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Date of publication in the **EIoP**: 27 Mar 2007

**Keywords:** Governance, networks, network approach, leadership, interest intermediation, open coordination

**Full Text:** HTML

**Abstract**
Recent transformations in the European Union have been putting significant pressure on the management function of the European Commission. Examining its brokerage position in policy networks, this article asks what kind of role does the Commission have in the political interactions in Brussels after the year 2000. Developing a conceptual framework about brokerage roles in EU policy, the article uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative data in an empirical analysis of two very different cases where the Commission has been embattled the past years. The article argues that previous reports of the Commission's demise are much exaggerated, because it continues playing a leading role in managing interaction between multiple actors at different levels of governance. The empirical results show that the Commission is a resilient central network broker.

**Full Text:** HTML

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# The European Commission as Network Broker(*)

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European Integration online Papers (EIoP) Vol. 11 (2007) N° 01;
http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2007-001a.htm

Date of Publication in **European Integration *online Papers***: 27.3.2007

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## 1. Introduction

Portrayed as the 'engine of European integration', it is hardly adventurous to claim that the post-Delors era has proven to be turbulent for this EU institution, in what has generally been perceived as a loss of its previous leading role. A series of scandals involving food safety and mismanagement resulted in the first resignation ever of the College of Commissioners in 1999, pushing the Commission to its lowest historical levels of political and administrative confidence (Judge and Earnshaw, 2002) and forcing sweeping internal reforms initiated soon thereafter by Prodi (Metcalfe, 2000). Furthermore, the expansion of the role of the European Parliament and the spreading of the co-decision procedure (Burns, 2004) appear to have affected the relative position of the Commission in the decision-making process vis-à-vis other EU institutions. Likewise, the "new modes of governance", which seek to achieve the voluntary coordination of member states and private actors in the absence of supranational regulation, appear to undermine the position of the Commission as compared to its relevant placement in the Community method (Wincott, 2001).

The point of departure of this article is that the paramount importance of these changes and their potential impact on the management and bureaucratic function of the Commission call for a reopening of the traditional scholarly debate concerning the role of the Commission. New empirical findings must address this open question. Even more importantly, however, the current analytical frameworks for these matters must also be carefully re-examined to improve their conceptual accuracy and analytical explanatory capacity.

The main question addressed in this article is the nature of the role occupied by the Commission in the interactions in Brussels after the year 2000. Providing reliable answers require a step further in the conceptual clarification regarding the role of brokerage. With this purpose in mind, it uses social network analysis to develop a specific typology of brokerage roles; a typology that constitutes a wider and more nuanced analytical framework for studying the different roles of the Commission and their specific significance in EU-level policy networks.

Employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative data (quantified relational data and individual interviews, respectively), the article examines two extreme cases in which the Commission has been under strain in recent years. The cases are extreme on the grounds that they are two cases in which the conventional role of the Commission has been openly challenged. Exploring the nature of the roles assumed by the Commission under these two stressed circumstances can provide evidence of the Commission's role in more mundane situations. The two extreme cases are the new regulatory regime for genetically modified organisms (GMOs), passed in 2004, and the definition of the common guidelines for the European Employment Strategy (EES) in 2003. The first case is

very interesting because it is the direct result of the loss of popular and member states' confidence in the Commission's management of these new substances in the aftermath of the food scandals in the late 1990s. Furthermore, the demands to establish a new regulatory regime for GMOs were explicitly directed to redesign the Commission's formal role on the GMO-approval system. The second case is also very interesting for different reasons. The EES is under the open method of coordination, one of the new modes of governance following a very novel procedure that does not require legislative action. The creation of EMCO (Employment Committee), a powerful and special committee formed by national representatives to put this open coordination in place, has *prima facie* relegated the role of the Commission in formal and informal terms. For these reasons, the two case studies selected provide an excellent empirical field to analyse in detail the changing role of the Commission after the major watersheds since the year 2000.

## 2. Previous analytical limits

Despite massive scholarly attention, the specific role of the Commission in the EU policy process has remained a highly contested topic since the 1960s, and it still requires further empirical research (Nugent 2000, Matlary, 2000, Dimitrakopoulos, 2004). The conventional starting point of the intergovernmentalist approach is generally deductive, namely, the specific conditions of principal-agent relations accounting for the effective delegation of powers. From that, a series of conditions limiting the autonomy of the Commission vis-à-vis member states are identified. The main argument is that the Commission is structurally constrained by the institutional choices of member states (Moravcsik, 1999; Garrett, 1992). In recent years, the Commission has been additionally constrained by the successive changes in the inter-institutional relations that have systematically empowered the principals (Majone, 2002). This member state assertiveness is not only structural; it is also a direct result of their willingness to confine the political vigour of the Commission in the post-Delors era (Kassim and Menon, 2004). Although interesting, the prominence of the focus on delegation issues leaves the intergovernmental approach ill-equipped to study the interactions between EU institutions and other non-governmental actors in the formal and informal political interactions taking place in Brussels previous to a formal decision. In other words, the research results about the Commission as a constrained actor shed dim light on the question of what kind of brokerage roles the Commission plays within those confined limits.

