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‘The cogs in the wheels of Early Warning’? The role of liaison officers in the European Parliament

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‘The cogs in the wheels of Early Warning’? The role of liaison officers in the European Parliament

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The Early Warning Mechanism (EWM) is one way in which policymakers have sought to address legitimacy problems in the European Union (EU) through enhancing the role of national parliaments in the EU’s decision-making. PADEMIA members Christine Neuhold and Anna-Lena Högenauer argue that the officials of national parliaments in the European Parliament (EP) play an important role in enabling parliamentary scrutiny through the dissemination of information. Their research highlights the key function of ‘information relay’ that these liaison officers performed for the first ‘yellow card’ procedure in the EWM.

The requirement for national parliaments to cooperate systematically with one another and the need to develop a high level of technical and legal expertise has led to the emergence of a network of the permanent representatives of national parliaments in the EP or, as they are called in the practical political process, **liaison officers**. Despite the fact that this network has rapidly expanded over the past decade, it has up to now received little academic attention. In this vein, we want to shed light on one main question: what is the actual role of the liaison officers in implementing the Lisbon provisions? In this context, we first set out by sketching the development of the network and then discuss its role of ‘information relay’ in the practical process.

The development of the network of liaisons and key features

The network of liaisons started in the early 1990s but was initially slow to grow from one representative to include representatives from (almost) all national parliaments in 2015. The Danish already sent a parliamentary representative to Brussels since 1991. The Finnish parliament followed in 1995 and Italy in 1998. The UK House of Commons delegated a parliamentary representative the year after.

A big influx only took place prior to- and after the Eastern enlargement (2003-2005). This ‘boom’ was only partially related to enlargement and included also ‘older’ Member States such as Germany, Greece, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria (lower chamber) and the UK (House of Lords). Even Norway is sending a representative since the beginning of 2013, which is seen to be based on a political decision to observe EU activities. Several bi-cameral parliaments such as the UK and Belgium send two representatives, one per chamber.



Liaisons act on the basis of formal mandates and positions and are careful when it comes to interpreting formal positions clearly



All liaisons sent by their national parliaments and are in constant contact with their ‘home legislature’. They are officials of their respective parliament and most have worked there for several years prior to having been delegated to Brussels.

In addition, the neutrality of the liaisons and their non-partisan role is seen as key. Liaisons thus tend to act on the basis of formal

mandates and positions and are careful when it comes to interpreting formal positions of their parliament and committees.

The role of liaisons in the practical political process

Building on the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, liaisons have derived a common task for themselves, which is the rapid exchange of information on the stance of their respective parliament towards a possible breach of the principle of subsidiarity. The advantage of the network of liaisons over other forms of parliamentary cooperation is that it functions by way of regular meetings, which have to become known as Monday Morning Meetings (MMMs). These meetings are a forum for information exchange where national legislatures are alerted to the fact that one or more legislatures are planning to conduct a subsidiarity-check and these meetings are also a hub for the exchange of best-practices of parliamentary control. In addition, the fact that most of the liaisons work on the same floor in the EP fosters informal information exchange and networks. The only delegation that uses office space outside of the EP is the German delegation, as it also comprises representatives of the political groups.



Liaisons are officials that guard the role of their respective parliament clearly



A good example to illustrate the impact of the network is the so-called [Monti II regulation](#), which would have affected the right to organise collective industrial action. During the eight weeks following publication of the proposal, 12 national parliaments representing 19 votes flagged up problems of the proposed regulation with the principle of subsidiarity and issued reasoned opinions, which lead to the first 'yellow card' procedure.

The role of the liaisons in Monti II was

twofold. In the first instance, the Danish parliament used their liaison to mobilize other parliaments. The Danish parliament had already earmarked Monti II on its list of priorities for subsidiarity control as it was likely to affect the Danish welfare system. The Danish liaison pushed very proactively for more reasoned opinions by circulating the Danish reasoned opinion as a 'blue-print' to the network of liaisons in order for other legislatures to follow suit.

Coincidentally, Denmark also held the presidency of the conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) and the meeting of the delegates of European Affairs Committees (EACs) was conveniently timed. The Danish EAC chair could thus use that meeting [to further push for reasoned opinions](#) among directly elected Members of Parliament, but the Danish EU advisor estimates that at that point most of the coordination work was already done. After getting the process of the ground, the network of liaisons used the catalyst effect of the increasing number of opinions to motivate further parliaments.

Concluding remarks

As highlighted, the network of liaisons performs the function of an information relay both *towards* their respective national legislature and *across* other national parliaments. It is in the very nature of the Lisbon provisions that a certain degree of coordination between national parliaments is needed in order to raise subsidiarity concerns. In practice, this coordination takes place on a bureaucratic and not on a political level. Officials thus raise the attention of decision-makers to issues of political importance.

Even after the Lisbon Treaty, the attachment to national mandates and the culture of the sending institution prevails. Liaisons are not policy-experts per se but officials that guard

the role of their respective parliament and at the same time contribute to concerted outcomes across national legislatures. Their closely-knit network can best be seen as an 'information network'. As such this network

does not share common beliefs or seeks collective decisions, but collects and exchanges information with a view to optimizing the collective knowledge of national parliaments.

*This note represents the views of the authors and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on [their recent article](#) in the *Journal of Legislative Studies*.*



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