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## **SMALL COUNTRIES CAN WIELD BIG INFLUENCE IN BRUSSELS, STUDY SAYS**

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Finland and Ireland are punching above their weight when it comes to exerting influence in the EU, according to a study by Danish think-tank Europa published on Friday (3 May).

The think-tank ranked member states' permanent representations in Brussels according to their size, how many of their diplomats are sent from the national administrations and how long these diplomats stay in Brussels building networks and gaining expertise.

The permanent representations are EU embassies of member states - headed by EU ambassadors, or "permanent representatives" - which have dozens of expert diplomats working in different areas from agricultural policy, to digital issues, and negotiating the EU budget.

The diplomats are sent to Brussels by the national administrations, usually for four years.

They basically replicate the national government bureaucracy at EU level and possess a deep understanding of European affairs and politics. Locally hired staff, also looked at by the study, often do administrative work at the representations.

The analysis found that countries such as Ireland and Finland "appear overall in a better position to fight for their national interest than countries like Denmark or Latvia".

Ireland and Finland perform relatively well on all three parameters set out by the analysis: number of expert national staff, the duration of their assignment, and overall number of staff relative to their country size in population.

Six countries have larger "perm-reps" than might be expected from their population size: Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, and Luxembourg.

Lithuania also outweighs itself: it is the fourth-smallest country among the 26 countries scrutinised by the study, but it has the 16th biggest perm-rep. Belgium is the EU's ninth-most populous country, but has the third-biggest representation and the added advantage of hosting most of the EU institutions in Brussels.

Nine countries have a smaller representation than their population rank suggested: Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the UK.

Denmark, which opted out of several common EU policies, such as the euro, defence policy and justice and home affairs issues, is the 16th biggest country among the EU26, but has the 22nd biggest representation.

Portugal is the EU26's 11th biggest country and has the 17th largest representation in Brussels.

There was no data available for researchers on Malta and Greece.

## **Clun mentality**

Smaller member states have the same rights and obligations as larger member states - one of the core foundations of the European club.

One of the key aspects of EU policy-making is to push for consensus and to prevent bullying of smaller member states into positions contrary to their interests, but size does matter in the EU.

As the study points out, the largest countries pay most into the EU budget, send the most MEPs into the European Parliament, and enjoy representation in key global forums, such as the UN Security Council or G20 and G7 formations.

Germany and France, the two EU states with the largest populations, also have the largest permanent representations in Brussels, with, respectively, 200 and 190 staff.

The two smallest representations belong to Latvia and Slovenia, which have populations of about 2m each and, respectively, 69 and 70 staff.

"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," researchers stated in the study.

According to the report, there was no clear relationship between a country's wealth and the size of its Brussels presentation - two of the EU's richest member states, Luxembourg and Denmark, were in the lower end of representation sizes.

## **Presidency boost**

Meanwhile, member states that are holding, or are preparing to hold the EU's rotating presidency have more diplomats on the ground, as they need not only to push their own interests, but coordinate legislative files among the 28 member states.

Finland, which will hold the EU's presidency from July, had a large representation even before starting preparations for the new task, researchers pointed out. The country is adding approximately 70 new staff due to the presidency.

Countries that have held the presidency often hold onto some of the increased number in diplomats, as they realise the added value of having more experts in key places, an EU official who used to work for an EU country's permanent representation told EUobserver.

"The countries that understood what influence increased staff means are willing to invest extra to obtain better outcomes. For them, it is more important to influence EU policies," the official added.

"Smart states", the study says, do precisely that.

"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," the researchers said.

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Kaynak/Source: