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Published in:
The New Eurocrats

DOI:
[10.1515/9789048501472-007](https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048501472-007)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Suvarierol, S., & Berg, C. V. D. (2021). BRIDGE BUILDERS OR BRIDGEHEADS IN BRUSSELS? THE WORLD OF SECONDED NATIONAL EXPERTS. In K. Geuijen, P. Hart, S. Princen, & K. Yesilkagit (Eds.), *The New Eurocrats* (pp. 103-128). (The New Eurocrats). Amsterdam University Press/EYE. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048501472-007>

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CHAPTER 5

BRIDGE BUILDERS OR BRIDGEHEADS IN BRUSSELS? THE WORLD OF SECONDED NATIONAL EXPERTS

By Semin Suvarierol and Caspar van den Berg²⁶

5.1 Living and breathing the Brussels bureaucracy

The foregoing chapters have demonstrated the extent to which national civil servants are involved in EU-related activities, and the dynamics of national administrative activities in the context of the EU. This chapter shifts the focus from national civil servants working *on* the European Union to national civil servants working *for* the European Union. This is a class of national civil servants for whom finding a balance between national and European interests in their work is a permanent, although sometimes implicit, feature of their daily professional activities. The duality of national and European roles is perhaps the most exacerbated for the seconded national experts (SNEs, see also chapter 3), national civil servants who are temporarily working for EU institutions, in particular those seconded to the European Commission.²⁷ On the one hand, Commission SNEs have to be loyal to the Commission and represent European interests in this supranational organ of the EU, while on the other hand, their employer remains the member state government, and they are thus expected to return to their home organisation after their secondment term ends. Therefore, the SNEs are practically torn between two employers: their daily employer under whose supervision they work (the Commission) and the national employer who sent them on the secondment and continues to pay their salaries (the member state).

Besides these atypical terms of employment, SNEs also form a particular group of European civil servants in terms of their position at a crossing point of European and national governance at the micro level. This key position stems mainly from their presence in the beginning phase of the EU leg-

islative process by working for the Commission. As has been argued in chapter 3, SNEs are potentially key strategic instruments for the member states in manoeuvring policy proposals. Conversely, SNEs are key resources for the Commission to sound out the acceptability of a particular proposal for a given member state. This reciprocal gain, however, can only work if there is an ongoing flow of information between the Commission and the member state through the SNE. By virtue of the flow of information, SNEs can play a major role in linking the European and the national level through their *networks* or '*know-who*' at both levels. To the extent that these networks are maintained, both the Commission and the member state can benefit optimally from the '*know-how*' of SNEs. Furthermore, since networks are attached to people, they can remain intact when the secondment ends, which can make the benefits of the secondment period long-lasting. The lasting benefits can only be reaped, however, if SNEs return to their home organisation and keep on working *on* Europe in positions where they can make use of their networks.

Based on this premise, this chapter asks how the work of SNEs can be characterised as connectors between the national and European administration: they utilise their networks, rather as *bridge builders* between the Commission and the member state, or do they primarily act as national *bridgeheads* in the supranational Commission arena? Answers to a number of sub-questions are necessary to arrive at this insight:

- To what extent do the SNEs rely on their national networks during their secondment?
- For what purposes do they use their networks?
- Do these networks endure? In other words, to what extent do the SNEs rely on their European network upon their return?
- To what extent does the Dutch government exert substantive influence through its SNEs (by means of signalling and frontloading)?
- To what extent is a period of secondment with the European Commission a route for career advancement for Dutch civil servants?

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows: First, the methodology and empirical data are presented. A short discussion of the secondment system will be followed by some remarks concerning the particularities of the Netherlands as a supplier of SNEs. We will review the answers to our questions and make conclusions by reflecting on the implications of our findings for the effective use of SNEs as a strategic tool (as implied in chapter 3).

5.2 Getting inside the insiders: Methodology and data

Empirical research focusing on seconded national experts is rare. The growing significance of SNEs within the Commission has only recently received attention in the literature, namely through the work of Jarle Trondal (2004, 2006a, 2006b). Trondal was the first scholar to collect data on SNEs. The sample of respondents he uses in his work includes mainly Swedish and Norwegian SNEs, and his work analyses the identities and allegiances of these officials. We chose to concentrate on national experts from one member state and arrive at valid results for this specific group. This also allowed us to explore to what extent SNEs fulfil their dual role of carrying expertise from the member state to the Commission and from the Commission back to the member state.

The Netherlands presents an interesting case in this regard. Not only did it long enjoy a reputation as an enthusiastic subscriber to the ideal of an integrated Europe, but as one of the founding members of the European Union it is a longstanding player in the secondment system. Secondly, its modest size makes it possible for researchers to identify and reach the entire population of current SNEs and a considerable share of the population of former SNEs for the period between 2001 and 2005 (56%) with relative ease. Our dataset is composed of 90 Dutch national experts divided into two groups: one group of officials who are currently working as SNEs at the European Commission and one group of former SNEs who were seconded between 2001 and 2005.²⁸ For both groups of respondents, we collected survey and interview data. The survey and interview questions have been adapted from Trondal's SNE studies to Dutch SNEs. The aim of the survey has been to obtain an overview on the networks, positions and careers of a large group of SNEs so as to follow up with in-depth interviews with a smaller group of SNEs on the major aspects that came to the fore through the surveys.