Supranational institutionalists provide a rather different view, portraying the Commission in more autonomous terms. They stress that in spite of the centrality of the member states in EU politics, there are significant gaps in member states' control over the process of European integration, mainly with respect to day-to-day policy making (Pierson, 1998; Marks et al. 1997). One such gap is precisely related to the autonomy of European institutions, which tend to follow their own preferences and forge alliances with different types of actors in the EU arena (Schmidt, 2004). This perspective opened the door to a series of analyses regarding the policy entrepreneurship of the Commission and the Commission's interaction with various actors other than the principals in day-to-day EU policy-making, demonstrating that the Commission played a fundamental role in those networks in the 1990s. In view of the recent contextual transformations mentioned above, this article seeks to illuminate the extent to which these findings hold true.

Cram perceives the Commission as a 'purposeful opportunist' mastering the ability "to respond to opportunities for action as they present themselves and even to facilitate the emergence of these opportunities" (Cram, 1997:156). In a similar vein, Pollack argues that the Commission is particularly well placed to be a successful policy entrepreneur in EU policy. Firstly, because it has a set of critical features that are very important in relational terms, namely, expertise, brokering skills, and institutional persistence. Secondly, because it enjoys the monopoly of initiative in the formal legislative procedures, which provides an additional vantage point vis-à-vis other EU institutions. And thirdly, because it enjoys a central position in the well developed and dense policy networks in Brussels (Pollack 1997:126). Along those lines, other authors describe the Commission as an active organization with a set of different techniques, whose relative influence largely depends on its relations with its political context, in particular with non-state interests involved in the specific policy area at stake (Chistiansen, 2001).

These studies have shed important light on the embeddedness of the Commission in the political context formed by formal and informally based interactions. However, to the extent that these studies have addressed the

Commission's brokerage role at all, they have done so obliquely. This is to say, the main pitch of previous analyses has been to emphasize that the Commission operates in policy networks and that these are important to explain its relative political position in EU policy making. But the questions regarding what specific roles the Commission plays and the extent to which these roles have been shifting since the year 2000 are issues that remain largely unexplored. Covering these blind spots entails turning the tide in search of specific analytical tools offering effective yardsticks for assessing the role of the Commission after the year 2000.

The embeddedness of the Commission in a complex web of relations at the supranational level is linked to an actor-based approach in EU studies, namely 'policy networks'. The study of informal policy interactions in the policy process and in the overall EU governance system has been gaining increasing scholarly consideration in the field of EU studies. John Peterson argues that the reason behind this accrued academic attention is that the nature of the EU political system lends itself to it; because it is characterized by a high division across sector-policy areas; because experts and non-state organizations have high prominence in the informal policy process; and because there is "an extraordinary complex labyrinth of committees that shape policy options" (Peterson, 2004b: 118). Both in its Anglo-Saxon and German traditions, there are not full-ranged theories about policy networks. However, the network metaphor has been analytically useful to try establishing causality between the features of the policy network and the policy outcomes of that particular policy sector (Börzel, 1998). In other words, EU scholars have been particularly interested to determine the extent to which the precise structure of a policy network helps explain particular policy outcomes, for example in the area of technology policy, agricultural policy or cohesion policy (Peterson, 1991; Daugbjerg, 1999; Ansell et al. 1997).

The study of the structure of policy networks and their impact on policy has been highly inspired by the early works of Rhodes in British politics (Rhodes, 1990), which mainly focus on the question of the degree of integration in the network and the dynamics of exclusion-inclusion within it. Rhodes' continuum between two ideal extremes of highly integrated and highly exclusive 'policy communities' on the one hand, and loosely integrated and inclusive 'issue networks' on the other, has proven to be a useful and popular tool for characterizing the structure of a particular network and hence for use as an independent variable explaining specific policy outcomes. The underlying testable hypothesis in policy network analyses in EU studies has been that the higher integrated and exclusive policy community, the less radical policy change will be. "Put another way, EU policy outcomes are determined by how integrated and exclusive policy-specific networks are, and how mutually dependent actors are within them. We should expect different kinds of outcome in sectors, such as pharmatheuticals or agriculture, where tightly-integrated, cabalistic policy communities are guardians of the agenda, than in sectors populated by bossily bound issue networks, such as environmental policy" (Peterson, 2004b: 124). However, how interesting the focus on density might be, policy network analysis in EU studies must take a step further away from the study of the entire network as such, delving into the relative position of specific actors *within the network*. Such an individual actor perspective is especially required in light of the current research question regarding the Commission.

The analytical limits of these previous approaches hence call for further endeavours forging ahead with a more precise and parsimonious analytical framework capable of yielding accurate results about the nature of the brokerage roles performed by the Commission after the year 2000. With this purpose in mind, the next section develops such a framework based on a typology of brokerage roles on a contextualization of these roles in the EU decision-making process and on the identification of three internal organizational features of the Commission that help explain how this EU institution has unfolded the brokerage roles in question.

## 3. The brokerage roles of the commission: The conceptual framework

Brokerage is generally understood as the intermediate position that one actor takes between two other actors, which are respectively referred to as 'the sender' and 'the receiver'. Studying the brokerage positions of different actors in the network provides information at two levels. Firstly, it is able to capture the specific role or roles that the different actors have assumed within the network and their relative central position in the network; and secondly, it offers interesting insights concerning the most prominent types of flows taking place in the network as a whole. Studying the position of the Commission within these network interactions allows defining the role of this EU institution in the policy process, from the point of view of policy management (Laffan, 1997) (Talleberg,

2002) (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). This is in contrast with approaches that see the Commission as a network organisation itself (Metcalfe, 1996).

