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The European Union's role in the G8: a principal-agent perspective

Arne Niemann and Judith Huigens

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of the European Union (EU) in the Group of Eight (G8) framework. We suggest that the EU in the G8 constitutes an unusual form of delegation because the principal-agent (PA) relationship is characterised by considerable degrees of informality and ambiguity. The main argument advanced in this article is that the European Commission, the agent, despite being structurally disadvantaged at the outset, managed to emancipate itself within the G8 over time. This process of agent emancipation has been reinforced, above all, by the flexibility and informality of the G8, the evolving European integration process, and the growing Commission capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship. Although the Commission has managed to move considerably beyond the original PA design intended by the principals, Member States' incentives to rely on the Commission also increased over time. We argue that the Commission itself was able to manipulate these incentives, which is most evident in the sub-case of the Commission's successful quest for attaining the Western aid coordination mandate for Central and Eastern Europe.

Key Words: European Commission, EU foreign policy, European Union, delegation, G8, principal-agent

INTRODUCTION

For nearly 35 years, the world's most powerful state leaders have gathered each summer to discuss a variety of global issues. Originally set up to create a new regime of collective management of the international system, the summit was borne out of the frustration world leaders had with the inefficiency and slow decision-making of the traditional international institutions (e.g. Bayne 1992). Upon its establishment in 1975, it was therefore agreed that the Western Economic Summit was to remain an informal, flexible group, refraining from institutionalisation and remaining without a standing bureaucracy, staff or infrastructure (Donnelly 2007: 93). Since 1977, two years after the first summit in Rambouillet, the EU/EC has been officially represented in the G8 framework. To speak in principal agent (PA) terms, one could say that the European Community (EC) Member States, as principals, conditionally granted authority to the European Commission and the Council Presidency¹, the agents, to act on behalf of the principals. However, the case of the EU in the G8 constitutes an unusual case for EU Studies. PA relationships in the EU context tend to be characterised by high levels of legalisation and formalisation (cf. Meunier 2000; Tallberg 2002; Pollack 2006), which is not the case here. In fact, while it was decided in 1977 that the European Commission and Council Presidency were to join the G8 negotiations, this decision was highly controversial and never formalised by granting a mandate or any (other) formal powers. Through the compromise that was ultimately decided upon the agents were allowed to participate at the summit, but were not to replace or eliminate the four existing EU G8 members.

As opposed to a textbook PA relationship in the EU context (cf. Dür and Elsig 2011), the case of EU representation within the G8 is actually more similar to delegation of authority to more traditional international organisations, where often no legally binding contracts exist between the principals and the agent (Pollack 2006: 196). Although a PA relationship presupposes the presence of a contract between the actors, this contract need not necessarily be explicit or legalised (Hawkins *et al.* 2006: 5), as in the case of the EU in the G8. Despite

limited formalisation of the decision, EU Member States granted conditional authority to the Commission and the Council Presidency when they decided for them to represent Community interests at the summit. As such, delegation, while implicit and informal, did indeed take place in 1977, justifying our use of PA theory. In fact, absence of legalisation does not preclude the relevance of PA theory, but it actually determines the characteristics of specific principal agent relationships, as the subsequent analysis will indicate. So far, studies in this field of less formalised PA relationships remain limited, certainly in the EU context. This article seeks to improve our understanding of informal PA relationships, by exploring the effects of this informality on the relations between the principals and the agent in the G8.

While the limited formal powers of the agent, and the permanent presence of some of the principals (that also sought to restrict the agent's role as much as possible at the outset), suggest that the agents were in a (structurally) disadvantaged position within the G8 context, the Commission gradually developed into a fairly mature and autonomous participant within the summit. The main question guiding this article is how this development can be explained, including an exploration of the factors contributing to the emancipation of the agent. Since the role of the Council Presidency, the other agent, has always been marginal within the G8 (cf. Huigens and Niemann 2009), our analysis will concentrate on the Commission as an agent. We argue that against the background of a (very) incomplete contract and flexible design, the Commission managed to emancipate itself (far) beyond the original intentions of the Member State principals, due to the informality and flexibility of the G8, the evolving European integration process, as well as Commission capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship. While this is not a classical case of agency slack – because principal's incentives to empower the agent also progressively intensified – we tentatively argue that the agent itself has manipulated principals' incentives, which comes out most clearly in the sub-case of Western aid to Central and Eastern Europe.

There are a number of aspects underscoring the relevance of this article: (1) overall, the role of the EU in the G8 is substantially under-researched. Scholarly work has been predominantly historical in nature and entailed a G8 perspective (but see Huigens and Niemann 2009). Closely related, analyses of the EU in the G8 from a PA perspective are so far completely absent.² (2) We seek to challenge an empirical observation that has been made with regard to the role of the European Community in the G8 during its early period, namely that ‘summitry is sucking the blood out of the Community institutions’ (Merlini 1984: 201). (3) We take up a number of aspects that have not received sufficient attention in the PA (EU) literature, such as the effects of informal contracting on PA relationships, or the conditions activating/inducing agent autonomy (cf. Elsig 2007).

A few words on our sources: due to the limited amount of academic sources available on the role of the EU within the G8 framework and the fact that the G8 hardly produces any documentation, this study has suffered from data constraints. As a result, a vital data source for us has been interviews with those involved in the preparations and the summit itself. Another alternative source that has been made use of is (participant) observation. One of the authors was accredited to the Hokkaido Toyako Summit in Japan as a journalist and thus interacted with media and experts at the summit. In addition, we explored press statements, summit websites and media reports/articles.

We will proceed as follows: the first section outlines the original preferences of the principals when they delegated to the Commission and the Council Presidency and describes the PA (institutional) design stemming from the 1977 compromise. Section two describes how the PA relationship evolved over the years. The third section explains the rationales behind the development of this PA relationship, and also asks to what extent the agent itself manipulated principals’ incentives for increasing the Commission’s scope for manoeuvre.

I. THE INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN OF DELEGATION: DELEGATING TO THE COMMISSION

As a basis for developing our main argument of substantial Commission emancipation in the G8 context we need to establish reference points against which this can be measured. Two reference points are particularly suitable and relevant for the purpose of our subsequent analysis in the second section: (1) the specific PA design that was agreed upon in 1977 (including the type of delegation/representation and the control mechanisms available to the principals); (2) principals' preferences concerning the PA relationship, especially regarding those Member States that held strong preferences on the question of what sort of delegation/representation should be chosen for the Western Economic Summits.³

Following the non-representation of the smaller Community Member States at the first 1975 Rambouillet Summit, the question of how they should be represented at the Western Summits was raised by them. Initially, the Netherlands and Belgium – that possessed relatively strong economic credentials and were rather active in international economic matters – fancied themselves to become members of what was to become the G7/G8. After it became clearer that this was not politically feasible, they focused their energies upon attaining more effective representation through the European Community, rather than individual membership (Putnam and Bayne 1987). The Benelux countries subsequently led the quest by the smaller Member States (that also included Denmark and Ireland) for a solution that would safeguard their adequate representation at the Western Summits. More specifically, they asked for independent Community representation, instead of (rather than in addition to) that of the European summit members, on the basis of a fixed and binding mandate so that the Community could speak with one voice at the summits (Hainsworth 1990: 14).⁴

The smaller Member States feared that Western summitry might take decisions without consulting them or reflecting their interests (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 149). Moreover, the summit was seen as potentially rivalling (or even replacing) 'the EC as the principal entity to

resolve and manage West European and transatlantic issues' (Hainsworth 1990: 14). In addition, as articulated by Gaston Thorn, foreign minister of Luxembourg, the non-participating EC countries were concerned that they might become second-class members and lose the augmented voice they had gained through Community membership (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998: 18). He also suggested that European powers that are present at the summits as national governments lacked the legitimacy to act as EC 'ambassadors' (cf. Bonvicini and Wessels 1984: 174).

The three European instigators of the summit – France, Germany and the UK – were opposed to Community inclusion at the Western Summit. It is interesting to note that the non-European summit participants were *a priori* not against full Community representation (Garavoglia 1984: 14). France under President Giscard took a leading role in the process and held the strongest preferences for Community exclusion from summitry. Still partly following a Gaullist-like foreign policy approach, a certain degree of sovereignty-consciousness informed French views, leading to the conviction that only representatives of sovereign states had the requisite legitimacy and authority to participate at, and shape, the Western summits. Giscard was also guided by efficiency/effectiveness concerns: his Library Group⁵ concept of summitry emphasised the informal nature of summit meetings in which heads of state/government should be undisturbed by additional parties whose participation would complicate matters and distort the informal/flexible direct contact and might prevent an *esprit de corps* that had been predominant in the Library Group (Bonvicini and Wessels 1984: 172).

No agreement on summit representation could be reached during 1976 as interests and positions were too far apart. Eventually, both the Commission and the European Parliament began to mediate between the bigger and smaller Member States. They tabled two separate compromise proposals – one by the Commission in 1976 and one by the EP in 1977 – that suggested agreement on a parallel approach (see below). Before the European G7 members could be brought on board the Commission had to flex its muscle in 1976/1977. An agreement

of the 1976 G7 Puerto Rico summit on export credits was deemed illegitimate by the Commission because it was made independently by individual EC Member States on a matter of Community competence. The Commission – supported by the European Court of Justice’s Opinion 1/75 – initiated legal proceedings against France, Italy, West Germany and the UK in July 1976 for violation of Article 69 EEC (on the free movement of capital), thus further indicating the boundaries of what the EC institutions were prepared to accept. Eventually, agreement could be secured around the formula promoted by the Commission and European Parliament, which paved the way for EC representation in the G7 (Garavoglia 1994: 9-12; Ulrich and Donnelly 1998: 18).

The principal-agent relationship stemming from the original compromise

The 1977 European Council meeting in Rome, a few months prior to the G7 summit in London, finally produced the following compromise concerning EC representation within the summit: ‘the President of the Council and the President of the Commission will be invited to take part in those sessions of the Downing Street Summit at which items that are within the competence of the Community are discussed’ (Bulletin EC: 5 1977: 28, quoted in Hainsworth 1990: 18). The compromise represented a pragmatic and parallel approach, in that it proposed the participation of two European Community representatives, alongside four EU Member States. Given the substantially diverging preferences amongst Member State principals⁶, a lowest common denominator solution was reached that left many contingencies unspecified. This ‘incomplete contract’ (cf. Tirole 1999; Hawkins *et al.* 2006; Farrell and Héritier 2007) has not been legalised through a formal mandate and only (very) imperfectly spells out the obligations of actors.

Both sides only grudgingly accepted the compromise. The smaller Member States had hoped for more far-reaching and formalised delegation. For them the problem of representation was not sufficiently solved, as the Commission or the Presidency could not

explicitly present the position of the smaller countries (but only of the Community as a whole), whereas the four large Member States could table their national positions and thus possibly circumvent the Community position (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153; Bonvincini and Wessels 1984: 173). The larger Member States also agreed only after considerable reluctance. They, and especially France, clearly preferred to limit the Community's role at the summits as much as possible (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998: 11).

