

Creating the new European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)

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Introduction

The creation of the new European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) reflects the commitment of the European Parliament to ensure that each of its 751 Members has access to high-quality information, analysis and research to support their work. Launched in November 2013, EPRS represents a major step-up in the research capacity of Parliament's secretariat, available both to individual Members and to parliamentary committees. By making much of its work available to the public too, the EP has the ambition to offer a range of services characteristic of a think tank, as evidenced in the name chosen for its public website: www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank

Five years after the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the European Parliament's increased role in the European Union political system has been increasingly widely recognised. The Parliament now has the power to shape EU laws across a broader range of fields than ever before. In areas such as protecting citizens' rights and the environment, regulating financial services, shaping trade relations with the United States, completing the single market or creating a digital single market, the Parliament is now a decisive participant in EU policy-making and co-legislator with the member states' governments in the Council of Ministers.

Fulfilling this increased role requires Members who are well informed on a broadening range of policy questions, particularly since EU legislation tends to be technical and often more detailed than national law. As in any parliamentary system, individual Members of the European Parliament do not have full access to the expertise of the executive, in this case in the shape of the European Commission. This imbalance is compounded by the fact that Ministers within the Council also have the backing of the expertise of their national administrations. Individual MEPs, by contrast, typically have only one or two research assistants working to support their legislative activities.

Of course, the European Parliament has already put in place a range of support services, developing them as it gained legislative weight with successive amendments of the EU's founding Treaties. The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force not long after the 2009 European Parliament elections, represents a step-change in this process: Parliament is now a full and equal participant in the Union's "ordinary legislative procedure". Comparisons of the EP's resources in this area with those of member-state parliaments, such as the German Bundestag and British House of Commons, and with the US House of Representatives, have underlined the need for additional capacity; and indeed EPRS aims to draw on the best practice and most successful features of such counterparts as it develops.

The launch of EPRS therefore builds on earlier developments in Parliament's capacity to inform its Members, in particular the more modest analytical service for individual Members provided by the Library, dating from 2009, and the creation of a new department dedicated to impact assessment and European added value in 2012. It is important to underline that, given the constraints placed on the Parliament's budget – as is the case with all the EU institutions and indeed public services across the EU member states – building EPRS is

primarily based on the reallocation of existing resources within the institutions, achieved so far as possible in a budgetarily neutral way.

Basic concept

The mission of the European Parliamentary Research Service is to provide MEPs with 'independent, objective and authoritative analysis of, and research on, policy issues relating to the European Union, in order to assist them in their parliamentary work'. Its philosophy may be summarised in six principles:

- = to be independent, objective and authoritative in the work undertaken;
- = to provide a comprehensive service, backed by specialism in all policy fields;
- = to be client-oriented and responsive directly to the needs of Members;
- = to offer a single point-of-entry for Members and a rapid response to requests;
- = to ensure the clear, simple branding of all products and services; and
- = to complement written material with greater 'in person' briefing of Members.

EPRS is organised in three directorates, though Members can access all EPRS services through a single 'Members' Hotline', modelled loosely on the 'Hotline W' in the German Bundestag. The three directorates are:

- *The Members' Research Service*, with the task of providing analysis for Members collectively on subjects of importance across Parliament's fields of work, and delivering such services upon request to individual Members.
- The *Library*, in particular, managing and providing physical and online access to Parliament's information sources and databases to Members and staff. The Directorate is also responsible for Parliament's archives, for its transparency unit and for responding to citizens' enquiries.
- *The Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value*, whose role is to assist committees in better scrutinising the work of the European Commission and other EU institutions at all stages of the legislative cycle, thus ensuring that EU legislation is not only better, but better implemented.

In addition, EPRS has two horizontal units dealing with tasks covering the whole DG – one for strategy and coordination, and the other for resources – human, financial and information technology.

At its launch in November 2013, EPRS brought together just over 220 parliamentary staff, mostly from the former Library and from the Impact Assessment and European Added Value Directorate, both previously located in other directorates-general. Around one third of the staff were assigned to the Members' Research Service, one third to the Library, one sixth to Impact Assessment and European Added Value Directorate, and the remainder to the two horizontal units.

Members' Research Service (MRS)

The new Members' Research Service builds on, but greatly expands, the former Library briefing service, through which individual Members could request a briefing on a particular topic. With the existing staff, the MRS has already successfully launched a broader range of publications, with the four to eight-page 'briefing' format complemented by shorter, more targeted one or two-page 'At a Glance' notes, and by longer, more detailed 'In-depth Analysis' papers. Moreover, the MRS has also sought to develop further the use of popular

text-light 'infographics' and statistical publications. Since its launch, the MRS has published some 193 of these various types of product.

The development of the MRS' range of free-standing, 'off the shelf' publications – available in both physical and digital forms – covers all areas of EU policy and law, in a pro-active and systematic way. In parallel, the MRS is greatly intensifying its existing capacity to respond to direct requests from individual Members, developing more flexible approaches to ensure it can deliver the tailored information and analysis that Members seek, within short deadlines, including by more in-person oral briefings direct to Members.