In 1989, Gould and Fernandez proposed an interesting conceptual typology of five distinct types of brokerage roles (Gould and Fernandez, 1989). Working mainly with quantitative methods of social network analysis, these authors proposed to divide the network actors into different groups according to their similar features. Brokerage roles are defined on the basis of the interaction between the actors within and across these groups according to the identity of the sender and the receiver. The authors propose the following five brokerage roles: coordinator, gatekeeper, representative, consultant and liaison. *Coordinator* is when the source, the recipient and the broker are from the same group. *Gatekeeper* is when the source is from a different group and the recipient and broker are from the same group. *Representative* is when the source and the broker are from the same group but the recipient is from a different group. *Consultant* is when the source and recipient are from the same group, but the broker is from another group. *Liaison* is when all three actors, namely, the source, broker and recipient, all belong to three different groups.

Box 1

These five definitions have been developed deductively and collect all possible combinations about the group identity of the source, the broker and the recipient of interactions. It is important to remind that the interactions above are one-way interactions, where the sender has indicated us that it has contacted another organisation, and the receiver is the organisation where such contacts have been directed.

In order to be fully operational in the field of EU studies further conceptual clarification is required in terms of the groups within EU policy networks. Policy networks in the EU are formed by complex interactions among highly diverse types of organizational actors, which can be divided into different groups. The first and most important group is formed by the most significant EU institutions, namely the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the European Court of Justice. This group is placed together because these institutions are those which are formally most central in EU policy-making. A second group is formed by less central EU bodies, such as the Economic and Social Committee, the Court of Auditors, the Committee of the Regions, the Ombudsman, etc. These two groups have specific, EU-Treaty defined tasks in the policy process. Alongside these two groups, there are a series of other groups formed by different sets of private stakeholders interested in the policy area. These are the social partners, industrial associations and firms, environmental interest groups, consumer associations, sub-national representation offices, etc.

The formal prerogatives of EU institutions in the policy process mean that this particular group possesses special importance in the overall network, primarily because it is that the final decisions are taken in this context. Naturally, the political interactions within the network will tend to be directed towards exercising the maximum possible political influence over this particular group. Likewise, the specific position and brokerage roles assumed by each of the EU institutions in this particular group will not only show differential key positions within the network, but will also have important effects on the policy outputs. Since the current study is interested in the issue of the changing role of the Commission, further conceptual clarification is necessary regarding the different strengths of brokerage roles in EU policy networks.

As the previous definitions of brokerage roles denote, a “coordinator” is an actor performing such a function within a specific group. Generally speaking, the Commission’s opportunity to unfold such a coordinating role in the group formed by the most significant EU institutions is to a large part dependent on what sort of formal prerogatives this organization enjoys in the decision-making process (most notably in relation to the legislative procedures); but it is also highly related to the set of informal interactions taking place within this group. The role of coordinator is important for two reasons: firstly, because the coordinator enjoys a superior political presence and visibility, since the bulk of the other group members have chosen it as a valuable broker; and secondly, because the coordinator is in a better position than the others to manage the content and the directions of the information flows within the group. The role of “gatekeeper” is also a very important broker role. A gatekeeper is in a key position to control the flow of information coming from actors from other groups into its own group. This is particularly important for policy networks in the EU, above all for the European Commission, given the central

brokerage role between the variety of groups formed by private stakeholders and the group formed by the main European institutions.

In contrast to the high significance of "coordinator" and "gatekeeper", the brokerage roles of "representative", "consultant" and "liaison" are notably weaker in the context of EU policy networks, particularly from the perspective of the Commission. In these three brokerage roles, the Commission acts as intermediary in relation to flows that are politically less relevant, since the recipients are not the group of central EU institutions where decisions are finally taken, but other groups. Consequently, these interactions have limited ability to exercise influence on the decision, and the broker (the Commission) fulfils more a function of communication from the EU institutions to the wider set of actors in the policy network.

In the above conceptualization of five brokerage roles in the EU decision-making process, there is an explicit understanding that not all of these roles are equally relevant or strong in political terms. Placing them in an imaginary dichotomy, "coordinator" and "gatekeeper" are the strongest forms of intermediation in the policy network on the grounds that their respective positions allow them to exercise important political influence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The relative position of the Commission in the network, with stronger or weaker brokerage roles and with more or less centrality, is largely dependent on three important internal organizational features: first, it depends on its ability to develop a moral political leadership, which is defined here as the capacity to coax the diverse actors into producing results that command a consensus, or at least results that reach across the aisle. This is of utmost importance in complex political settings in which the degree of intra-EU diversity across countries and across stakeholders is very large. The second element is the Commission's ability to exploit its institutional capacity in terms of the knowledge basis of its human resources. This is particularly salient in contexts with high scientific and technical content, where the effective mobilization of internal knowledge resources becomes essential for fulfilling strong brokerage roles. Last but not least, the Commission's brokerage roles and centrality also depend on the successful unfolding of its managerial competence, namely, the manner in which the organization is able to process multiple sources of information and selectively channel this information in relation to selected strategic purposes.