The flexibility of the 1977 decision on Community representation enabled both sets of principal preferences to be pursued through the use of control mechanisms and limitations to participation. The smaller Member States tried to 'stay in the loop' as much as possible by insisting on involving the Commission in regular consultations prior to, and substantial debriefings after, G7 summits. There were two main oversight mechanisms that were made use of. Firstly, the Commission was to report to all bodies of the Council framework, specifically to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), on G7 aims and results. Secondly, EC coordination was initially arranged through discussions at the European Council meeting that took place before the summit (Bonvincini and Wessels 1984: 179; Putnam and Bayne 1987: 152). In the meetings (at COREPER, Council and European Council level) questions and suggestions could be raised by all Member States. These control mechanisms were extensively used by Belgium and The Netherlands, the two most adamant advocates of exclusive Commission representation (interview with Ulzurrun⁷; also cf. Hainsworth 1990).

At the same time, the European G7 members sought to hold on to their national independence and restrict the position of their agents as much as possible. G7 EU Member States ensured that Council Presidency was always held by a G8 member at the time of the summit (Hainsworth 1990: 52). As a result, the Council was effectively not independently represented until 1982 (Silvestri 1994: 11). In addition, the Commission was only granted participation on issues of EC competence. And as it did not replace the four European participants at the summit, the latter were in a position to 'police patrol', or directly monitor

the agent (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). These ‘present principals’ or ‘attending principals’⁸ had the advantage over the smaller Member State principals in having the ability to access a greater amount of information and gain more direct influence over the agent. They could also influence the recognition and legitimacy bestowed upon the Commission. For example, as hosts they have considerable say over procedures and agenda-setting. Here, the Commission can be granted varying levels of courtesy, recognition and leeway (Huigens and Niemann 2009). It has been noted that the position of the Commission was rather delicate during this early period. ‘(I)f it was not fully backed by the other [participating] member its credibility would suffer’ (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153).

Hence, the 1977 compromise and how it was initially enforced by the principals, created a situation in which the agents were structurally disadvantaged: without a fixed mandate they had no formal powers; their role at the summit was restricted, and monitoring by the EC Member States was rather close. This was further amplified by the non-replacement of European summit participants that also became ‘attending’ principals. However, as suggested above, the compromise can be seen as a (very) ‘incomplete contract’ that failed to specify actors’ obligations and thus provided scope for potential agent progression.⁹ The following sections will describe and explain how the PA relationship developed against this (overall rather unpromising) background.

II. THE EVOLVING PRINCIPAL-AGENT RELATIONSHIP

This section offers a closer look at the relationship between the principals and the agent, and characterises it as a dynamic and evolving one. Overall, the Commission substantially developed beyond the role that its principals had originally intended it to play. During the course of agent emancipation, however, principals’ incentives to rely on the Commission also gradually increased.

A brief note on our use of terminologies: while ‘discretion’ grants the leeway to accomplish principal-determined goals in the way seen fit by the agent, ‘autonomy’ is the range of action available to the agent, including the ability to set policy goals (Hawkins *et al.* 2006: 8). Discretion and autonomy are hard to distinguish within the informal context of the G8. For the remainder of this article we will refer to ‘autonomy’, unless ‘discretion’ can be clearly differentiated. The term ‘emancipation’ denotes increased (Commission) scope of involvement, autonomy and discretion over time.

The changing features of the PA relationship

During the years following the 1977 compromise, the PA relationship between the Commission and the Member States changed substantially. Even though the original institutional design has not been formally revised, the (very) incomplete and informal nature of the PA contract has enabled the development of a different principal-agent dynamic, which is now characterised by a high degree of agent autonomy. While the position of the Council Presidency remains marginal at the summit, the Commission has developed into a nearly full-fledged summit participant. Although formal membership remains disputed (hence the name G8, as opposed to G9), the Commission has become a fully accepted participant and is generally treated on par with the real G8 members (Huigens and Niemann 2009).

While officially permitted to attend the summit since 1977, its actual participation has slowly evolved over the following decades. Initially, the Commission was only included with regard to trade and North-South issues. However, Commission participation was extended to all economic issues in 1978. When the focus of the summit shifted to more political topics, it was decided in 1981 that the Commission was also admitted to the discussions on political issues. While then officially permitted participation in all aspects of the summit, actual Commission participation developed in parallel with the extending competences of the EC/EU,

for example through the implementation of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998).

As such, the Commission is nowadays actively involved in every aspect of the summit, including discussions on all topics, and the preparatory meetings. It holds the same independent organisational structure within the summit as its fellow summit participants, with a leader (the President of the Commission), a sherpa (the Head of Cabinet of the President of the Commission), and its own team of sous-sherpas (interview with Ulzurrun). In addition, the Commission is represented at the on-site and independent ministerial forums and meetings that have grown to be a part of the G8 system of institutions, such as the Foreign Minister Meetings, the Trade Minister Quadrilateral, or *ad hoc* meetings on issues like terrorism or climate change (Kirton 1999: 52). During these discussions, the Commission holds the same rights as its G8 counterparts. It has the right to be heard on *any* subject on the agenda (interview with Mc Swiney). The only element, where its summit participation formally differs from that of the other G8 members, is the fact that the EU cannot host a summit (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998: 11).

What has most visibly changed is the scope of issues on which the Commission gets substantially involved. While the Commission was originally only involved in discussions on trade, it has now become a valuable contributor to many other debates, such as that on development, the environment, finance as well as technology and conflict prevention (Hainsworth 1990: 55; Kirton 2004). Its contribution on these topics is considered both necessary and useful, adding to the legitimacy of the G8 (Lamy 1988: 5). Furthermore, even on issues where the Commission cannot take a formal position, it has contributed to debates, for instance as an honest broker (Kirton 2004; interview with Dvorkovich).

Meanwhile, the control mechanisms of the principals have been eroded, increasing agent autonomy. While in the early 1980s, considerable debate used to take place during the COREPER briefings, significant discussion and disagreements have diminished over time (cf.

Bonvicini and Wessels 1984: 173). The sessions have become merely informative, without any substantive debate or voting (interview with Ulzurrun; also cf. Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153). This comes close to what Hawkins and Jacoby (2006: 210) have termed ‘ceremonialism’, with monitoring becoming purely formal and superficial or even containing incomplete or symbolic information. Furthermore, the European Council coordination efforts prior to the summit have fallen into disuse, limiting the input of non-G8 Member States to a minimum (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153). Over time, the Commission has developed not only its own institutional machinery for the summit, but also its experience, expertise and institutional continuity makes it an autonomously participating member of the G8. In none of the summit activities is the Commission delegation connected to, or dependent on, other EU G8 delegations (interview with Ulzurrun; interview with member of an EU state’s G8 delegation).

In light of the erosion of control mechanisms, informal political pressures have increasingly played a part in determining the PA relationship between Member States and the Commission (cf. Pollack 2006: 196). ‘Politically’ bound by the system of competences and EU agreements, the Commission is hardly always able to do as it pleases. Although the Commission representation would not get openly called upon for not staying within its competences, it tends to be less proactive on those issues where it holds little or no competence, such as military and defence issues (interview with McSwiney). Similarly, on topics that are deemed controversial or where no basic agreement exists within the EU, such as nuclear energy, the Commission tends to stay in the background at the summit (interview with a member of the Russian G8 delegation). As opposed to individual EU G8 members, the Commission needs to take into account the positions of the other EU summit participants, and therefore does not often press for the more radical approaches (cf. Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153; interview with Dvorkovich).

Despite these informal pressures on the agent, the above analysis suggests that the Commission has developed far beyond what its principals had originally anticipated, given the

tight monitoring mechanisms originally intended by the smaller Member States and the minimal agent role foreseen for the Commission by the European summit participants. However, principals' incentives for drawing on the Commission have also evolved over time and become more lenient towards agent emancipation. For the smaller Member States (now the EU-23) close monitoring of the Commission via the various bodies of the Council framework became gradually less important, since they realised that the summit business did not undermine the role of the Community and because G8 discussions were usually formulated on a general political level, lacking direct and predictable policy implications for them (Lesage *et al.* 2009). The European G8 members (EU-4), on the other hand, became more inclined to accept agent emancipation. One factor in explaining this preference transformation is the change of government in France and Germany. Mitterrand and Kohl were more supportive of the Commission in the G8 framework than their predecessors (e.g. Putnam and Bayne 1987: 217). It can also be argued that the EU-4 have become more forthcoming because a more emancipated Commission, to some extent, served their purposes. Not only could the presence of additional European representatives, with on some occasions as many as five, help to build momentum, the Commission has also proven a valuable G8 participant on a variety of topics, as parts of the subsequent section will illustrate (cf. Kirton 2004; Ullrich and Donnelly 1998).

III. EXPLAINING AGENT EMANCIPATION

First, we argue that agent emancipation has primarily been fostered by three factors: (1) the flexibility and informality of the G8; (2) the evolving European integration process; (3) growing Commission capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship. The second part of the section will then address the question of whether principals' evolving incentives for greater Commission autonomy may, to some extent, be attributed to assertive agency.

The informality and flexibility of the G8

The G8 summit is a prime example of a weakly legalised international organisation and thus greatly differs from other bodies, such as the WTO, for the negotiation in which the Commission has been delegated formal authority (cf. Kerremans 2004; Elsig 2007). As originally intended, G8 summit meetings are still aimed at participants agreeing on common measures toward global challenges, and not so much at drawing up and signing international agreements. It is therefore explicitly not a decision-making body, and none of the agreements at the summit are formally binding (May 2005: 69). Summitry of this nature has been defined as ‘concert diplomacy’ (cf. Pentilla 2005), which is characterised by informal rules and an extensive degree of flexibility that enables participants to act quickly and decisively when in agreement (Donnelly 2007: 94). This informality and flexibility facilitated and contributed to the Commission's ability to emancipate itself. In such a setting, where the (legal) stakes are limited, principals have little incentive to counteract agent strategies to increase autonomy (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006: 212).

First of all, the informality of the summit has enabled the Commission to participate actively in an increasing number of G8 debates, despite (sometimes) limited legal competences. While legal competences have affected the Commission’s range of manoeuvre, the limited legalisation of the summit diminishes the significance of such competences (interview with Ulzurrun; interview with a member of the Russian G8 delegation). After all, if the results of the summit are not binding, it matters less whether or not those who participated in the discussion had the legal authority to do so. In addition, the G8 constitutes a setting in which quite a number of major issues are interlinked, making it impossible to draw strict demarcation lines between issues of more or less competence (Lamy 1988: 5). This is how, despite formally not having the competence to act (Groenleer and van Schaik 2007: 971), the Commission has still managed to become a promotional broker on climate change. ‘This is a

country club, it is not so much about legal issues. It is all very political' (interview with member of an EU state's G8 delegation). In sum, as noted by Hainsworth (1990: 56), 'the flexible and informal nature of summit deliberations [...] has presented the Commission with a golden opportunity to independently extend its own agenda'.