The entire population of the current 62 Dutch SNEs was contacted to participate in the survey,²⁹ out of which 46 responded to our request, resulting in a 74% response rate. Hence we can be confident that our data for the current Dutch SNEs are representative (Babbie 1992: 267). In-depth interviews were conducted with eight of these officials, selected on the basis of the range of responses they gave, with the aim of covering the broadest range with a small number of respondents.

The former SNEs were reached using the snowballing method due to the absence of complete records. Out of a population of 91 former SNEs, we

were able to contact 51,³⁰ and 44 of the contacted former SNEs filled in the questionnaire (a response rate of 86%). The use of snowball rather than random sampling does not pose great problems for interpreting the results, since we only report frequencies, means and medians in our analysis. In addition, 20 in-depth interviews have been conducted with this group of respondents. The item non-response rate was low for the surveys, the poorest item score was 78 respondents. The survey questions have been streamlined to enable comparison between the two groups of SNEs. The former SNEs have been asked questions regarding their secondment period and their current functions to enable cross-time comparisons.³¹

5.3 Demand and supply: The Dutch and the expert secondment system

The growing number of tasks accorded to the European level of governance over the years has brought up the need for more staff, which has led the European Commission to increasingly resort to external assistance through temporary employment arrangements, partly due to budgetary stringency and partly to changing agendas that require extra expertise. There are 22,543 officials working for the Commission, 6,868 of whom are external or temporary staff.³² Seconded national experts number 1,077, but their relative weight is better understood when one takes into consideration that their number equals 9.7% of the total number of 11,052 policy officials (Administrator/A-level officials), i.e., the highest level of Commission officials.

The primary aim of the secondment system is to inject into the Commission the high level of professional knowledge in a specific area of expertise and work experience in the member state the national experts possess, especially in areas where such expertise is lacking within the Commission's rank and file. The potential benefit for the national administrations in return is that SNEs increase their expertise at the European/international level while gaining insider knowledge on the institutional set-up and functioning of the EU, which, one presumes, they take back to their administrations.

SNEs are typically seconded from the administrations (national, regional or local) of EU member states, though the Commission also recruits experts from the private and voluntary sectors or international organisations where their expertise is needed. SNE vacancies are usually made public by informing the Permanent Representations of member states in Brussels, which subsequently contact the respective national authorities. The recruiting Commission unit receives the applications of SNE candidates from the

member states, makes a shortlist and selects an SNE, usually as a result of an interview. The secondment lasts between six months and four years during which the SNE is remunerated by their home employer and receives compensation from the Commission for the extra costs incurred by living and working abroad.³³ Whereas it is a relatively cheap matter to hire experts for the Commission, Dutch government organisations, for instance, invest an estimated total of three million euros annually through continued salaries on seconded officials.³⁴

From the outset, SNEs have a double allegiance: they are employees of their home organisation (financially and officially), but they work under the instructions of the European Commission. SNEs are obliged to behave solely in the interests of the Commission and not to accept any instructions or duties from their home government or organisation. But they do not have the authority to represent the Commission or to enter into any commitments on behalf of the Commission.³⁵ This double role is further exacerbated by the fact that the entire secondment system is based on the assumption that SNEs return to their home organisation after the termination of their secondment. SNEs cannot escape the permanent balancing act this arrangement entails. As one interviewee stated: 'The Commission is my boss, but I will return, so I do take Dutch interests into consideration. For instance, I am careful with my criticisms of the Netherlands. On the other hand, the more you sound like a representative of the Netherlands, the less authority you wield in the Commission. So you have to be objective.'³⁶

The Commission is organised primarily according to sector and function, which makes it structurally comparable to a national administration. What differentiates the Commission is its multinational staff. In order to prevent any particular nationalities from dominating the ranks of the Commission, the organisation has from the beginning respected a 'geographical balance' rule whereby the number of staff employed by the Commission reflects approximately the population size to ensure a legitimate composition. Dutch officials currently make up 3.3% of the total and 4% of A-level officials of the Commission. The Netherlands comprises 3.6% of the EU population and 4% of the weighted Council votes. Thus, the Dutch share of Commission officials is largely in proportion to its geographical entitlement. Until recently, however, the Netherlands was under-represented within the Commission bureaucracy. This under-representation partially stemmed from the fact that the entrance exam for permanent officials, the *concours*, was difficult to pass for Dutch candidates because competitive examinations are fairly unknown in the Dutch educational system. This led

POLICY AREA	DIRECTORATE-GENERAL	FREQUENCY PERCENT	
Market-oriented	DG Competition	9	
	DG Internal Market and Services	7	
	DG Economic and Financial Affairs	4	
	DG Enterprise	4	
	Total	24	26.7%
Social Regulation	DG Environment	7	
	DG Health and Consumer Protection	5	
	DG Employment	4	
	DG Justice	4	
	DG Education and Culture	1	
	Total	21	23.3%
Supply side	DG Transport and Energy	7	
	DG Research	5	
	DG Taxation and Customs Union	4	
	DG Information Society and Media	3	
	Total	19	21.1%
Administration	Eurostat	4	
	DG Budget	2	
	Secretariat-General	2	
	Legal Service	2	
	OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office)	1	
	Total	11	12.2%
External affairs	DG External Relations	3	
	DG Trade	3	
	DG Enlargement	2	
	Total	8	8.9%
Provision	DG Agriculture	5	
	DG Development	2	
	Total	7	7.8%
		N= 90	100%