The changing conditions exposed at the introduction of this article have placed the Commission under pressure. For that reason, it is reasonable to expect at least two noticeable features in the Commission's performance as a broker in EU-level policy networks, which can be formulated as two hypotheses. The first is that other organizational actors have challenged the position of the Commission as the most central broker in the EU-level policy networks. Such challenge might come from the other EU-level institutions or by particularly well-positioned and highly visible stakeholders. The second hypothesis relates to the type of brokerage roles performed by the Commission. One might expect that the Commission has a tendency to perform brokerage roles that are weak, like roles that are mainly 'representative', 'consultant' and 'liaison'.

In order to test these two hypotheses, the next sections carry out a careful analysis based on quantitative and qualitative data from two very different case studies, the regulation of GMOs and the EES. The quantitative method follows the so-called "Social Network Analysis", which uses statistical measurements in the study of relational data. Social network analysis has a long tradition in the social sciences, particularly in the field of sociology, but its use in political science and public administration is growing. In keeping with this tradition, the current study undertakes a number of selected measurements of centrality and brokerage roles in both networks. Qualitative data gathered in the form of a series of individual interviews with major stakeholders and EU institutions has been used to triangulate and complement the quantitative findings(1).

The GMO case data was gathered between September-December 2004, whereas the EES case data was collected between January-June 2005.

Box 2

In the network questionnaires, the respondents provide information regarding the organizations that they interact regularly with in relation to the topic at stake. Hence, respondents are not asked to evaluate the different brokerage roles of the Commission, but just to provide information about which other organisations do they have regular contacts. This relational data was binarized (values 0-1) and gathered in two matrices for the GMO and EES cases, of 18x18 and 10x10 organizations, respectively. The questionnaires were either collected in continuation of an individual interview or they were collected by mail. The individual interviews were conducted following a series of open-ended and broad questions that produced more qualified information about interaction.

Social network analysis measurements were performed using the program Ucinet-6. The size of 'egonetwork' and the 'betweenness' centrality were measured using the binary matrix as the sole input. Brokerage measurements were conducted using the matrix as input and an attribute file with the division of the organizations into different groups as partition vector.

# 4. The Commission in the GMO policy network

The setup of a new regulatory framework for the release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to the market – and the environment – has been a controversial issue in EU politics (Pollack and Shaffer, 2005). These organisms, which are modified by sophisticated methods (occasionally entailing a transfer of genes from other natural species), came under public scrutiny due to the scientific uncertainties surrounding their safety for the environment and for consumers. The European debate about GMOs took place immediately after the unfolding of the BSE (mad cow disease) and dioxine food-safety crises. The major source of dissatisfaction over GMOs in Europe was the structure of the approval procedure at the EU level, which was not deemed to be transparent nor based on sufficient scientific evidence. In particular, the dominant position of the Commission came under attack. As a result of these tensions, the EU levied a de facto moratorium in 1998 on GMO approvals until a new regulatory framework was in place. The subsequent decision-making process for these new regulations took place amid a highly tense political atmosphere between stakeholders (industry, consumers, environmental, agriculture and aid-NGO groups), very different national positions and a highly splintered European Parliament. Apart from creating more transparent approval procedures, the final regulations lean on consumer interests, since new labelling requirements follow the philosophy of "consumer choice" rather than environmental protection (Skogstad, 2003).

The most interesting aspect of this case is that the Commission was simultaneously part of the problem (because it was under pressure) and part of the solution (because it had to initiate the legislative process which followed the co-decision procedure). Formally speaking, the Commission retained the monopoly of initiative. Nonetheless, solving the GMO conundrum required much more than formal powers. It required a minimal degree of moral leadership in order to reach across the aisle of many different and complex interests; a high degree of institutional capacity given the technical and knowledge-intensive features of this policy area; and ample doses of managerial ability given the size of the policy network.

Measuring the scores of brokerage roles performed by the 18 actors in the matrix, Table 1 reveals several interesting aspects. The Commission scores highest in most brokerage roles, meaning that it is the most prominent broker in the GMO network, as indicated by the number of total scores. Despite the turbulence surrounding the decision-making concerning GMO regulation, the Commission has managed to avoid being superseded by other institutions or organizations. Having said that, it is worth noting that the Commission mainly plays the role as gatekeeper and representative in the flows between its own group of EU institutions and the other stakeholders, but it does not play any coordinating role within the group of EU institutions.

Table 1

The status of the Commission as the main broker in the network is placed in perspective when examining the nature of the brokerage roles it performs. The added scores of 'coordination' and 'gatekeeper' are lower than those of 'representative' and 'consultant' together(2). Despite the slight numerical distance, this is a significant difference because the measurements are carried out in terms of absolute scores, that is, the number of times that other actors have positioned the Commission in that particular brokerage role. Hence, these results appear to

confirm the first hypothesis: that the Commission is performing brokerage roles that are weaker in terms of political influence. Nevertheless, considering all the scores together, the Commission rates the highest, pointing to the centrality of the Commission in the overall network. Table 2 corroborates this later remark, indicating that the Commission retains a central position, though closely followed by other actors, particularly the European Parliament. The analysis of the size of the egonetworks and of the betweenness centrality are interesting additional measures which shed more light about the centrality of the Commission, regardless of its different brokerage scores.

