

**PAPER**

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**WHO IS BIG IN BRUSSELS?****Contact:****Head of Research, Catharina Sørensen****+45 21 54 88 21****cas@thinkeuropa.dk**

*RESUME How come some small member states in the EU have more influence over policy-making than their size suggests they should have? This informal fact of EU-cooperation is repeatedly insinuated by expert observers, surveys and scorecards, such as those by the European Council on Foreign Relations. Here, Sweden and the Netherlands, for instance, are believed to have more influence than more populous countries such as Italy or Romania. While the Franco-German duo may be the EU's undisputed powerhouse, there is no linear relationship between size and influence over EU policy among the smaller member states.*

*While a small member state can do nothing about its geography, it can do something about its representation. It is up to each member state whether to be big in the Brussels machinery. In a new survey, we rank the member states' permanent representations in Brussels when it comes to size, composition of staff and duration of secondments. We find that on these parameters, countries like Ireland and Finland appear overall in a better position to fight for their national interest than countries like Denmark or Latvia.*

*Research suggests that small member states try to compensate for their size by developing smart state strategies, such as the state as lobbyist, or the state as norm-entrepreneur. But to do so, they need to work harder and faster. In this respect, the size and composition of their permanent representation in Brussels matters. To punch above your weight, you need the manpower and the right staff in place.*

One of the defining features of integration within the European Union is that small and large member states are united under shared institutions and a common legal framework. In several respects, the Union's smallest member state – Malta, with less than half a million citizens – has exactly the same rights as its largest member state – Germany, with 82.8 million citizens. This is the case, for example, with respect to representation in the European Commission, or in treaty- and framework budget decisions.

In other respects, size gives larger member states a significant advantage in the EU. Large states – defined by the size of their population – possess higher numbers of votes in qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers. They have more members of the European Parliament. They tend to have a larger GDP, and hence more financial and administrative resources. And, consequently, large states often enjoy representation in key global forums, such as the UN's Security Council, or the G7/G20 formations.

Smaller member states, thus, have a natural disadvantage compared to larger member states when it comes to the likelihood of influencing EU-politics. But they are not left powerless. Small member states can resort to a number of 'smart state' strategies to maximize their influence in the EU. These include 'the state as lobbyist', where the state is at the forefront of, and tries to influence, all steps of the policy process, or 'the state as norm entrepreneur', where it seeks to position itself as a model of good practice in a field of interest in order to sway partners.<sup>1</sup>

Denmark, a small member state, served as *norm entrepreneur* with respect to the introduction of a specific treaty base for environmental policy in the Single European Act in 1986. Prior to this treaty, the EU was only able to legislate on environmental issues if there was a clear link to single market regulation (e.g. discrimination). With the new article, legislation with the specific purpose to protect the environment became possible. A long-standing frontrunner on protecting the environment, Denmark was the leading driver of this development and able to convince its partners of the importance of the move with reference to its own track record in environmental policy.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we draw mainly upon Caroline Grøn & Anders Wivel (2011): Maximizing Influence in the European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: From Small State Policy to Smart State Strategy, *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 33, No. 5, 523-539; Martin Marcussen (2016): Danmarks stemme i EU forsvinder, *RÆSON*, 9. marts; and Diana Panke (2015): Small states in EU decision-making. How can they be effective, In Balderstein & Keating: Small states in the modern world, Edward Edgar publishing.

A successful smart state strategy necessitates that small states are at the forefront of the policy agenda, possess expert knowledge on strategic fields, and that they themselves serve as a leading example of best practices. They have to work hard(er) and fast(er) and develop network capital to be heard and seen in Brussels, where the speed of policy making is fast and competition for attention is fierce. But, as some researchers argue, in this ‘Tom and Jerry’ way, the small and smart may sometimes trump the big.<sup>2</sup>

Duration of EU-membership plays a role, as practice and experience can help small states develop policy expertise and the right networks. But another key to success is more straightforward: It is about putting enough resources into the game. To build-up and maintain the essential networks and to be successful in lobbying for its interests, the small state needs, to start with, to possess sufficient staff in its permanent representation to the EU in Brussels. This permanent representation, or ‘perm-rep’, is where member states negotiate and lobby on behalf of their country in the EU. It is typically bigger than any other foreign representation of that country and has personnel from practically all government departments who represent their country with respect to the various areas of EU policies.