When the summits became less 'result-oriented' after the (early) 1980s, there was a renewed emphasis on informality and intimacy (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 153). 'Everything is done to encourage a personal rapport among the leaders during the time that the summit lasts' (Bayne 2005: 17). In this setting, power hierarchies are less pronounced, which enabled the Commission to be involved (even more) on equal terms (interview with member of an EU state's G8 delegation). Furthermore, the G8 context generally enhanced the Commission's international standing and thus contributed to its general emancipation as a foreign policy actor. Not only did summit participation enable the Commission to 'access a high-ranking network of relations from which it had previously been excluded' (Bonvicini and Wessels 1984: 185). Perhaps more importantly, by participating at one of the highest political levels, the Commission gained considerable international recognition. To be present at the summit means that one belongs to the group of the most powerful entities in the world. To be portrayed as such, can shape perceptions and these perceptions can change actual influence (Huigens and Niemann 2009: 14). For instance, media coverage of the Commission at the summit has amplified 'the visibility and prestige of the EC Commission and the entire Community system in the eyes of the world' (Hainsworth 1990: 55; interview with Sannino).

The evolving European integration process

The continuing EU integration process has extended the competences of the Community, and hereby the number of issues on which the Commission can actively participate at the summit. As Ullrich and Donnelly (1998: 13) note, 'as the EU expands and acquires legal competence in an increasing number of areas including economic and monetary coordination, social and

regional policy [...] its role in the Western Economic Summits as well as the entire G8 framework continues to evolve' (cf. also Lamy 1988). Where there is exclusive Community competence, Member States have surrendered the right to enter into bi-lateral agreements, and the Commission legally speaks on behalf of the Union (Fischer 2001). This is related to the doctrine of parallelism, according to which common rules laid down internally could be (adversely) affected if Member States act individually to undertake international obligations (McGoldrick 1997: 42). Hence, with the extensions of Community competence through the Single European Act, as well as the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice, the delegation of internal tasks also implied a delegation of authority for the G8. After the Community gained shared competence on environmental issues for example, a new task was delegated to the Commission, i.e. to (co)represent EU interests on the subject in the international arena, including the G8 context.

In addition, the growing role of the EU in the G8 has also been influenced by the EC/EU's augmented foreign policy ambitions over time. As it was increasingly sought to speak with one voice externally – something that was already emphasised within the European Political Cooperation (EPC) framework, but even more under the CFSP (Duke 2000) – increased coordination was needed in international institutions. At times the moderate integrative developments in ECP/CFSP can be closely linked to those within the summit. For example, once the Commission became formally represented in European Political Cooperation in 1981, it also became admitted to take part in all political G7 discussions that year (Hainsworth 1990: 14).

Growing Commission capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship

Increased capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship by the Commission itself have contributed to its emancipation in the G8 (Silverstri 1994: 10). As suggested in the PA literature, agents tend to gain autonomy the more they expand their resources, expertise, and

abilities for performing the tasks at hand (cf. Hawkins *et al.* 2006; Büthe 2010). This aspect is related to the previous one. On issues where it has gained (at least partial) competence, the Commission has often developed very considerable expertise and capabilities (both technical/substantive and in terms of negotiation/mediation). This certainly goes for issues such as trade, development aid and climate change. The Commission, in trying to justify its independent participation, has made considerable efforts to bring its expertise into the summit debates. It has been noted that the Commission's expert knowledge has added value to G8 discussions and generally benefitted the Commission's legitimacy at the summit (interview with member of the German G8 delegation). In particular, it has been argued that the Commission can often add a different dimension to the discussions because it tends to take a more holistic and comprehensive approach to policy problems than other actors, as has been noted, for instance, with regard to conflict prevention (cf. Rummel 2004: 118). Closely related, it has been held that the Commission often manages to substantially advance G8 debates due to skills of accommodation and consensus-building that G8 national governments sometimes lack (cf. Kirton 2004: 462).

Other issues further added to the Commission's gradually enhanced standing at the G8. Right from the start the Commission made sure that it was not only holding (increasingly) the same rights as other participants, but also the same responsibilities. G8 members are to comply with the targets agreed at previous summits. The Commission has never used the 'we are not a real member, and therefore we do not need to comply'-card (interview with Mc Swiney), an impression that is backed-up through the G8 Research Group's compliance scores (e.g. Kirton *et al.* 2006; Kokotsis *et al.* 2007; Erdman *et al.* 2008). In addition, the Commission contributes to the G8 through its privileged position of centrality and its substantial networks, not only at the European level where it is centrally located within a web of intergovernmental and transnational policy networks and relationships, but also more and more at the international level through its extensive number of external representations, the

growth of its bi-lateral agreements, and the special relationship it has developed, for example with the ACP countries (e.g. Rummel 2004; Smith 2003). On some issues, the Commission can further back-up its claims for substantial international actorness through financial means, as in the case of its enormous aid budget (Holland 2008: 352). In sum, G8 business is conducted in a more effective and successful manner through participation of the Commission.