Table 2

Egonetwork size is a very simple measurement of the absolute number of the other actors in the network that have pointed to that actor as a receiver of their interactions, including itself. The relevance of the Commission is the highest in the network, hitting 17 scores in a matrix formed by 18 actors. However, this result shall not be exaggerated, since it is essential to point at the relevance of other actors, particularly, the European Parliament, Copa-Cogeca (agriculture), BEUC (consumers), Euro-coop (consumers) and Greenpeace (environmental). "Betweenness centrality" provides a more fine-grained measurement of centrality and can better qualify the previous findings. Betweenness centrality measures the intermediary scores (betweenness) of each actor as a percentage of all of the other interactions within the network independent of the direction of the ties. The assumption is that the more the actors depend on a specific actor to make connections, the more favoured the position this actor will have, regardless of the specific brokerage roles. Here, the Commission has a paramount position in contrast with other actors, which indicates the central role played by that institution.

The findings of Tables 1 and 2 reveal important features of other crucial actors in the GMO network, for example, the centrality of the European Parliament, which has scored particularly high. This can be explained by its position in the co-decision procedure, but also by the activism of many MEPs in this matter. Most surprising of all is the relatively low position of national representatives in the network. Since our study has only focused on interactions taking place at the European level, this figure does not capture national-level interactions between interest groups and member state representatives. Nonetheless, one could have expected more direct interaction between European umbrella organizations and specific member states. Some of the interviews point in this direction, mentioning regular interactions between sceptical governments and European-level interest groups, as well as pro-GMO governments and European-level industrial groups. However, this was not reflected in the collection of quantitative data, because our respondents did not provide accurate data about these interactions.

Returning to the role of the Commission in the interactions at the EU level, the data above indicates that the Commission has a relatively weak brokerage profile in the GMO network (more representative-consultant than coordinator-gatekeeper), but in spite of this, it enjoys a relative centrality and presence in the overall network, as most flows of interaction go through this institution. In order to understand this, we might revert to the degree of its moral political leadership, institutional capacity and managerial competences.

In the early stages of the policy process, the Commission transferred the GMO 'turf' from DG agriculture to DG Sanco (consumer protection). This represented a very significant political move. The interviews bear evidence of a positive view among most political actors on DG Sanco. In all probability, this allowed the Commission to exercise a relative (even if weak) degree of moral leadership, which is reflected in its weak coordination and gatekeeper brokerage roles. DG Sanco became the beacon of "safety first" political attitude in an unconcealed attempt at regaining the trust of highly critical member states (particularly Austria, Italy, Greece and Luxemburg) and the GMO-sceptical stakeholders. However, reaching across the aisle was no mean task. Most interviewees have reported that political discussions took place in an atmosphere of constant bickering and tended to be very emotional.

The issue of GMO regulation is highly complex in at least three technical dimensions, namely, the scientific dimension, the legal dimension (the compound set of national and EU regulations related to GMOs) and the procedural dimension (the approval procedure falls partly under the comitology framework). Navigating through this morass was a major challenge for all of the political actors, particularly those with weak institutional capacity. Here, the Commission sat in the eye of the storm. It enjoyed strong internal knowledge resources regarding the

legal and procedural technicalities and simultaneously had a set of strong external resources to tap into the scientific knowledge. The European Parliament was much weaker on those three dimensions, and member states knew relatively little about one another's regulatory frameworks. The lack of information and knowledge from other EU institutions put the Commission in a relatively stronger position vis-à-vis the Parliament and the member states. This might explain why the Commission remained at the centre of political intermediation despite its weakened role as coordinator and gatekeeper.

The GMO policy network was a large network. Since this subject cuts across several policy areas (agriculture, consumer protection, industry, environment), it mobilized an unusually wide range of stakeholders. The size and density of the policy network are not trivial matters, since they establish the conditions for brokerage, meaning that the larger and denser the network, the more difficult to exercise strong brokerage roles, particularly of coordinator. The managerial competence of the Commission, namely, the manner in which this organization processes multiple sources of information and channels it selectively, was put to a test given the multiple sources and recipients of information. The Commission officials interviewed in this study indicated that they received plenty of information, but that they were processing and channelling it selectively, probably conveying a "consumer choice" solution. Likewise, the high density of interactions in the overall network limited the ability of the Commission to perform stronger brokerage roles, particularly as gatekeeper.

# 5. The Commission in the employment strategy

The role of the Commission is very different in our second case study. The European Employment Strategy (EES) is a relatively new policy in the EU context. Developed gradually since 1997 amid widespread political concerns about high levels of unemployment across Europe, the EES does not entail any transfer of regulatory competences from the national level to the EU level. Instead, it is based on a voluntary and open-ended coordination of member states' policies towards several different aspects of the labour market in search of increasing and improving employment (Goetschy, 2003). The decision and implementation of the strategy follows the open method of coordination, a procedure in which the Commission is far from enjoying the treaty-based prerogatives it has in the conventional legislative procedures of the 'Community method' (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004; Zeitlin, 2005). In many senses, the open method of coordination (OMC) is the litmus test for the Commission's ability to exercise strong brokerage roles. In contrast to the GMO-related controversies, where the Commission was invariably part of the solution, in the OMC, the Commission runs the risk of being partly marginalized. The EES is a process highly dominated by the member states, which are represented at EMCO, a specially designed and powerful committee. The low profile of the European Parliament and the non-existent role of the European Court of Justice means that there are very little inter-institutional interactions in which the Commission can act as broker.