According to one small state researcher, states are more successful ‘the more staff their Permanent Representation has in the respective policy area. The larger the missions in Brussels, the better a small state is equipped to effectively make its position heard (...). [It is not just] the sheer number of attachés and diplomats that matter, but it is important that the staff in the missions is highly qualified and possesses a large fundus of EU-expertise’.<sup>3</sup>

The reality of the complex Brussels scene means that learning to control the EU’s institutional machinery takes time and dedication for each new staff member, and that career experience, or at least deep knowledge of the subject area, and good language skills, often help when it comes to being heard, or with respect to the formation of successful alliances and coalitions.

In short, the weight given to EU-representation in terms of man-power and having the right people in the right places, can boost the impact of a small state in the Union.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Marcussen, op.cit.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Panke, op.cit.

## **If you cannot move the mountain ...**

While a small member state can do nothing about its geography, it can do something about its representation. It is up to every country whether to be big and well-staffed in Brussels. But how, then, are the EU's small member states organised in Brussels? Who is big in terms of staffing? And who serve the longest? Naturally, we expect that large member states have more resources and hence more staff – but at the same time, EU membership involves, in theory, the same committees, the same decisions and the same research needs for big and small.

Most member states make transparent and elaborate listings of their staff available through the website of their perm-rep. However, no two staff listings are structured in an identical manner, and often there are discrepancies in terms of the staff groups that are listed. Some include administrative staff and chauffeurs, while others only list the heads of the various policy sections. While it is possible to get a sense from the websites that, for example, the French and the Italian representations are significantly larger than the Estonian and the Cypriot representations, it is not possible to make a reliable comparison across all member states. Neither is it possible from the websites to obtain information on the other parameters for smart state success, namely the seniority and term-length of staff.

## **What we did**

We set out to examine if big is big, and small is small, through an email enquiry among all 28 permanent representations. To increase the likelihood of replies, we focused on three straightforward questions relating to a) the size of member states' perm-rep's; b) whether most staff are officials from the member state's ministries or locally employed; and c) the duration of the typical secondment from a home ministry. We received complete replies from 18 member states: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

We ask about the distinction between seconded staff and locally employed as a measure of the seniority of staff, which would be next to impossible to survey directly through our email enquiry. While a member of local staff may be every bit as qualified as a seconded staff member, this figure can nonetheless give an impression of how resources are prioritised. In theory, seconded staff has more direct training, including language training, and provide more long-term continuity – but are also much more expensive – than the locally employed. As most local

staff members typically still need to speak the language of the country in question, the selection base in Brussels can be small, and salary and employment conditions are often less favorable. Several representations pointed out that they also second staff from the EU's institutions.

Bulgaria, Denmark, Latvia and Lithuania also provided information on the share of total staff that work in administrative functions. This figure was around 15 pct. in the Bulgarian and Latvian cases, and 30 pct. in the Danish and Lithuanian cases. While beyond the scope of this study, a detailed mapping of staff profiles at each permanent representation would provide important additional information as to what countries are best positioned in Brussels to further the national interest. In this respect, the profile of seconded staff plays an important role – whether these are junior staff members with no prior EU-experience or language skills, or whether they already have extensive EU-training and speak the dominant EU-languages.

The numbers used in this article are comparable in the sense that they are the figures given by the member states themselves in response to identical questions. We are aware that we cannot assume perfect comparability of the data. Our results should be seen as a qualified indication of who's big and small in Brussels, not as the definite answer. Further details on our method are set out below.

## Method

We contacted all 28 member states' permanent representations to the EU by email between January and March 2019, following up on each unanswered email with two additional requests, as well as by phone. We received complete replies from 18 representations: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. In addition, we received information on total seconded staff count from the United Kingdom and Hungary. As to the remaining eight member states, we were able to count staff from websites from Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Spain. Some of these member states did reply to our enquiry, but either declined to provide data or referred to their website. We have no data on Greece or Malta.

Our three questions:

- a) How many people work at [your country's] permanent representation to the EU in Brussels?
- b) How many people at your permanent representation are seconded from [your country's] home ministries?
- c) For how long is the average secondment?

In the below, we include all member states except Greece and Malta in the discussion on total staff numbers, using website figures for the countries that did not respond to our survey. For the remainder of the article, we discuss only the 18 member states where we have information on all three questions.

