

The teams of European Parliament members: who and how assists MEPs?

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In today's edition of the program Now ‐ Interacting with the European Parliament, Radio Bulgaria, Gateway Europe and the European Institute are bringing more details about the role and responsibilities of the assistants and advisors of European Parliament members.

The job of EP members is tight with trips between Brussels, Strasbourg and their own countries; with committee sittings and attendance of plenary sessions; with law-making that influences Europe's future; with reviews and preparation of many reports and with meetings with lobbyists and citizens. To be able to fulfil this wide range of duties every EP member is provided with a large budget and with a team of assistants and interns.

“Close to 5000 employees work in the European Parliament. This staff can be divided into a few groups”, the head of the EP Press Service Marjory van den Broeke told Radio Bulgaria. “One of the groups is involved in dealing with various administrative, technical and other issues. Another group is in charge of Public Relations. Parliamentary groups have their own staff too committed to political issues. And finally, the EP members are entitled to selecting and hiring personal assistants”, Mrs. van den Broeke.

How are they hired, and their remuneration determined?

“For the purpose the European Parliament pays some EUR 16,000 to each of its members”, Mrs. Marjory van den Broeke says further. “They are free to hire one, two, three or more assistants, and are free to determine the size of their remuneration. We only keep data about assistants based in Brussels and accredited to the EP. Their number is about 1000. However, the European Parliament members are not staying in Brussels or Strasbourg all the time. Very often they work in their own countries. This is natural, given their commitments to voters. For this reason they hire assistants for their offices in member countries. In such cases the EP does not have information on how many assistants they hire on the spot. In principle if an MEP is a member of the EP Budgetary Committee, he or she would normally to select assistants, who are economists or financiers. An MEP, who is member of the Committee on Environment, would rather hire a biologist or an ecologist. As to responsibility it fully goes to the EP member whose duty is to watch closely the work of assistants and be accountable for the final results. The system that I have just described will change after June 2009 elections. In their aftermath there will be two kinds of assistants. First, officials accredited to the EP and based in Brussels. They will be paid European-level salaries, in fact almost European, because EP officials will be hired after job contests. Assistants in the Brussels offices of MEPs will have a specific status. As to assistants working in the member countries, their appointment and payment will be carried out through authorized agencies. These are the most important changes. Naturally, MEPs will keep their freedom in hiring personal assistants, because they work with them on a daily basis and should know them well. To

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recap, the duties, ways and nature of the work will remain unchanged”;

The adoption of amendments to the Regulations for the Work of European Parliament Members was provoked by a major row caused by MEPs who had hired relatives as their assistants. In mid-July the Bureau of the European Parliament endorsed new measures for the regulations’ enforcement aimed at greater transparency in the work of the European law-making authority. They will take effect in 2009 following the upcoming European parliamentary elections. The new rules clarify in detail what conflict of interests is about. More on the matter - from Mrs. Diana Wallis, member of the Bureau of the European Parliament and one of the fourteen Vice-Presidents of the European Parliament.

“I think there are two sides to this. First of all somebody who works for a Member of Parliament - it’s obviously quite a close relationship; it’s a relationship of trust. And therefore it’s quite a personal relationship. But on the other hand we have to clearly be very transparent about that. I myself, when I last wanted to employ an assistant, as former assistant left, we advertised in as many places as we could. And I can tell you that I had about 400 applicants. And we conducted as open a process as we possibly could for making an appointment. But at the moment all that is very much up to each member’s discretion, how they go about appointing somebody in the manner in which it is done. What we want to see from 2009 is a rather more regularized system for how assistants are appointed, their terms of appointment and also matters dealing with their payment. So that’s what we are working towards, trying to achieve at the moment. It’s quite complicated technically. It involves assistants’ coming under something called the “Staff regulation”, so that they become almost, and I say almost, something like European civil servants. But it would still keep that very personal relationship between them and the Member of Parliament.”

Assistants should have enough qualifications to be able to assist MEPs in their daily duties, Daniela Penkova believes. She has a long work record in the NGO sector including Open Society and the European Institute, where she has managed various events related to Bulgaria’s European integration. Daniela is an engineer by occupation. In addition she has graduated European Integration in the University of National and World Economy. Her present job is parliamentary assistant in the office of Bulgarian MEP Nickolay Mladenov.