The empirical evidence is very interesting in this regard, since it seems to refute in part the hypothesis of a marginalized Commission. The brokerage measures in Table 3 provide data about the different intermediary roles of the organizations directly involved in the establishment of the EES guidelines in 2003.

Table 3

The aggregated scores of the Commissions' role as 'representative' and 'consultant' are larger than those of 'coordination' and 'gatekeeper' together. Just as in the GMO case, these results suggest that, in relative terms, the Commission has performed mostly weak brokerage roles in the policy network around the EES guidelines. However, it is important to underline that, in contrast to the previous GMO case, the Commission exercises an unexpected but clear role as coordinator within the group of EU institutions. We shall return to this below. Furthermore, the total scores in Table 3 and the different measurements of Table 4 systematically reveal a Commission at the very core of the overall EES network.

Table 4

A measurement of the size of the 10 actor's egonetworks shows that the Commission scores highest (8), followed by UNICE, ETUC and CEEP. This is not surprising, since these organizations correspond to the social partners, who enjoy a privileged position in the field of labour market policy. The relative centrality of these actors, and in

particular of the European Commission DG Employment, is again portrayed in the measurement of betweenness centrality, which measures the distance of one actor to the other actors taking into account the position of the actor under study. Here, the differences of centrality are exacerbated, since the Commission and UNICE are the only actors with significant positions.

One of the most surprising findings from the quantitative measurements in Tables 3 and 4 is the relatively low profile of EMCO in the overall policy network. In contrast to the complex inter-institutional balance of powers in regulatory procedures (particularly in the co-decision procedure), final decisions concerning EES guidelines are taken within EMCO prior to being moved up to the Council of Ministers. On that basis, one could have expected that EMCO scored much higher in both tables, mostly in the measurements of size of egonetwork and betweenness centrality in Table 4, since EMCO might be a natural recipient of most interactions. The qualitative interviews, however, tell us that EMCO members prefer to develop solid ties with other national representatives together with their own national social partners and the Commission, but not with supranational stakeholders. The reverse is also the case: interviewed supranational stakeholders do not report any significant direct contacts with EMCO, but plenty with the Commission. This explains EMCO's relative isolation in the quantitative measurements of the network as well the Commission's coordinating role within the group formed by EU institutions. In the absence of direct ties between EMCO and supranational stakeholders, the Commission has developed a role as gatekeeper and representative, being practically the only actor conveying the views from supranational stakeholders to EMCO and vice-versa. And it does so maintaining many bilateral meetings.

In order to explain why the Commission has this specific brokerage profile in the EES decision-making, one might revert to the three internal organizational features mentioned above, namely, the degree of its moral political leadership, its institutional capacity, and the manner in which it has exercised its managerial competences.

The Commission has traditionally been strong in the social dialogue and regulatory initiatives in the field of employment policy, which are two adjacent tools to the EES. This has allowed the Commission to exercise a relatively strong moral political leadership in the procedures of the open method of coordination, linking them strategically to these other tools (Goetschy, 2003). However, the relative moral strength of the Commission has been partly undermined by the internal squabbles between DG Employment and DG Ecfin regarding their different views on the labour market, as reported by several of the interviewees. In the decision-making of the 2003 EES guidelines, stakeholders massively chose DG Employment as a valid broker to EMCO, whereas DG Ecfin never assumed such a position, seeking instead to exercise some normative influence over the Council. DG Employment managed in part to extrapolate its central position in the social dialogue to the OMC procedures, as it was perceived as a valid broker by the organizations in the policy network.

The field of employment policy is less knowledge-intensive than the GMO field. In comparative terms, this might have placed less demand on the institutional capacity of the actors involved, particularly the Commission. Nevertheless, the complexity of employment policy issues shall not be underestimated, given the important differences in the labour markets in the 25 member states and the strong legal or quasi-legal dimension of labour policy contents. The extensive, rather than intensive, knowledge resources required in this field did not put the Commission in any better position vis-à-vis other organizations. Social partner organizations are traditionally well endowed with knowledge resources. This leads to the next issue regarding the managerial competences of the Commission. The policy network around the EES is comparatively smaller than the GMO network. This might have significantly lowered the need for brokerage in general terms. However, the isolation of EMCO gave the Commission the opportunity to operate as gatekeeper. The managerial competences of the Commission are evidenced by the strategic use of the information provided by stakeholders and conveyed to EMCO as well as by its emphatic support to include in the network other stakeholders than the social partners.

# 6. Conclusion: The resilient network broker

These results overwhelmingly point in the direction that the Commission is a resilient network broker. The first hypothesis formulated in the beginning of this article – that the Commission was to be challenged from other EU-level institutions and stakeholders – is only partly confirmed, since it is true that the social partners and the

consumer/environmental groups have high relevance in the networks examined, but not to the point to take over the Commission's role as the most central broker. The price that the Commission had to pay, however, was to have less influence in the form of weaker brokerage roles, which confirms the second hypothesis about a Commission with a weaker brokerage profile.