While it is difficult to ensure perfectly comparable data (some perm-reps, for instance, host staff serving both the EU-representation and the bilateral embassy and NATO-delegation, and one perm-rep, Austria, also hosts national social partners), and staff numbers notoriously fluctuate on a regular basis, the numbers used in this article are comparable in the sense that they are the figures given by the member states' themselves in response to identical questions. Interestingly, no figure for the total staff number in the 18 responding member states corresponded exactly to our own count from their websites, which may be due to the regular exchange of staff. In 16 of the cases, the number obtained through the email exchange was higher than the website-count, while it was slightly lower in the cases of Denmark and Ireland.

It is normal practice for countries holding, or about to hold, the EU-presidency to beef-up their perm-reps in order to handle the extra work load involved in preparing for, and executing, an EU-presidency. Romania is holding the reins during our data-collection, with Finland due to take over afterwards – something that was clearly visible from the staff figures received from these two countries. In the analysis, we have sought to control for the 'presidency factor'. Finland also provided figures for non-presidency staffing, and in the Romanian case we, exceptionally, included the website figure for total staff number, and reduced the secondment figure by the same volume as was the case in the Finnish case.

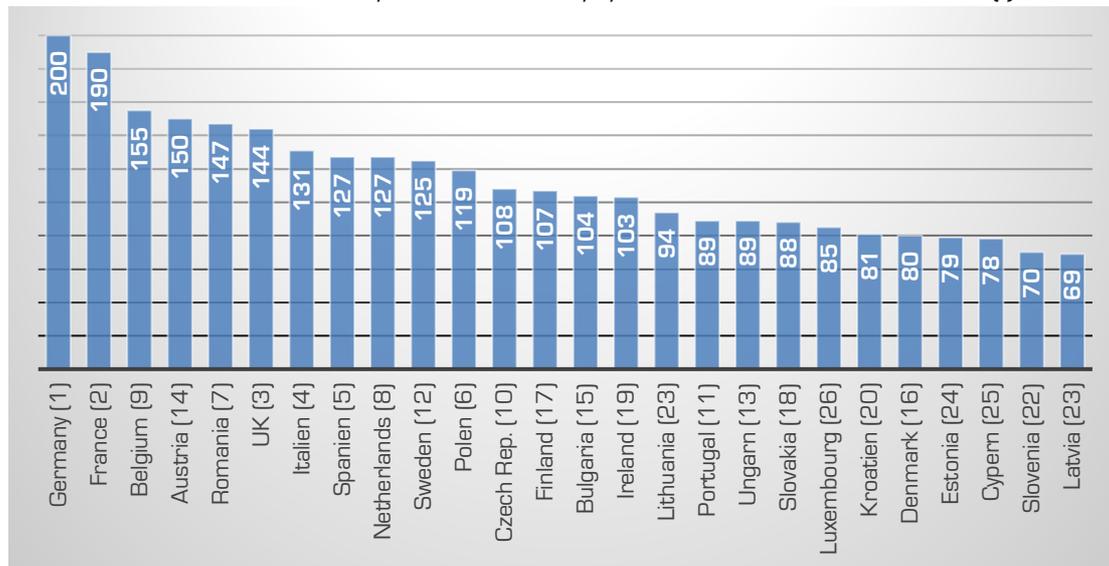
The figures provided by the Netherlands and the UK, and those presented by Spain on its website, did not include the full admin staff count. To promote comparability, we estimated the proportion of admin staff at those representations, where this division of tasks was specified, and used an approximated average of 20 pct. to boost the British and Spanish figures. In the Dutch case, where the email correspondence specified more precisely which admin functions were excluded from the staff count, we boosted the figure with 10 pct. As these considerations suggest, the findings of this study need to be considered within a non-negligible margin of error.

## A. Total staff numbers

In terms of total staff numbers there is a tendency towards big being big, and small being small, confirming the expectation of a link between staffing and GDP. Interestingly, however, there are plenty of deviations.

**Figure 1: Small can be big in Brussels**

*Countries ranked on size of EU-representation, with population rank in the EU26 found in [ ].*