Table 5.1 Commission Directorate-Generals as SNE Receivers

the Dutch government to take active measures aimed at increasing the number of Dutch officials, e.g., by introducing training courses for the *con-cours* and appointing an official to the Dutch EU Permanent Representation responsible for co-ordinating Dutch appointments to EU institutions.³⁷

Secondments, meanwhile, have been a safe way to secure Dutch posts. Furthermore, the secondment system allows the country to send the 'right people' to Brussels and to create a good image so that the Commission actually requests Dutch SNEs.³⁸ The Dutch SNE policy seems to have reached this target since the Netherlands is currently the home of 62 SNEs to the European Commission, which comprises 5.8% of the SNE population. This, however, is not exclusively due to government strategy. There are two other factors that help to explain the relative over-representation of Dutch officials among SNEs. One is the proximity of the Netherlands to Belgium, which makes it possible to keep one foot in the home country during the secondment. The personal lives of potential Dutch SNEs suffer less than those of their colleagues from further afield.³⁹ Secondly and perhaps more importantly, is the fact that the Netherlands has a high level of expertise in the fields sought by the Commission, such as transport, research, environment, agriculture and financial markets.⁴⁰ Table 5.1 indicates the distribution of respondent SNEs across policy areas and Commission DGs.

The table shows that half of the respondents were deployed within either the market-oriented or the social regulation DGs, and that the top four receiving DGs were DG Competition, DG Internal Market and Service, DG Environment and DG Transport and Energy.

Looking at the ministries and agencies that provide SNEs, the percentages by policy area are somewhat different than the percentages per policy area for the receiving DGs. These differences are accounted for by the differences in organisational arrangements between the EU and Dutch central administration level.

POLICY AREA	MINISTRY	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Market-oriented	FIN (Ministry of Finance)	13	
	EZ (Ministry of Economic Affairs)	9	
	NMA (Competition Authority)	3	
	DNB (National Reserve Bank)	3	
	AFM (Financial Markets Authority)	1	
	OPTA (Telecom Authority)	1	
	Total	29	33%
Provision	LNV (Ministry of Agriculture)	14	
	Productschap Akkerbouw (Arable Farming Commodity Board)	2	
	Total	16	18%
Social Regulation	SoZaWe (Ministry of Social Affairs)	5	
	MinJus (Ministry of Justice)	4	
	VROM (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment)	3	
	VWS (Ministry of Health)	1	
	BVE Raad (Educational Board)	1	
	OCW (Ministry of Education)	1	
	Total	16	18%
Supply side	VandW (Ministry of Transport)	9	
	Senter (Office for Sustainability and Innovation)	1	
	Syntens (Entrepreneurial Innovation Office)	1	
	Agentschap Douane (Customs Office)	1	
	TNO (Institute for Applied Sciences)	1	
	FOM (Foundation for Fundamental Research on Matter)	1	
	European Science Foundation	1	
	Total	15	17%
	External affairs	BuZa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	9
Administration	CBS (Statistical Bureau)	3	
	CPB (Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis)	1	
	Total	4	4%
		N= 89	100%

Table 5.2 Dutch ministries and agencies as SNE Providers

Not surprisingly, the top five suppliers of SNEs are the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Safety, the Ministry of Finance (including the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration), the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There is a clear parallel between the organisations that are key providers of SNEs and the organisations with the highest density of Europeanised civil servants (chapter 2). Four out of the top five suppliers of SNEs feature in the cluster of 'Eurocratic bulwarks', the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Administration being the only exceptions as Eurocratic runners-up. This can be seen as strengthening the validity of the 'league table of EU-ness' of Dutch public organisations presented in chapter 2.

5.4 Profiling the Dutch expert contingent

Who are the Dutch SNEs? Based on our survey and interview data, we construct a profile of Dutch SNEs with respect to their education level, age and rank prior to secondment, and type of home organisation.

Based on the nature of the activities of SNE positions and on the interview responses, we infer that all SNEs are highly educated (HBO-level and up) and that the overwhelming majority holds a university degree (Bachelors/Masters/PhD). Of the total group of respondents, 38% started their secondment between the ages of 25 and 34, 33% between the ages of 35 and 44, 21% between 45 and 54, and 8% over 55. The average age at the start of secondment was 40. This indicates that the Dutch government seconds predominantly young to middle-age officials who are presumably at the beginning or in the middle of their careers. With respect to the rank of an SNE upon secondment, some interesting patterns can be observed, as shown in table 5.3.

About 63% of the SNEs were in ranks 10 to 12 prior to the start of their secondment, 31% were in ranks 13 and 14, and 6% were in ranks 15 and 16. The average prior rank among the total group of SNEs was 12.47. These figures seem to underline the assertion that EU-level activity among national civil servants is more the domain of middle-level civil servants than of top-ranking civil servants, (Noordegraaf 2000; 't Hart et al. 2002). The trend that the frequency of SNEs decreases as rank increases is largely explained by the fact that SNE positions are mostly policy-making posts, and policy preparation becomes increasingly less common as a main activity for civil servants

	FORMER SNEs	CURRENT SNEs	TOTAL
Higher civil servants (Ranks: 10-12)	28 (66.7%)	24 (58.5%)	52 (62.7%)
Senior civil servants (Ranks: 13-14)	14 (33.3%)	12 (29.3%)	26 (31.3%)
Top civil servants (Ranks: 15-16)	0 (0%)	5 (12.2%)	5 (6.0%)
TOTAL	42 (100%)	41 (100%)	N=83 (100%)

Table 5.3 Ranks of Dutch SNEs at the time of secondment

in ranks 14 and above.⁴³ In section 5.6, we will return to the issue of rank, within the framework of the discussion on career development through the secondment system.