In addition, on a number of issues, the Community has displayed considerable leadership at summits, which further enhanced its recognition in the G8 context. Early examples include those on joint macro-economic stimulus and energy measures in the late 1970s (Putnam and Bayne 1987: 248), which were followed by cases such as the initiative on the global information society (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998: 30), the Commission's proactivity on conflict prevention in the 1990s (Kirton 2004), or the case of western aid coordination to Central Eastern Europe (Niemann 1998), which will be elaborated below. Often, given the incompleteness of the PA contract, it is unclear how far the Commission can go and what level of proactivity it can pursue, especially in cases of 'mixed' or 'shared' competence. This has left the Commission with considerable discretion. On climate change, an issue where the Community and Member States share competence, the Commission has been able to demonstrate considerable entrepreneurship because an extensive interpretation of its (informal) 'mandate', flanked competent negotiation, has placed the Commission in the position of key broker on this issue in the G8 (Groenleer and van Schaik 2007: 985).¹⁰

Has an emancipated assertive agent manipulated principals' delegation preferences?

Preferences are here understood in a narrow sense, not as preferences over outcomes or substantive policies but as delegation preferences, i.e. interests in terms of the PA relationship.¹¹ So far we have argued that the agent, the Commission, has managed to move significantly beyond the original (delegation) preferences of the principals. It has been suggested, however, that Member States' preferences concerning the PA relationship also

changed over time, in a way which made Commission emancipation agreeable to them. Thus, it can (probably) *not* be claimed that Member State principals have lost control over their agents. Yet, an aspect that has thus far not received sufficient attention in the PA literature is the extent to which agents may contribute to principals' preference changes (regarding the degree of delegation) by skilfully asserting themselves (cf. Hawkins and Jacoby 2006: 212). As has been noted, it is relatively easy to assemble seemingly plausible *ex post* accounts of why given outcomes served the principals' preferences, while such accounts are difficult to refute, but also difficult to corroborate (Pierson 1996: 135). Given a certain bias in the literature in favour of assuming principal control in situations where their preferences correlated with outcomes (e.g. Pollack 2003), the burden of proof lies with those who want to argue that principals' very preferences were not exogenously given, but shaped/manipulated at least to some extent by agents to suit their purposes (not least in terms of greater autonomy).

Different degrees of preference endogeneity – here understood as the level to which agents manipulate principals' delegation preferences – can be suggested for the case of the EU in the G8: (1) that the degree of agent entrepreneurship and autonomy lies within principals' exogenously given preferences; (2) that the Commission developed (emancipated) and, in that process, became so useful that it affected principals' (hitherto) conservative preferences to gain more leeway; (3) or that the agent even takes the principal by surprise and thus manages to expand its 'mandate' when principals were not yet sure of their delegation preferences or whether they favoured Commission entrepreneurship. We tentatively claim that the second suggestion is more plausible than the first one. In the last part of our analysis, which constitutes a (sub-)case study on the Commission's role in obtaining the mandate for coordinating Western aid to Central and Eastern Europe, we also tentatively assert that the third suggestion can be made plausible.

The above analysis already goes quite some way to refute the first suggestion. Building on the above analysis of the factors explaining agent emancipation, it can be argued that the

Commission managed to add significant value to G8 debates, through its considerable expertise in many issue areas, its more holistic and comprehensive approach to policy problems, its skills of accommodation and consensus-building, its substantial policy-network, and through its entrepreneurship on several issues (Kirton 2004: 462). And this also seems to have impacted on EU-4 preferences with regard to the PA relationship, as can be inferred from our interviewing. For example, British participants involved in the G8 acknowledged that their attitude concerning Commission involvement became more positive, which induced them to be more lenient in terms of the institutions' involvement at the summit (cf. Hodges 1994). A German G8 official noted that he used to be prejudiced with regard to Commission involvement in the summits prior to taking up his G8 posting. 'But when becoming involved in G8 business, I realised that the Commission really creates extra value, not only because of its formal trade competence, but because Commission participants contribute with good knowledge, competence, ideas and the institutional memory of the Community. As a result, we generally take Commission initiatives very seriously at sherpa level and tend to give them some scope for manoeuvre' (interview with member of the German G8 delegation). Generally speaking the Commission's international role as well as its recognition within the G8 have grown to the extent that in the words of one European G8 official, 'because of this development it seems generally more accepted amongst the European members when the Commission becomes proactive and plays a more independent role in the G8 framework' (interview, by telephone, 2009).

It can also be argued that the Commission impacted on Member States preference formation concerning the level of delegation in a more indirect way. As described above, due to the progression of the European integration process, the scope of issues on which the Commission could actively participate at the summit substantially increased. And a deepening of competences over time in certain policy areas, in turn increased EU-4 acceptance of more intense and proactive Commission participation on those issues (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998).

It can be argued that for many of the issue areas that subsequently led to an increase of Commission scope of action in the G8, the Commission itself priorly helped to instigate important integrational steps. For example, it has been argued in the literature that the Commission played a proactive and integrative leadership role in the launch of the 1992 project (Sandholtz and Zysman 1989), in the communitarisation of policy areas such as the environment (Sbragia 1993), energy (Matlary 1997), information technology (Sandholtz 1992), as well as telecommunications (Sandholtz 1993; Fuchs 1994), and in paving the way for monetary union (Jabko 1999). These are all areas that led to expansions of the Community's external relations scope and also subsequently became relevant G8 matters. Since membership and the scope and density of Community provisions matter and influence Member States' preferences (Haas 1958; Sandholtz 1996; Pierson 1996), the Commission's contributions to the supranationalisation of these policy areas is also very likely to have affected the EU-4's boundaries of accepting Commission autonomy in the G8 framework. A more concrete illustration of how the Commission has influenced/manipulated principals' delegation preferences to its advantage, is the case of Western aid to Central and Eastern Europe.