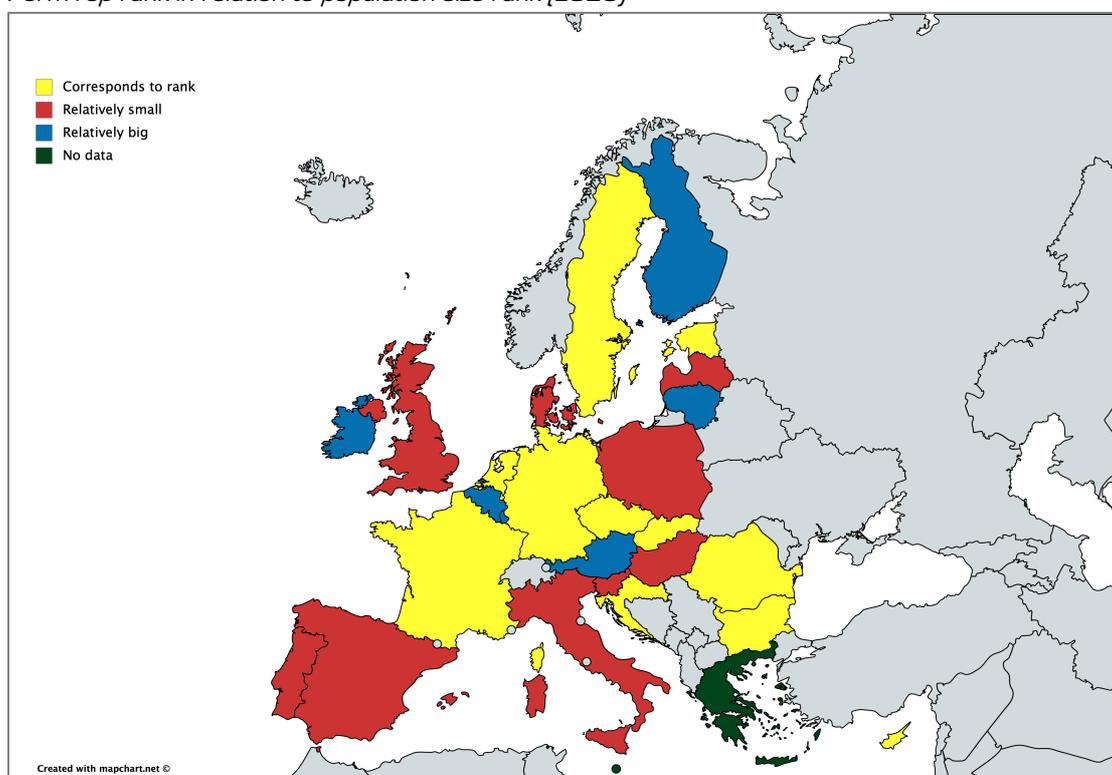
**Note:** No data available for Malta and Greece. **Source:** Think Tank EUROPA, 2019.

The EU's two heavyweights, Germany and France, are not only the biggest, most populous countries in the EU, with respectively 82,8M and 67M citizens – these two countries also have the biggest permanent representations in Brussels, with respectively 200 and 190 staff present. This suggests that they do not rely only on their unrivalled size reputation to maximize their influence in the EU, but also put in the manpower. The two smallest perm-reps in our study belong to Latvia (2M citizens) and Slovenia (2,1M), with respectively 69 and 70 staff members. This appears to be the minimum head count needed to run a perm-rep. Cyprus, a much smaller country with 0,9M citizens, has 78 staff. It is noteworthy that there is no apparent relationship between country affluence and perm-rep size, as two of the EU's richest member states, Luxembourg and Denmark, are both found in the lower end of the spectrum.

Not all small member states are small in terms of perm-rep size. Belgium, with its 11,4M citizens, reports the third-biggest representation in the EU, above much bigger UK, Italy and Spain. Also, Lithuania, a country of 2,9M citizens, has 94 staff members at its perm-rep, compared to Denmark with 80 staff, despite a population of 5,8M. Finland, comparable in size to Denmark, counts 107 staff.

The crude comparison between a country's position in the perm-rep size hierarchy, and its position in the hierarchy of populous member states, reflected in Figure 1, shows that, aside Germany and France, eight countries have corresponding positions (plus/minus two). This concerns Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> The below map presents an overview of the size of a member state's permanent representation in comparison to its position in the EU's population size hierarchy.

**Figure 2: Lithuania, Belgium, Finland and Ireland punching above their weight**  
*Perm-rep rank in relation to population size rank (EU26)*



**Note:** No data available for Malta and Greece. **Source:** Think Tank EUROPA, 2019.

Six countries have a larger perm-rep than could be expected from their population rank, namely Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, and Luxembourg. Looking past Austria, whose representation also hosts social partners, Lithuania 'jumps' the most places (it is the fourth-smallest country among the EU26 in our study, but it has the 16<sup>th</sup> biggest perm-rep), followed by Belgium (the EU's ninth-most populated country, but with the third-biggest perm-rep). Finland and Ireland both 'jump' four places.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the base is EU26, as we do not have data for Greece or Malta.