At the heart of the MRS approach is a move to more detailed subject specialisation. Whereas the former Library briefing service was largely delivered by generalists who were required to move from topic to topic, the greater resources allocated to the MRS means that individual policy analysts will be able to specialise in specific areas. Additional staff, brought into the MRS through redeployment, will bring their prior experience, but will also be expected rapidly to specialise. All policy analysts will also nurture contacts with think tanks and academia in their area of expertise, encouraging the sharing of information and placing the European Parliament at the centre of discussions on policy choices.

Ultimately, the MRS aims to have a team in place capable of both generating easy-to-read, content-rich analysis and of responding rapidly to requests from Members, across all areas of parliamentary activity. Its five policy units – covering economic policies, structural policies, citizens' policies, budgetary policies and external policies – are the basis for the development of the required expertise, but of course this division is no barrier to addressing issues or requests which happen to fall across teams. Moreover, the structure mirrors the administrative grouping in other areas of the Parliament's secretariat, based primarily on the division of responsibility among clusters of committees, in which the bulk of Parliament's legislative detailed work is carried out.

Library

The Library Directorate within EPRS is responsible for managing and delivering information resources directly to Members and their staff and to other parliamentary clients, including colleagues within EPRS itself. To the established reading rooms, home to the Library's collection of some 82,000 books, in all three of Parliament's places of work – Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg – EPRS has now added a new Members' Reading Room in Brussels, offering MEPs a haven in which to access EPRS resources. However, more and more, on-line delivery is the norm for Library services, with the whole Parliament able to access around 100 news and press agency services from across the Union, hundreds of major journals and legal databases, and, increasingly, e-books.

The creation of EPRS was quickly followed by the launch of a new intranet site, bringing together access to all EPRS services on a single platform within the Parliament. EPRS has also taken the lead in rejuvenating the existing EP 'Think Tank' site, on which all Parliament's research publications are accessible to the public. In addition, a new 'graphics warehouse' makes available an ever-growing collection of charts and graphs for MEPs to re-use in their own personal publications and websites. We will shortly be experimenting with the pod-casting of some of our more succinct products. All of these Library services are provided by the On-site and Online Library Services Unit.

The Parliament's Historic Archives Unit also form part of the Library Directorate, and an on-going digitisation programme ensures that the institution's 'memory' is readily accessible to

all EPRS staff, and the wider Parliament, when considering new, and not so new, policy questions. The Citizens' Enquiry service, now known as 'Ask EP', is also to be found within EPRS. Whilst the primary task is, of course, to respond to citizens' many and varied questions, knowledge of what concerns the general public is also valuable in anticipating topics likely to feature in future parliamentary discussion. Finally, our Transparency Unit manages the EP's public register of documents, freedom of information requests, and the so-called Transparency Register (of outside interests seeking contacts with Parliament and its Members).

Impact assessment and European added value

Undoubtedly the most innovative of EPRS' services is the work of the Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value. This is concerned with better equipping the Parliament's committees so that they can scrutinise and oversee the activity of the executive, in particular the European Commission. Since the launch of EPRS, a total of 51 publications have been produced by this Directorate. Whereas Parliament has traditionally focussed on the consideration and adoption of legislative proposals, the new tasks undertaken here aim to ensure the EP makes a more effective contribution to policy-making throughout the whole legislative cycle – upstream and downstream – both before the Commission considers making a formal proposal to legislate, and later – in assessing how well the legislation in force is working in practice, on the ground.

The *ex-ante* impact assessment work is the most established of the Directorate's tasks, having been launched in early 2012. A specific Ex-Ante Impact Assessment Unit now analyses all the impact assessments which the Commission provides with its legislative proposals, and delivers quick appraisals of their methodological strengths and weaknesses to the committees concerned. At the committees' request, they can then provide more detailed appraisals, alternative or complementary impact assessments, or impact assessments of significant amendments that committees may propose. More recently, the launch of *ex-post* impact assessment work aims to ensure that committees have access to all available information and analysis on the implementation of existing legislation, assessing whether it is fully and correctly implemented and the extent to which its results meet public expectations. We have an Ex-Post Impact Assessment Unit and a Policy Performance appraisal Unit for this purpose.

The Directorate's work on European added value seeks to identify gaps in current EU policies, and support parliamentary 'legislative initiative reports' calling on the Commission to bring forward formal proposals in such areas. In particular, the 'Cost of non-Europe' work aims to highlight the economic costs Europe can confront through not acting in certain areas where the Treaties provide the Union with the competence to do so. This work is undertaken by a European Added Value Unit. In parallel, a Scientific Foresight Unit strengthens the Parliament's ability to get ahead of the policy curve – it encompasses well-established work on Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA), which seeks to improve Members' understanding of the scientific under-pinning of policy choices, and also engages in scientific foresight.

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