The case of Western aid to Central Eastern Europe

This sub-section explores the case of first solid evidence of substantial Commission emancipation in the G8 framework, the Commission's pursuit and attainment of the mandate for the coordination of Western aid for Poland and Hungary, as granted by G7 heads of state/government at the Arch Summit in Paris in July 1989, followed by a 1990 G7 recommendation to have all aid by the Group of Twenty Four (G24) coordinated through the Commission (Ullrich and Donnelly 1998: 6). This has been regarded as the highest foreign policy responsibility that the Commission managed to realise for itself until that point (Ehlermann 1989). In addition, it has been identified as a turning point in the history of EU participation within the G7, in that the Commission's role and capabilities were explicitly

recognised through the delegation of this task (Silverstri 1994: 10). We argue that European G7 members were influenced in their preference formation by a skilful Commission that – on the basis of a significant Community track-record – managed to lobby effectively for obtaining the aid coordination mandate.¹²

In the early summer of 1989 the preferences of the EU-4 were overall moderately affirmative of Community involvement in the coordination of Western aid for the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). While the UK and Italy were still in the process of finding out what they wanted, Germany and France were both leaning towards an international response. In Germany a major national effort had apparently met some difficulties in the Bonn coalition (Ehlermann 1989: 24). France, fearing a redirection of Germany's interests towards the East, also preferred a coordinated solution, rather than a German bilateral single-handed effort (Kramer 1993: 222). However, it can be argued that these delegation preferences were substantially influenced by endogenous Community/Commission dynamics.

First, an important aspect conducive to obtaining the task of coordinating Western aid for the CEEC is related to the Community's achievements, experience and expertise as well as its soft power (and the expectations following from it). The Commission was in many ways ideally placed to fulfil the role it was assigned at the G7 summit in Paris (Andriessen 1989: 8). It had gained experience in development policy particularly with respect to the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries under the Yaoundé, Arusha and Lomé Conventions, and the Mediterranean countries under the Maghreb and Mashreq protocols (Grilli 1993). Moreover, the Commission had already been involved in dealings with the CEEC through the negotiations of the 'first generation' trade agreements, for example with Hungary in June 1988 and Czechoslovakia in December 1988 (de la Serre 1991: 310). In addition, it can be argued that the Commission had gained experience in higher political matters through its gradually increasing involvement in EPC which was recognised in the 1981 London Report and given a legal basis in the Single European Act (Nuttall 1992).

At the same time the successful and dynamic development of the Community in the late 1980s – along with the Commission’s fruitful involvement in ACP development and in EC-CEEC trade agreements – led to a series of demands and expectations by the outside world (to the Community’s soft power) that obliged it to respond to the events of 1989 and finally give responsibility to the Commission for the coordination of Western aid (Niemann 1998). Not only Eastern European states, but also the US increasingly expected and demanded Commission proactivity (Petersen 1993: 25-26). This also influenced EU-4 preference formation in terms of delegating authority to the Commission. As an Italian official argued, ‘of course we had taken note of the Commission’s achievements in relevant areas and the calls for a Community response. This became the dominant line of argument in our internal debate’ (interview Brussels 1996). And a German civil servant (rhetorically) asked ‘why should we try to piece together a national effort when Brussels has become a major player with significant aid know-how and experience in the region, also in face of our generally quite Communitarian policy outlook?’ (interview Bonn 1996).

Second, we argue that the Commission’s skilful ‘politicking’ and ‘manoeuvring’ has contributed to influencing EU-4 preferences and thus Commission autonomy. The attempt to translate new East-West dealings into enhancements of the Community’s foreign policy capabilities was a clear Delorist goal (Ross 1995: 48, 138). Despite much public surprise in Brussels and the rest of Europe, the coordination idea was by no means a new one. ‘Jacques Delors had been asking the [EC] Twelve for months to coordinate relations with the Communist Bloc’ (Ehlermann 1989: 23). Moreover, the Commission had not only lobbied among Member States, but also the US government. The desire to have joint discussions with the United States on East-West questions was first mentioned by Delors in February. In April Delors called for the co-ordination of export credits to the CEEC which irritated several Member States (Financial Times 25/04/1989). In June Delors went to Washington where he brought up the matter again during talks with President Bush. ‘Insiders claim that it was

Delors' own powers of persuasion about Eastern Europe over lunch with Bush which led the Americans to consider giving the Community the important new foreign policy role' (Ross 1995: 63). In the intra-EU negotiation/deliberation process the Commission, led by Delors, emphasised that Member States had already stated how important it was to mount a substantial effort, without too much delay, and that they were generally in favour of an internationally coordinated effort, 'while at the same time the Commission was ready to get off the starting blocks precisely for such a major coordinated effort' (interview, Brussels 1996; Ehlermann 1989).

Commission lobbying and networking also impacted on EU-4 preference formation processes. As a British civil servant stated, 'we were a bit surprised when we heard that the Americans were already on board. After that it was clear for us – both in Downing Street and in Whitehall – that the Commission would get the job' (interview, London 1996). And a 'neutral' observer added that 'it was strategically well done by the Commission to build alliances at an early stage, which put it into a pool-position when the actual debates begun' (interview, Brussels, Council Secretariat, 1996).