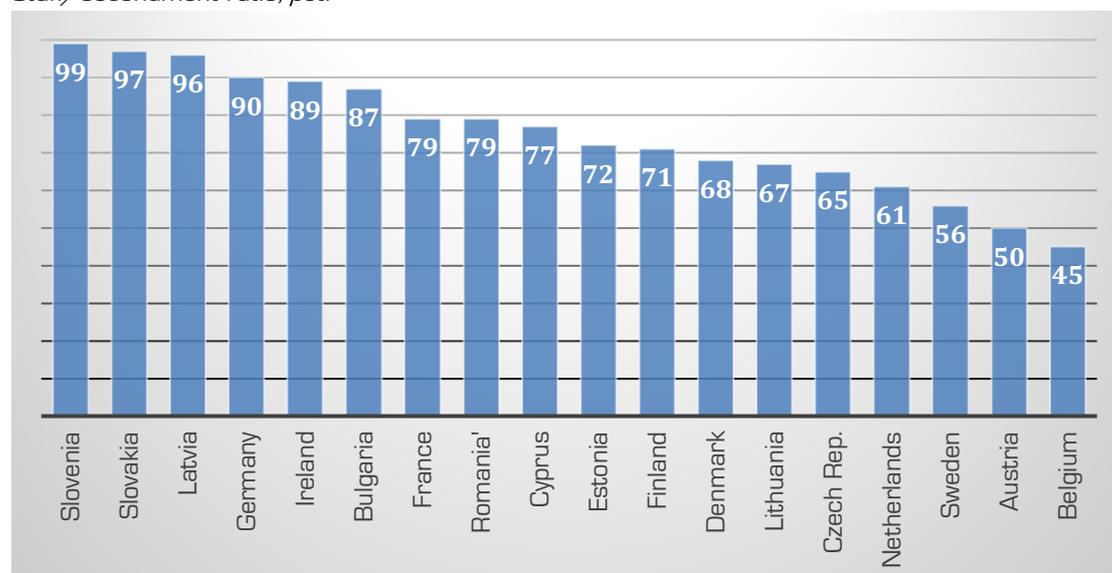
Nine countries have a smaller representation than their population rank could suggest – Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and the UK. Here, based on our figures, the Danish and Portuguese cases are the most pronounced (Denmark is the EU26’s 16<sup>th</sup> biggest country, but has the 22<sup>nd</sup> biggest perm-rep, while Portugal is the EU26’s 11<sup>th</sup> biggest country and has the 17<sup>th</sup> biggest perm-rep).

## B. Seconded staff

Looking at the share of secondments in proportion to the total staff number at the perm-reps, being big or small has no explanatory power. The two smallest perm-reps in Brussels, those of Latvia and Slovenia, together with another small country, Slovakia, now form the top-3 of having the largest share of their staff composed of home ministry officials, as opposed to locally-employed staff. These countries supply between 96 and 99 pct. of their staff members from home ministries. Belgium has the lowest share across the 18 countries in the survey, with less than half of its total staff, 45 pct., being seconded. In precisely the Belgian case, however, the perm-rep will have a much larger base to choose from when hiring local personnel, given that Brussels is its home capital.