Far from becoming bogged down by the contextual pressure the European Commission has managed to retain a prominent position within EU policy networks since the year 2000. The two cases under examination have demonstrated that the Commission plays multiple brokerage roles simultaneously, and that it has managed to retain a clear centrality in all of these roles when it comes to the flux of political interactions within the network. However, some of these roles are more relevant than others in terms of political influence, depending on the direction and final destination of the interactions. Balancing the scores on strong brokerage roles against those on weak roles, the Commission performs relatively weakly. Particularly striking is that the Commission was only able to work as coordinator within the group of EU institutions in the EES network, reflecting that, after all, the changing inter-institutional conditions have affected the relative position of the Commission in this specific sub-set of relevant interactions. The data equally reveals that the Commission is a dominant gatekeeper in both networks. It looks as if most (if not all) stakeholders in the policy area turn their eyes and attention to the Commission as a crucial access point for influencing the decisions. However, the strong roles of coordinator and gatekeeper are overturned by the weak roles as representative and consultant. In its role as representative, the Commission has a fundamental position conveying the information from the other major EU institutions to the stakeholders at the EU level. What is most interesting, however, is that the data indicates that stakeholders and other organizations appear to be using the Commission as a broker in their interactions with one another (within and across similar groups of stakeholders), since the Commission systematically scores highest in the roles as consultant and liaison in both networks.

Turning now back to the previous theoretical accounts about the role of the Commission, this study offers a nuanced picture about the different brokerage roles performed by the Commission from 2000 to 2005. Along with the intergovernmental account, this article shows that the Commission is a constrained actor in the complex political processes in Brussels, particularly in cases like those under study, namely, cases where the Commission itself has been under strain. But the current findings also portray a Commission as an organisation that is able to mobilize its internal and external resources in order to position itself centrally in the informal and dense interactions that take place within those complex policy networks. In other words, an organisation that still is at the core of the EU policy-making process, and that is able to adapt and to accommodate to the ever-changing institutional and environmental context. The findings of this article are naturally only valid for the time-period under study, namely, from 2000-2005. The important changes in the second half of 2005, particularly in relation to the apparent political assertiveness of the recently appointed Barroso Commission, might again be changing the élan of this institution vis-à-vis other EU institutions and stakeholders in EU policy-making. This opens up a series of new questions regarding the role of the Commission after the year 2005 that need to be addressed in the near future.

# 7. List of abbreviations

BEUC: The European Consumers' Organisation

CEEP: European association of public employers

COCERAL: European Association Representing Trading in Cereals

Copa-Cogeca: Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations in the European Union and General Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives in the European Union

CoR: Committee of the Regions

DA: Danish Employers' association

DG: Directorate General

EAPN: European Anti-Poverty Network

ECOSOC: Economic and Social Committee

EEB: European Environmental Bureau (Federation of Environmental Citizens' Organisations)

EES: European Employment Strategy

EMCO: Employment Committee

ETUC: European Confederation of Trade Unions

Euro-coop: European Community of Consumers Cooperatives

FEDIOL: The EU Oil and Proteinmeal Industry

GMOs: Genetically Modified Organisms

IFOAM: International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

OMC: Open Method of Coordination

UNICE: European Business Association

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## Endnotes

(*) I wish to express my gratitude to Hans Peter Olsen, Sevasti Chatzoupoulou and Anders Esmark for their help with the data. My gratitude goes as well to the members of the 'Centre for democratic network governance' and two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and suggestions in relation to previous versions of this article. The usual disclaimers apply.

(1) See Borrás and Olsen for a careful methodological discussion about the combination of quantitative and qualitative data for network analysis in EU studies (Borrás and Olsen, 2006).

(2) The scores of 'liaison' are not included in this relative weighting because they might distort the position in terms of strong or weaker forms of intermediation given that the number of sub-groups is large, and hence 'liaison' would systematically give high scores, distorting the relative position of the Commission.

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# Table I

## Brokerage scores in the GMO policy network

| Type of organizations | Organizations[1] | Coordination | Gatekeeper | Representative | Consultant | Liaison | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***EU institutions*** | Commission | 0 | 13 | 13 | 4 | 78 | 108 |
| | European Parliament | 0 | 9 | 9 | 2 | 36 | 56 |
| | National rep. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| ***Scientific advisors*** | Independent scientific advisor A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| | Independent scientific advisor B | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ***Agricultural organizations*** | COPA-COGECA | 0 | 10 | 10 | 2 | 34 | 56 |
| | IFOAM | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 12 |
| | Demeter | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| ***Industrial organizations*** | COCERAL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Euro-commerce | 2 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| | Europabio | 2 | 14 | 14 | 0 | 12 | 42 |
| | FEDIOL | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| ***Consumer organizations*** | Euro Coop | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 52 | 56 |
| | BEUC | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 54 | 56 |
| ***Environmental organizations*** | EEB | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 10 | 12 |
| | Friends of the Earth | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 22 | 26 |
| | Greenpeace | 0 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 40 | 50 |
| ***Aid NGO*** | X-minus-Y | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

[1]The scores of "liaison" are not included in this relative weighting because they might distort the position in terms of strong or weaker forms of intermediation given that the number of sub-groups is large, and hence "liaison" would systematically give high scores, distorting the relative position of the Commision.