In the previous section, we already indicated the distribution of SNEs in terms of their home organisations (table 5.1). Introducing the dichotomy of executive agency vs. policy department (see also chapter 2), we observe that 76% of all respondents originated from policy departments, and 24% from executive agencies. Apart from the fact that part of this difference is explained by the fact that most SNE positions are policy positions and many fewer are executive positions, assuming that the share of SNEs delivered by each type of organisation is a valid indicator of EU involvement, our findings are analogous with the conclusion found in chapter 2.3.2, namely that policy departments are more involved in EU affairs than executive agencies.

With respect to the duration of the secondment, we observe that 17% of the SNEs were seconded for less than a year, 34% for a period between one and two years, 30% between two and three years, and 19% between three and four years.⁴⁴ So, the large majority of SNEs remains at the Commission for about two years. A two-year stay is bound to provide enough time to supply substantive contributions to the work in the Commission and to constitute a substantial improvement for the individual SNE in terms of skills and knowledge on the EU. If we consider the fact that 49% of Dutch SNEs stay in the Commission between two to four years, this period of time is presumably also long enough to build a network at the EU, if not at the transna-

tional level. Does the secondment period translate into returns for the SNEs and the Dutch government in terms of networks and knowledge and can the Dutch SNEs exchange their value-added for better career opportunities which involve them using this EU know-who and know-how?

5.5 Knowing how and knowing who: Networking

We borrow our definitions of transnational policy networks from the multi-level governance literature where the role of informal bargaining between a very wide variety of actors (individuals and institutions, public and private, local, regional, national, European, international) is suggested to be at least as decisive as formal power relations. *Policy networks* are defined here as ‘more or less stable sets of public and private organisational actors, linked to each other by communication and by the exchange of resources, such as information and expertise’ (Jönsson et al. 1998: 326). They consist of the contacts, ties and connections between actors that develop as a complement to formal institutional relations. The emergence of these networks is conditional upon the development of personal relations between relevant actors, which in turn depends on their frequency of interaction. As such, policy networks bring together individuals originating from different fields of knowledge and social environments.

The significance of policy networks within EU governance is twofold: ‘*know-how*’ and ‘*know-who*’, i.e., an actor needs to have thorough substantive knowledge, as well as knowledge of the organisations, procedures, and individuals who shape the policy environment (Jönsson and Strömvik 2005: 18). Furthermore, these networks are *transnational* and involve both governmental and non-governmental policy actors. Experts may be linked with one another by means of vertical (i.e., across levels of governance), horizontal (i.e., across policy sectors and/or across government, corporate and research organisations) and potentially also diagonal (i.e., cutting through both vertical and horizontal orderings) relations (Slaughter 2004, see also chapter 1). These multilateral network links allow bureaucrats at various levels of governance to prepare and implement policies assisted by organised interests supplying technically relevant expertise. This is the essence of network governance (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999).

To investigate to what extent SNEs form a bridge between their own member state and the European Commission, we asked both groups of SNEs questions involving the frequency of their reliance on their network in the Netherlands and the Commission. A majority of current Dutch SNEs

(53.3%) reported drawing upon the network they built in the Netherlands prior to their secondment once a week. Another 47.7% said they were approached monthly by their former colleagues at the Dutch organisation they worked for. Only 18.2% of the former SNEs were approached weekly and 34.1% monthly by their former colleagues during their secondment period. Clearly, the current Dutch SNEs have more frequent contacts with their network in the Netherlands. Their contacts also involve sending written information to their home organisation – 53.3% have such contacts monthly.

What does this network entail, however? To what extent do SNEs build up and become part of transnational networks extending to different administrative levels in different member states, to non-state players, and other EU and international organisations? Or are they just individual bridges between the Commission and the member state they come from? And, since policy networks are assumed to be relatively stable and persistent; what happens to these networks after the secondment period? To what extent do the bridges remain intact?

Who's in the loop?

We will first look at the frequency of SNE contacts across different levels and actors. Since the scale employed does not have equal intervals, we use the median to compare the results.

Survey Questions:

- **Current SNEs:** How frequently do you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following during your secondment?
- **Former SNEs:** How frequently did you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following during your secondment? / How frequently do you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following in your current function?