“Our qualifications correspond to his scope of activities”, Daniela explains. “My two colleagues have graduated in economics. One of them has specialized in Paris, and the other one has worked with Commissioner Meglena Kuneva. I have been working in the sphere of European integration for 15 years now, so we are all specialists in this area. Well, of course foreign language skills are a must. The minimum is fluency in one language, and speaking a second one is almost mandatory. There are colleagues working with three languages, and this is indeed important. The native languages of member countries are used in the plenary hall. However, there is a lot more going on in lobbies, cafes and outside the plenary hall, where actual voting takes place. So, one has to speak foreign languages and try to socialize in this small town called EP with its close to 7000 officials in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, to be able to do their job properly. Our team is quite nice, it is like a family affair, and we get on very well together. Given that Nickolay Mladenov has a very tight schedule indeed with 15 to 20 meetings a day, we have to be a perfectly organized team of players. I think our team is doing a very

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good job”;

What are the responsibilities and duties of an assistant? Daniela Penkova says more:

“When the MEP is active, he tries to take more reports in parliament, prepare and submit more amendments to legislation etc. For this job he is in need of assistants, because he cannot possibly read all the material coming to us, or to EP committees. Mr. Mladenov is member of two committees – the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection and the Committee on Foreign Affairs – Subcommittee on Security and Defence, as well as of three other delegations for relations with Afghanistan, Israel and Iraq. He is also deputy chairman of the latter. It is obvious that with such a challenging schedule, he needs a lot of assistance. Each MEP is free to hire assistants within the limits of a fixed monthly budget. We are three people in the office. Two of them assist him on specific tasks in the two committees, and I am in charge of the general coordination of meetings and especially of activities and assignments he has in Bulgaria. MEPs have to work with their voters in the countries, where they have been elected, apart from their Brussels agenda”;

Daniela says that despite the work-load, the job is also bringing her moments of genuine pleasure. Well, there are also a lot of problems to fix, as well as a few stressful situations. How does a day of a parliamentary assistant proceed?

“A day in the work of Daniela Penkova is closely dependent on the day of Nickolay Mladenov”, Daniela explains. “In the morning we arrive to the office at 8:30, or at 9. If Mr. Mladenov has earlier sittings in committees, we come at 7:30 to read documents through, and prepare material for him. The European Parliament is an institution with a constant flow of e-mails. Arriving in the morning I find least 200 messages on my e-mail that I have to read and sort out. I have to order tasks by their urgency and arrange meetings for Mr. Mladenov. Reading e-mails takes quite some time, you know. Besides, any of the parliamentary assistants has access to a language course that the parliament provides for its employees. So, currently our team is taking a French language course. It takes two and a half hours. After lunch we held meetings, especially during the weeks, when Mr. Mladenov attends committees in Brussels. During these periods he usually holds a lot of meetings with various stakeholders. Many lobbyists pay visits to Brussels pressing for amendments to legislation discussed in committees. Our team tries to arrange meetings that would be useful to our country. In general a workday proceeds in phone calls, meetings and discussions, and ends at about 6 p.m. After work I love to take long walks. We also gather for some partying, now and then. Our team feels like a family.”;

In practice a European Parliament member can hire as its assistant a citizen of another EU country. Bulgarian MEP Kristian Vigenin has a young Frenchman on his team Etienne Cuche.

“I met Kristian Vigenin in June 2007 shortly after the Bulgarian elections for European Parliament members,” Etienne says. “I was already working for EP and decided to look for a position with one of the MEPs from the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe. In turn Kristian Vigenin needed an assistant with some parliamentary experience - and coming from an old member

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country with all the knowledge and contacts that this 'Old Europe' status could give. I think that we all benefit from good dialogue between the West and East in a bid to create a united Europe.

The young Frenchman says more about his job:

'It's quite diverse, enriched with the aspect of political advice that it contains, and this makes it particularly interesting. I assist and advise Kristian Vigenin on all his activities as MEP. The key aspect is political advice on his work as law-maker. I assist him in being well informed, discuss with him various initiatives etc. I am also in charge of managing his political assignments as MEP. Communication with Bulgarian voters is paramount, because Mr. Vigenin was elected to represent them, though he also works for all Europeans. In this respect I support his initiatives seeking to strengthen contacts with Bulgaria: Bulgaria-focused cultural events in Brussels and Strasbourg; opening of his information centres in Bulgarian towns, as well as participation in conferences in Bulgaria.'

Is the job of a parliamentary assistant a source of satisfaction?

'My work is fairly engrossing and this is a challenge, however it is also very demanding and leaves me with little private time', Etienne Cuche comments. 'The political dimension makes the job so fascinating. However one has to be aware that the teams of MEPs are small, including two or three assistants, so everybody faces important responsibilities. Also, this job requires full trust between the team and the European Parliament member it works for. As a result of this atmosphere of trust, I feel directly involved in a few parliamentary affairs, and this I find appealing.'

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