# Table II

## Actors' centrality within the GMO network

| Types of organizations | Organizations | Size egonetwork* | Betweenness centrality** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***EU institutions*** | Commission | 17 | 16.743 |
| | European Parliament | 15 | 3.238 |
| | National representatives | 6 | 0.061 |
| ***Scientific advisors*** | Independent scientific advisor A | 9 | 0.061 |
| | Independent scientific advisor B | 1 | 0.000 |
| ***Agricultural organizations*** | COPA-COGECA | 15 | 3.238 |
| | IFOAM | 11 | 0.686 |
| | Demeter - Organic Farmers | 10 | 0.143 |
| ***Industrial organizations*** | COCERAL | 6 | 0.000 |
| | Eurocommerce | 12 | 1.216 |
| | Europabio | 13 | 2.457 |
| | FEDIOL | 8 | 0.061 |
| ***Consumer organizations*** | EURO COOP | 15 | 3.544 |
| | BEUC | 15 | 3.348 |
| ***Environmental organizations*** | EEB | 12 | 0.472 |
| | Friends of the Earth | 13 | 1.415 |
| | Greenpeace | 14 | 3.021 |
| ***Aid NGO*** | XminusY Solidarity Fund | 6 | 0.000 |

* Absolute scores ** Percentage

# Table III

## Brokerage scores in the EES policy network

| Type of organizations | Organizations | **Coordination** | **Gatekeeper** | **Representative** | **Consultant** | **Liaison** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *EU institutions* | Commission | 2 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 24 | 50 |
| | EMCO | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| | EP | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Social partners | ETUC | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| | DA | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | CEEP | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| | UNICE | 4 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 14 |
| Other stakeholders | EAPN | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Minor EU institutions | CoR | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Ecosoc | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |

# Table IV

## Diverse measurements about the actors' centrality within the EES network

| Type of organizations | Organizations | Size egonetwork* | Betweeness centrality** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***EU institutions*** | Commission | 8 | 41.667 |
| | EMCO | 3 | 0.926 |
| | EP | 4 | 0.000 |
| ***Social partners***[1] | ETUC | 5 | 5.556 |
| | DA | 1 | 0.000 |
| | CEEP | 5 | 4.630 |
| | UNICE | 6 | 25.926 |
| ***Other stakeholders***[2] | EAPN | 2 | 0.000 |
| ***Minor EU institutions***[3] | ECOSOC | 3 | 1.852 |
| | CoR | 1 | 0.000 |

* Absolute scores

** Percentage

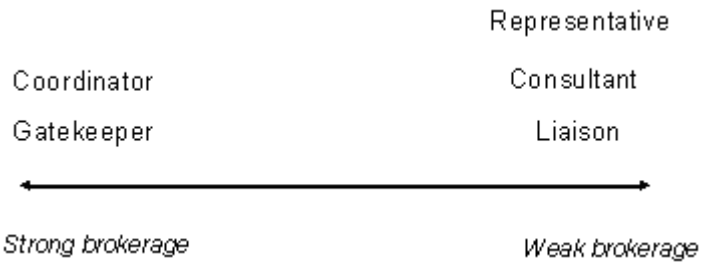
[1]ETUC: European Confederation of Trade Unions; DA: Danish Employers´ association, CEEP: European association of public employers; UNICE: European Business Association.

[2]EAPN: European Anti-Poverty Network

[3]ECOSOC: Economic and Social Commitee; CoR: Commitee of the Regions.

# Figure 1

## Strong and weak brokerage roles in EU policy making



# Box 1

## Brokerage roles according to the group origin of sender, broker and recipient

Coordinator
Sender--Broker--Recipient (A = same group)
A -------- A -------- A

Gatekeeper
Sender--Broker--Recipient (A and B = different groups)
B -------- A -------- A

Representative
Sender--Broker--Recipient (A and B = different groups)
A -------- A -------- B

Consultant
Sender--Broker--Recipient (A and B = different groups)
A -------- B -------- A

Liaison
Sender--Broker--Recipient (A, B and C = different groups)
A -------- B -------- C

Source: Gould and Fernandez, 1989.

# Box 2

## Data sources for the two case studies

| | Valid network questionnaires (Quantitative data) | Individual interviews (Qualitative data) |
|---|---|---|
| GMO case | 34 valid network questionnaires:<br>▪ 6 European Parliament Members<br>▪ 2 National representatives<br>▪ 3 Commission officials<br>▪ 4 Consumer associations<br>▪ 8 Industrial associations<br>▪ 4 Environmental associations<br>▪ 4 Agricultural associations<br>▪ 2 Scientific experts<br>▪ 1 Aid NGO | 17 interviews:<br>▪ 5 European Parliament Members<br>▪ 1 National Representatives<br>▪ 2 Commission officials<br>▪ 2 Consumer associations<br>▪ 3 Industrial associations<br>▪ 1 Environmental association<br>▪ 2 Agricultural associations<br>▪ 1 Scientific expert |
| EES case | 17 valid network questionnaires:<br>▪ 2 European Parliament Members<br>▪ 4 EMCO<br>▪ 3 Commission<br>▪ 2 ETUC<br>▪ 1 UNICE<br>▪ 1 CEEP<br>▪ 1 DA<br>▪ 1 Committee of Regions<br>▪ 1 Economic and Social Committee<br>▪ 1 EAPN | 13 interviews:<br>▪ 2 European Parliament Members<br>▪ 3 EMCO<br>▪ 1 Commission<br>▪ 2 ETUC<br>▪ 1 UNICE<br>▪ 1 CEEP<br>▪ 1 DA<br>▪ 1 Committee of Regions<br>▪ 1 EAPN |