Answer categories: Once per day=5, Once per week=4, Once per month=3, Once per year=2, Never=1

	Median: Current SNEs	Median: Former SNEs during secondment	Median: Former SNEs in current function
Colleagues within other DGs	4	4	
SNEs from:			
- The Netherlands	3	3	3
- Other member states	4	4	
Other EU institutions	3	3	2
Other international organisations	3	3	2
The Dutch EU Permanent Representation	3	3	1
EU Permanent Representations of other member states	2	2	1
<hr/>			
Dutch national administration:			
- Own policy sector	4	3	4
- Other policy sectors	2	2	3
<hr/>			
National administrations of other member states:			
- Own policy sector	3	3	2
- Other policy sectors	1	1	1
<hr/>			
Representatives of regional governments from:			
- The Netherlands	1	1	1
- Other member states	1	1	1
<hr/>			
Representatives of local governments from:			
- The Netherlands	1	1	1
- Other member states	1	1	1
<hr/>			
Representatives of the private sector from:			
- The Netherlands	3	3	3
- Other member states	2.5	2	1
<hr/>			
Representatives of NGOs from:			
- The Netherlands	1	2	1
- Other member states	1	2	1
<hr/>			
Universities or research institutes from:			
- The Netherlands	2	2	2
- Other member states	2	2	1

Table 5.4 Frequency of Dutch SNE contacts

If we concentrate on the medians higher than 2, since this offers the most regular contacts, we see that only a few actors actually fall into this category. The most frequent contacts are within the Commission and with the Dutch national administration within the officials' own policy sector. Other EU institutions, international organisations, the Dutch EU Permanent Representation, and sectoral contacts with other member states are the most forthcoming contact points in the supranational and national arena. The non-governmental aspect among the SNE networks is occupied by Dutch, and to a lesser extent, by European business.

The figures for the contacts of past SNEs during their secondment follow a similar pattern with few exceptions.⁴⁷ When we turn to the network patterns of former SNEs in their current function, however, we see that their contacts are clustered predominantly within the Dutch national administration. Meanwhile, the Commission and Dutch business figures are the other most forthcoming network partners. The results clearly show that the only lasting transnational or supranational networks for SNEs are within the Commission.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these observations. The SNE secondment system does stimulate the formation of transnational networks, but applying these data to the three types of network relations set out in this article, we see that the network connections fall largely under the vertical dimension of network relations, to a lesser degree under the horizontal dimension, and only to a very limited extent under the diagonal dimension of network relations. Therefore, the SNEs do indeed form bridges between the Commission and the member state and provide a channel for the flow of information, ideas and contacts.

Networking as strategic behaviour

How do the SNEs fulfil this bridging function in practice? Of the three avenues for strategic behaviour available to member-state governments, signalling, frontloading and the coalition-building introduced in chapter 3, SNEs play a significant role in the first two. SNEs, especially in the pre-proposal stage, can use their position within the Commission and the wider networks to influence the content of proposals.⁴⁸ As one SNE emphasised, 'Apart from the SNEs, The Hague has no access whatsoever to what happens in the early stages of the Commission's legislative process.'⁴⁹

SNEs facilitate signalling in the sense that they offer easy access points for national civil servants and officials at the Permanent Representation so that they can pursue certain national interests or concerns within the Com-

mission apparatus and vice versa. When Dutch government officials begin seeking an access point within the Commission, they first seek out a fellow-national to talk to.⁵⁰ This usually means an SNE, who plays the role of a switchboard within the Commission. Roughly half of former SNEs and the majority of the current SNEs (63% of the interview respondents) indicate they were relatively frequently used as an 'EU helpdesk' for the members of their home organisations. Words they use to describe their role include: 'feeler', 'resonance box', 'ambassador', 'antenna', 'brainstorming partner' but also 'missionary' and 'infiltrator'.

The practice of signalling rests on trust-based reciprocity, and the necessary level of trust can stem from nationality or previous trust-generating interactions. In this sense, the SNE networks make the flow of information between the Commission and the member state possible:

I have personal contacts with my former colleagues. My Ministry approaches me first. I discuss the issues with colleagues who call. The other way around, when there is a new strategy I will first sound out ideas with colleagues in the Netherlands in order to use existent knowledge in the Netherlands within the ministries.⁵¹

Signalling can thus work in two directions:

Your SNE position makes it possible to notify colleagues at home, so that they can anticipate the Commission's course of action. For instance, they can prepare sabotage strategies, proposals for amendment or forge alliances. In some cases, the timing of a member state entering the policy game is decided by the SNE.⁵²

In terms of the Commission, both the network and the experience of the SNE at the national level are valuable for the Commission because:

... the permanent officials do not need to have any experience or network at the national administration level. This is the value-added of an SNE. At the end of the day, the Commission focuses on member states, so it is important to have a network within these member states. Furthermore, the officials have no experience with practice. As an SNE, you learn a lot about what happens on the ground in practice. That is a big asset. You just know how it works and how things are implemented.⁵³

It is in the Commission's interest to know what the member state is considering.⁵⁴ In turn, the information is then channelled to the Commission which can thus be used as input on a proposal.

The importance of SNEs with respect to frontloading, is even more crucial, given that the appointment of SNEs within a specific DG is the central instrument for this type of strategic behaviour. That the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, among others, sends its officials to strategic positions in the Commission, as argued in chapter 3, finds support in the account of an SNE seconded from this ministry:

Your influence depends on your position. I work in the field of phytosanitary and veterinary trade barriers. Of course, the Netherlands has a strategic interest in this area. It is interesting to see how the Commission deals with this issue. As an exporting country, it is very important to have someone at such a strategic position within the Commission, both for the Netherlands and for my own Ministry.⁵⁵

In short: strategic appointments in view of certain important dossiers are a pivotal method of frontloading.

