional system the Lisbon Treaty 10 Years on: Success Or Failure?" *SIEPS (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies)*, Report No. 2, Stockholm.

Kelsen, Hans. 1929. *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*. Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr.

Ludlow, Peter. 2004. "The making of the New Europe: The European Councils in Brussels and Copenhagen 2002", *Brussels: Eurocomment*.

Mangenot, Michel. 2003. "Une 'chancellerie du prince'. Le Secrétariat Général du Conseil dans le processus de décision bruxellois", *Politique européenne,* vol. 3, n° 11, p. 123-142.

Mangenot, Michel. 2010. "Un nouveau président pour l'Union européenne. Le traité de Lisbonne ou le triangle institutionnel à quatre côtés". *Edition du croquant, Savoir/Agir,* vol. 1, n°11.

Mangenot, Michel. 2011. "La présidence du Conseil : sociologie d'une institution de l'Union européenne", *Politique européenne,* vol. 3, n° 35, pp. 7-28.

Missiroli, Antonio. 2008. "The Impact of the Lisbon Treaty on ESDP". EPRS: European Parliamentary Research Service.

Missiroli, Antonio. 2010. "The New EU 'Foreign Policy' System after Lisbon: A Work in Progress", European Foreign Affairs Review, Issue 4, pp. 427-452.

Novak, Stéphanie. 2014. "Le grand retour des États ? ", *Pouvoirs,* vol. 2, n° 149, pp. 19-27.

Picq, Jean. 1997. "L'administration comme pouvoir", *Esprit* n° 236, vol. 10, pp. 127-136.

Piris, Jean-Claude. 2010. *The Lisbon Treaty: A Legal and Political Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Presidency Conclusions, Helsinki European Council, 10-11 December 1999. Annex "An Effective Council for an Enlarged Union - Guidelines for Reform and Operational Recommendations".

Puetter, Uwe. 2013. "The European Council – the new centre of EU politics", *SIEPS (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies)*, European Policy Analysis, Issue 2013:16, Stockholm.

Puetter, Uwe. 2014. *The European Council and the Council: New Intergovernmentalism and Institutional Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quermonne, Jean-Louis. 1985. "Le secrétariat général du gouvernement. Institut français des sciences administratives". Comptes-rendus des 2 journées de travail organisées par l'Institut les 31 mai et 1er juin 1985.

Quermonne, Jean-Louis. 1991. *L'appareil administratif d'Etat*. Paris : Seuil, Collection Points.

Rapport de la Présidence et du Secrétariat général du Conseil sur la procédure de codécision (4 décembre 2000). PRESS OFFICE/NEWSROOM. [EN LIGNE]. [Bruxelles]: Conseil de l'Union européenne, [30.08.2001]. Press Release 13316/1/00.

Rapport de Javier Solana, Préparer le Conseil à l'élargissement (7 mars 2002). S0044/02. Bruxelles: Conseil de l'Union européenne, Secrétariat général, 07.03.2002.

Rittelmeyer, Yann-Sven. 2011. "L'institutionnalisation de la présidence du Conseil européen : entre dépendance institutionnelle et inflexions franco-allemandes", *Politique européenne*, vol. 3, n° 35, pp. 55-82.

Rouban Luc. 1991. "Jean-Louis Quermonne : L'appareil administratif de l'État", *Revue française de science politique*, 41e année, n°3, pp. 408-410.

Sénateur François-Poncet, Jean. Rapport n°188 au nom de la commission des Affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées sur le traité de Lisbonne. Session ordinaire 2007-2008.

Smeets, Sandrino and Zaun, Natascha. 2021. "What is intergovernmental about the EU's '(new) intergovernmentalist' turn? Evidence from the Eurozone and asylum crises", *West European Politics*, vol. 44, n°4, pp. 852-872,

Soudet, Pierre. 1960. *L'administration vue par les siens et par d'autres*. Paris : Bergers-Levrault.

Report on European Institutions, Presented by the Committee of Three to the European Council (October 1979). [s.l.]: Council of the European Communities, 1980. 86 p.

Trumpf–Piris Report. 1999. "Operation of the Council with an enlarged Union in prospect (10 March 1999)". Report by the Working Party set up by the Secretary-General of the Council. The Secretary-General, 11.03.1999. 103 p. Archives centrales du Conseil de l'UE, Brussel.

Van Middelaar, Luuk. 2016. "The Return of Politics - the European Union After the Crises in the Eurozone and Ukraine", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, no. 3, pp. 495-507.

Van Rompuy, Herman. 2011. *Le système présidentiel de l'Union européenne après Lisbonne*. Sous la direction de Véronique Charléty et Michel Mangenot, Ecole nationale d'administration (Paris/Strasbourg).

Wallace, Helene (2002), quoted by Mangenot, Michel. 2011. "La présidence du Conseil : sociologie d'une institution de l'Union européenne", *Politique européenne*, vol. 3, n° 35.

Wessels, Wolfgang. 2011. *The European Council*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Woolcock, Stephen. 2010. "EU trade and investment policymaking after the Lisbon treaty", *Intereconomics* 45, 2010, pp. 22–25.