**Figure 3: Seconded or locally-employed?**

*Staff/secondment ratio, pct.*



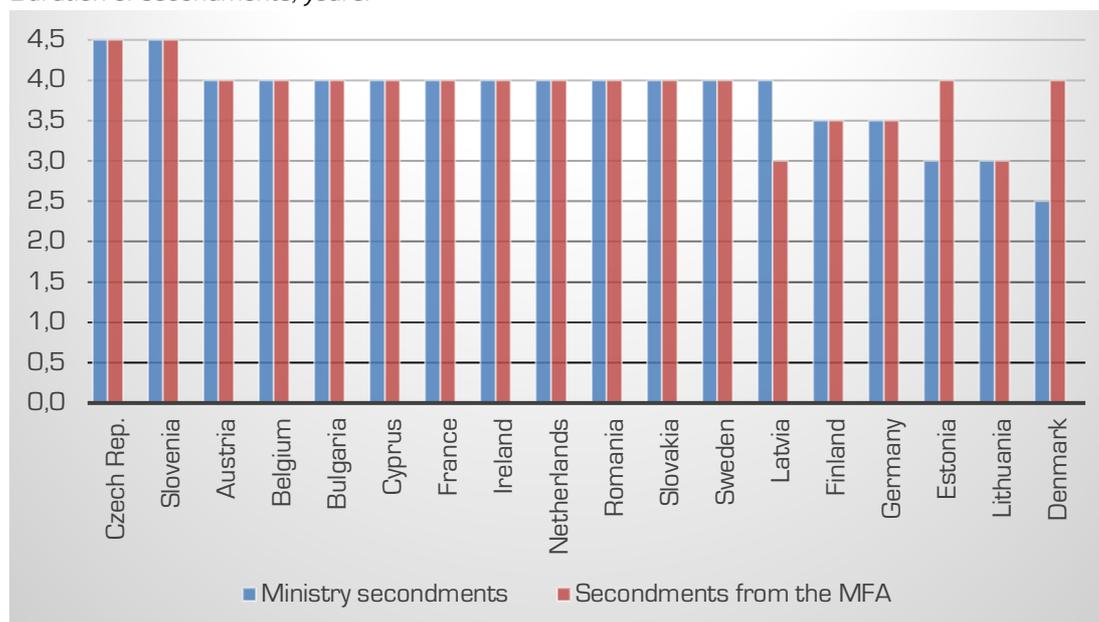
**Note:** Data only available for countries that replied to our survey. **Source:** Think Tank EUROPA, 2019.

### C. Duration of secondment

By far, the most common duration of a secondment to a perm-rep is 4 years. 10 out of the 18 countries in our study quote this figure for all secondments, and there is no obvious relationship to population size. Three member states, Denmark, Estonia and Latvia, distinguish between officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and officials from other ministries. In the Latvian case, diplomats from the foreign ministry are typically posted for 3-year periods, while officials from other ministries are posted for 4 years. The Estonian case is reverse. In the Danish case, foreign ministry officials are seconded for 4 years, while other officials serve 2,5 years – the shortest average term noted by any of the 18 perm-reps. Two other countries, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, report a longer duration for both secondments of 4,5 years, while three indicate a shorter duration for both secondments of 3,5 years (Germany and Finland) and 3 years (Lithuania).

**Figure 4: Staying long in Brussels?**

*Duration of secondments, years.*



**Note:** Data only available for countries that replied to our survey. **Source:** Think Tank EUROPA, 2019.

### Big in Brussels

Does size, seniority and duration of secondments matter in practice, as it should according to smart-state theory? The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) regularly monitors member state relations in the EU, and conducted last

autumn a large study on coalition building in the EU.<sup>5</sup> While it does not establish the causal relationship behind influence and power in the Union, there are some interesting findings with relevance to our survey.

The ECFR finds that Germany and France are more effective at building coalitions than any other member state. While they are assisted by their great size in sustaining a widespread perception within the Union that they are the most important partners in integration initiatives, the think tank also notes that France and Germany's coalition building success is due to their uniquely high levels of interaction with their EU allies. This is a variable that is linked to the availability of resources at the perm-reps, and here Germany and France are by far the biggest in our survey.

In a similar vein we may speculate that staff numbers also contribute to explain the ECFR's findings that, among the Nordic trio in the EU, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, Sweden contacts Finland much more 'on European policy matters' than it contacts Denmark, and Finland contacts Sweden, the Netherlands and Estonia more than it contacts Denmark. While Denmark's influence may be lower than its neighbours due to its EU-opt-outs (on justice and home affairs, defence and the euro), it may also be part of the story that out of these countries, the Danish perm-rep is the only one to rank below its population rank. At least, its relatively small permanent representation, and short duration of secondments from most home ministries, do nothing to alleviate the possible loss of influence from the opt-outs that Denmark may be experiencing. In this respect, it is noteworthy from our figures that especially Slovenia appears to try to compensate for its small mission in Brussels by prioritising the presence of home ministry staff and by ensuring a longer duration of secondments.

Influence remains tricky to measure, but if smart state theories are correct, it is not just down to being a big member state. The results from our survey suggest that some small member states are in a much better position than others to make full use of strategies such as 'the state as lobbyist' or 'the state as norm-entrepreneur'. At least, there are large discrepancies across the EU's small member states as to the size and composition of their permanent representations. Small population size does not necessarily equal being small in the Brussels game.

*The author wishes to thank project assistant Louise Pierrel Mikkelsen, who was in charge of data collection.*

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<sup>5</sup> EU Coalition Explorer 2018, European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>.