The other two mechanisms through which frontloading is secured as a strategic route are (a) through instructions from superior; and (b) as a result of the national-cultural perspective taken by the SNE in question on the policy issue. Dutch SNEs claim that they do not receive any direct instructions from the Dutch government, which is quite different from SNEs of other member states:

There are countries with an SNE policy. The UK sends instructions and influences opinion-building with position papers. The French SNEs are also given follow-ups. The Netherlands does this less. You sometimes end up reading the national position by chance in a newsletter.⁵⁶

While some SNEs believe they should exert national influence, others believe the influence should be exercised by the Dutch Permanent Representation instead.⁵⁷ In that sense, some SNEs seem to totally endorse their Commission identity: 'Expertise is the most important. We are not the member state representatives here. They are in the Council.'⁵⁸

Still, the secondment system offers the member state the opportunity to support EU files with its own people.⁵⁹ This happens via the direct involve-

ment of SNEs in the Commission. They can ‘make the Dutch voice heard in Brussels.’⁶⁰ This is actually what our Dutch SNE respondents consider the frontloading method, which is much more common and much more appropriate in terms of exercising influence. The Ministry does not need to dictate to SNEs since they already have an indirect influence over them by way of the process of ‘thinking as a Dutchman’.⁶¹ This is also a transparent national method, since the proposal drafted by a Dutch SNE still needs to pass through all the official EU procedures. Thus, this viewpoint gets locked into the proposal and might be altered at various junctures, but the general spirit rarely changes substantially. In other words, the first blow is half the battle, and SNEs play a pivotal role in enabling member-states to strike that first blow.

With respect to the contribution to the policy process, the nationality of an SNE influences his or her way of thinking:⁶² ‘Although you never have a substantial mandate, what you do bring to the table in the policy-making process is a Dutch point of view on the policy issue in question.’⁶³ As another SNE observed:

The SNE brings his own experience, way of thinking, and problem-solving strategy to the Commission, all of which have been developed within a specific framework of one’s home country. Once you are faced with real policy issues at the Commission, the first reflex is to fall back into one’s old routines. As time goes by, he may place issues within a wider, more European framework, but still the SNE’s prior experience – or even the tradition he comes from – continues to play a large role.⁶⁴

Furthermore, many SNEs reported that while they were seconded they continued to follow the Dutch media (newspapers, television, etc.) and that for a considerable part, their social lives remained more centred in the Netherlands than in Brussels. As a result of the stronger links that SNEs have with their home countries compared to permanent Commission officials, SNEs are also better able to reflect the stakes of a member state and to anticipate national policy positions.⁶⁵ An interesting distinction that both current and former SNEs made is the one between Dutch permanent Commission officials and SNEs. Permanent Dutch officials have reportedly far less direct contact with officials at the national administration level than SNEs. At the same time, SNEs perceive permanent officials as being more independent in relation to their member’s home country. This seems to indicate that the width and depth of an official’s network in the member state does not de-

pend so much on an official's nationality, but more on whether the official is pre-socialised in a national context and whether the official is legally bound to the national administration.

One SNE noted that the national perspective taken by the SNE serves the benefit of the Commission, too:

It is very common to present the problems or positions of your member-state. I was also regularly approached by other Commission civil servants who wanted to put out their feelers in the early stages to find out whether or not a specific proposal would be greeted with enthusiasm by the Netherlands. So, the presence of SNEs allows for a smoother and quicker policy process because SNEs are normally well aware of various national positions.⁶⁶

However, it should be noted that the mere presence of SNEs within the various DGs does not automatically lead to a successful outcome and that the degree of success is contingent upon the degree of co-ordination of SNE activity from the national department and the effectiveness of the SNE in mobilising his or her network to influence the authors of a policy proposal. This leads to the situation where member states have the opportunity to have an impact on the policy-making process if they can second their civil servants purposefully and strategically. The Dutch government seems to have adopted this strategic approach with the aim of gaining more access to the EU by building and sharing experiences through the secondment system.⁶⁷

However, roughly half of the former SNEs reported that there was not enough interest on the part of their seconding organisation for the potential gains that secondment could have for these organisations. 'Out of sight, out of mind', was a very frequent description of the perceived attitude of the sending organisation towards the SNE during the secondment. Many pointed out that it was they who had to take the initiative of contacting their home ministry, and that the ministry did not make enough use of their presence in the Commission. The situation may be changing, however: our data signals a difference between the current and the former SNEs in terms of the degree of contact between the home organisation and the SNE during secondment (see table 5.4). It seems that the contacts between SNEs and their home organisations have indeed increased over the past few years. A second conceivable explanation for this variation is the potential propensity by officials to think more positively about 'the relationship with their home organisation during their secondment' *while* they are seconded rather than

after their return, given that many respondents were disappointed by the treatment they received from their home organisations upon return, which seems to be common as the following sections suggest.

Do SNE networks persist?

The empirical evidence above demonstrates the bridging function of seconded officials *during* their secondment. However, the lasting effects of the secondment system can only be assessed by addressing the question of whether the bridge remains intact after the secondment. Using the knowledge and networks they acquired during the secondment is the most crucial payoff of the secondment system for the member state government: 'When you know the internal procedures of the EU, you can anticipate instead of reacting. Your Commission network allows to keep on anticipating. This is perhaps more important than anything else. The ministries, in turn, acquire more of an understanding of what can be done and what cannot.'⁶⁸

Several respondents observed that building up and maintaining a network with people at the Commission level is easier than maintaining a network with officials at the national level. The organisational culture at the Commission level is apparently more open to establishing longer-term professional and social contacts than the organisational culture in their Dutch home organisations.⁶⁹ Since not all SNEs originate from within the Dutch central government, but also from agencies and semi-governmental institutions, the secondment system can also help create networks between the SNE and governmental actors at the national level, which may become beneficial once the secondment has ended.

Our findings convincingly show, however, that although the expertise of Dutch ministries/authorities flows largely toward the Commission, the Dutch administration does not always get the EU expertise back. In other words, the bridge is often one-way: only 27 of 43 (62.8%) former SNEs from our sample still work for the organisation they worked for prior to their secondment.⁷⁰

This means that network ties in turn also seem to grow weaker once an SNE returns – 27.5% of the former SNEs stated that they continue to use the network they established during their secondment in their current function at least once a month while another 25% use it only once a year, and 17.5% do not use their Commission network at all.

It is also striking that current SNEs expressed relatively high hopes regarding the degree to which they believe they will be able to professionally utilise their networks, while the majority of former SNEs demonstrated

their disappointment with respect to how much they actually use their networks in their present jobs since their secondment. Given that many former SNEs also reported that they had considerable expectations in this respect before and during their secondment, we interpret these differences as an indication of overly optimistic prospects on the part of current SNEs rather than an increase in the levels of opportunities to utilise acquired networks upon their return to their home administrations.

During the interviews with former SNEs, many respondents indicated that their networks within and, when applicable, outside the Commission had grown outdated and were thus of little or no use. This is remarkable, considering that the secondments of our respondents had ended on average only two years earlier. In most cases, the reason for their networks becoming outdated was the fact that their first job after the secondment did not require their networks. A considerable number of these respondents noted that while they made little to no use of their established networks professionally, they did maintain personal contacts with their secondment colleagues.

Some of these respondents, with current jobs that do not enable them to make formal professional use of their networks, did indicate that the personal contacts they maintained did yield some information, which may or may not have a bearing on their current employment, although some of it was sometimes of interest to their organisations. They were convinced that their present colleagues for whom this information might be relevant did not get the same information as timely: 'Through my network at the Commission I get information about issues that no one else within my organisation has access to;' ⁷¹ and 'It is always nice to have more information on an issue or receive it earlier than your boss, for instance. Because I know a number of people at the Commission, I get this informational advantage vis-à-vis my boss.'⁷² These respondents reported networks form a more personal and indirect way back into their organisations.

Others who felt their network had, to some extent, dissolved indicated that a large part of their network had already left Brussels as well, and that they did not have new contact information for most of these people. Nevertheless, respondents who indicated that their networks were outdated did acknowledge that their secondments and their familiarity with the structures of the Commission gave them an advantage in building up new networks in their current jobs.

On the contrary, former SNEs with jobs that still have a good connection at the Commission reported that the benefits of their acquired networks

were substantial. This indicates a positive correlation between, on the one hand, the degree of compatibility between the jobs SNEs had during secondment and the jobs they now held, and, on the other hand, the degree to which officials have been able to maintain their networks and utilise them professionally.

5.6 Life after secondment: SNEs and their careers

If the Dutch government wants the benefits of its investments in the SNEs not only during but *after* their secondment, there needs to be a proactive career planning programme for the SNEs upon their return. The reality, however, has been quite different. First, since only 62.8% of SNEs actually return, it is clear that the current 'return guarantee' is insufficient to ensure any return on investment.

SNE interviewees have pointed out the gap between expectations built up in Brussels and the reality upon their return to The Hague. The high expectations stem from the fact that SNEs feel they grow enormously during their secondments and expect to be rewarded for this upon their return. The reality is often quite different, so much so that current SNEs tend to be concerned about their futures based on their knowledge of their predecessors' fates:

The return policy is an important issue. SNEs gain substantial and practical knowledge at the EU institutions. There is currently no management system in place to take care of what happens after secondment. Secondment is not a promotion. Until now, SNEs have not been rewarded upon return. Some have been promoted away. Now that the number of SNEs has doubled, it is time to overhaul the policies concerning returning SNEs. After all, secondment should be good for your career.⁷³

However, when looking at their national careers upon their return, we see that secondment entails stagnation, since SNEs maintain the same rank during the entire secondment period regardless of their personal growth. They return to the same job and rank, which constitutes a relative loss of opportunity for many who would have otherwise had a chance for promotion.⁷⁴ At the same time, their peers at the ministry in The Hague continue to rise among the ranks, as they are still visible to their superiors at the ministry whereas the SNE in Brussels also becomes also 'out of sight and out of

mind' in terms of their career planning. In the words of an SNE: 'In the Netherlands, they are not sitting and waiting for you. They say: "Are you still alive? We have to find something for you." So it is not good for your career in the Netherlands.'⁷⁵

The fears of the current SNEs find life in the experience of former SNEs. One observation seems to represent the sentiments of a large number of former SNE's:

Beforehand I expected that the secondment would offer me additional career opportunities, but as it turned out, this was by no means the case. For those who managed to get a permanent position with the Commission afterwards, it has obviously paid off. But all the people I know that have been seconded are disappointed in terms of the supposed advantage that they were to get out of their secondment. No wonder that most of them leave within a year after they have returned to work elsewhere where their Brussels experience does get valued.⁷⁶

Former SNEs were asked whether they believed that their secondment had offered them any career advancement, 51% answered negatively.⁷⁷

Comparing the present ranks of former SNEs with the ranks they had just before being seconded, it turns out that among those who were seconded in the period 2000-2005, 57% were still at the same rank, 29% had moved up one rank, while 11% had moved up two ranks (the remaining 3% represents one individual who had actually been demoted one rank). In other words, of the former SNEs included in our study, 60% had not been significantly promoted, during or since the completion of their secondment. The average upward mobility among this group during an average period of 3.75 years was by 0.49 in rank. Although we have not been able to compare this figure with national civil servants of the same age, educational level and organisation during the same period, this rate of upward mobility is by no means spectacular.

As long as this image is sustained and there is no concrete career planning, the SNEs will continue to take steps in their career that ultimately decrease their chance of returning to their original ministry employers. Their old positions do not offer enough challenges, which urges many to begin searching for alternative employment, whether it is in Brussels or in the private sector in the Netherlands.

CURRENT SECTOR	RETURN to PREVIOUS ORGANISATION		Frequency (Percent)
	Yes	No	
Public	25	4	29 (67.4%)
Semi-public	2	3	5 (11.6%)
Private	0	4	4 (9.3%)
Public international (Commission, IO)	0	3	3 (7.0%)
None (Retired)	0	2	2 (4.7%)
TOTAL	27 (62.8%)	16 (27.2%)	N= 43

Table 5.5 SNE return rate after secondment

As the figures for the former SNEs show, SNEs who do not return to their home organisation make career moves in various directions.

One remarkable exception here is the Ministry of Agriculture SNEs. This ‘Eurocratic bulwark’ ministry in particular scores very high in terms of luring its SNEs back: of the eight Agriculture SNEs, seven of them are still working for the ministry. This is because, interviewees pointed out, the Ministry of Agriculture has a more consistent policy regarding their SNEs. While some did end up in their old positions, others obtained promotions to positions that matched their profiles.⁷⁸ Thus the Ministry’s reputation as a true ‘Eurocratic bulwark’ (see chapter 2) also applies to its career management of its SNEs.

On the whole, however, a secondment with the Commission can hardly be seen as a route to career advancement for those involved. Being seconded has actually had a negative career effect, at least for some of the SNEs who were seconded in the early years of the 21st century. This is not a typical Dutch phenomenon. A survey among former SNEs from various member states conducted in 2002 shows that problems regarding career advancement were a general phenomenon associated with the entire secondment system.⁷⁹

5.7 An under-utilised asset: Conclusions

Our empirical data on Dutch former and current SNEs show that SNEs do build bridges between the EU and the member state via their roles in forming and sometimes maintaining policy networks in EU governance. These

contacts between the Commission and national ministries allow the member state to signal and frontload its positions and viewpoints into the policy proposals of the Commission through its SNEs. This, however, should not be interpreted as a direct national influence. Firstly, the Commission welcomes the experience, networks and input of the SNEs because the success of policy proposals depends on the member states themselves. SNEs also stress how loyal they are to the Commission during their secondment. Secondly, the influence is exercised fairly indirectly through the SNE's own thought processes which they characterise as having been shaped by their national background and upbringing. Thirdly, there is an entire chain of command before the SNE's draft proposal reaches the upper levels of the Commission where sections of the proposal may be modified. Finally, other than the distinction between national or EU interests, the role of expertise itself may be a third significant variable. Experts working within transnational networks develop distinct professional norms and values. Although this study does not take this factor into account, future contributions to this field could benefit from the inclusion of the role of expertise as a source of substantive preferences. On the whole, however, secondment seems still to be a legitimate and valued exchange system of officials for both the Commission and the member states.

However, our study has also demonstrated that not all of the hopes people have for the secondment system are fulfilled and the long-term benefits of these networks are often fairly limited, which can be perceived as an opportunity loss for the seconding member states. Many former SNEs do not land in jobs that allow them to draw upon their Commission networks; many do not return to their original home organisations.

Since networks are more dependent upon individuals than positions within an organisation, the enhanced trust and frank exchange may persist after someone changes position. The conditions under which this persistence is more or less likely to occur remains uncultivated research territory. These networks can facilitate decision-making by dispatching more and more national experts onto the supranational level and subsequently reabsorbing these same experts back into one's national administration (see Beyers and Kerremans 2004).

In this chapter, we have identified a number of mechanisms through which SNEs can potentially play a linking role between the Commission and the member state. The secondment system does indeed facilitate information flows and, in specific cases, influences an intricate web of relations across the formal institutional structures of the EU and its member states.

The results of the Dutch case, however, show that the SNEs are not optimally utilised. Even though the recent efforts of the Dutch government have led to increased levels of contact between the SNEs and their 'home base', there is still much room for improvement. When considering how the benefits of the secondment system can be made to endure after the secondment period, the career paths of the officials after their secondment are a crucial factor. At present, expertise and networks fade quickly as experts, quite literally, 'move on.' Better career planning for the SNEs would prevent this from happening and maximise the benefits for the member state.