Hence, although EU-4 preferences concerning the aid coordination mandate were not generally unfavourable in terms of a Community solution at the time, and the case for endogenous preferences cannot be made water-tight, there is substantial reason to suggest that the Commission considerably influenced/manipulated national preferences formation processes; both subtly through Community soft power resonance abroad and increasing its own expertise and standing, as well as more assertively by resolute networking/lobbying. As a result, the Commission seems to have taken some of its principals – that were still in the process of developing their delegation preferences – by surprise. It can therefore be concluded that the Commission's own entrepreneurship also contributed to its emancipation here.

CONCLUSION

In view of the above analysis the following findings can be considered particularly noteworthy: firstly, we have shown – that despite a structurally disadvantaged starting position – the Commission has succeeded in emancipating itself within the G8. Over the years, it has improved its standing and autonomy as well as the scope of issues on which it is involved. Against the background of a (very) ‘incomplete contract’ this process of agent emancipation has been reinforced, above all, by the flexibility and informality of the G8, the evolving European integration process, and the growing Commission capabilities, standing and entrepreneurship. Overall, our analysis clearly challenges the (earlier) empirical finding that that ‘summitry is sucking the blood out of the Community institutions’ (Merlini 1984: 201). Instead, our investigation indicates that the Commission has over time gradually evolved into a mature actor that can, under certain conditions, fully exploit its substantial autonomy in the G8 context, as particularly the case of Commission coordination of Western aid for Central Eastern Europe has indicated.

Although the Commission has managed to move considerably beyond the original delegation preferences of the principals, Member States’ incentives to empower the agent also increased over time. Therefore, this is not a classical case of agent slack because overall the Commission’s behaviour and emancipation turned out to be not undesired by the principals. However, we argue that the agent may shape principals’ delegation preferences (in the first place), which has most clearly been shown in the case of the Commission’s successful quest for attaining the Western aid coordination mandate for the CEEC. Here the Commission through its expertise and experience, along with skilful networking and lobbying, managed to take principals by surprise and substantially manipulate their preference formation. More generally, we suggest that, PA analysis should pay more attention to endogenous preference formation (of principal’s delegation preferences being endogenously influenced by agents).

The existing scope for probing and further specifying the factors driving agent emancipation (particularly in terms of the informality of the PA relationship), and the

conditions facilitating agent autonomy in such context, the opportunity for (further) specifying the process, mechanisms and strategies of what we called ‘endogenous’ preference formation, and more generally the lack of comparison with other cases (esp. those with informal PA relationships), suggest that there is substantial ground for further research emanating from this study. Future work should, in light of its increasing international relevance, also analyse the EU’s position and role within the G20. The Commission remains a quasi-member in the context of the G8, but it has been a full-fledged member of the G20 from the beginning. The European Union is represented by both the President of the European Commission and the newly installed President of the European Council. The decision to grant the EU full G20-membership could be considered ultimate evidence of agent emancipation. A closer examination of the circumstances under which this membership was granted, and the current dynamic between the diverging European members, would thus be highly interesting and relevant.

Biographical notes: Arne Niemann is Lecturer of European Integration Studies and International Relations at the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam. Judith Huigens is Junior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Address for correspondence: Arne Niemann, University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science, OZ Achterburgwal 237, 1012 DL Amsterdam, The Netherlands; E-mail: a.niemann@uva.nl , Tel: +31-20-5252220.

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NOTES

¹ Even though the EC/EU is also represented by the Council Presidency, this article concentrates on the Commission as an agent, not least because the role of the Council Presidency in the G8 is marginal (cf. Huigens and Niemann 2009).

² For an overview of research on EU foreign (economic) policy that is based on the PA framework, see Dür and Elsig (2011 forthcoming).

³ The term 'Western (Economic) Summit' has been reserved for the 1975-1977 period. For the 1978-1997 time-span, we use 'G7'. For the post 1998 period we refer to it has the 'G8'. 'G8' and 'Summit' are also used when we refer to the grouping more generally.

⁴ As noted in the literature, smaller or less powerful states (tend to) favour (substantial) delegation as a means to constrain the more powerful states and because they cannot really influence international outcomes very much themselves (cf. Hawkins *et al.* 2006).

⁵ The 'Library Group' referred to informal sessions between American, British, French and German finance ministers that met (for the first time) in the White House Library in 1973 (Bayne 1992).

⁶ On diverging principal preferences in PA analysis see for example Nielson and Tierney (2003) and Hawkins *et al.* (2006). Generally, it has been assumed that the larger the preference heterogeneity among principals, the less likely principals will be to delegate. In this case, delegation (still) came about given the fact that the smaller Member States had no substantial other options, and the European G7 members faced substantial pressure by the non-participating Member States and the Community institutions to agree to at least some degree of Community representation.

⁷ A list of interviews – including interviewees' affiliations and functions/positions as well as information concerning the place and date of interviews – can be found at the end of this article.

⁸ This is not to be confused with the term 'proximate principals' that act in a double role as both principal(s) and agent(s). Cf. Nielson and Tierney (2003) and Elsig (2010 forthcoming).

⁹ Contrary to much of the literature that concentrates on the acts of delegation and highlights Member State principals' ability to control agents (Moravcsik 1998; Tsebelis and Garrett 2001), works on incomplete contracts emphasises that after the initial decisions on the institutional choice of delegation important *ex post* deliberations and negotiations may take place over how (institutional) ambiguities should be dealt with (cf. Farrell and Héritier 2007: 227ff).

¹⁰ Effective Commission participation and proactivity has been confirmed by performance studies conducted by the G8 Research Group. The Commission's performance results not only suggest output capacity that is comparable to that of the 'real' G8 members, the numbers also suggest that this performance is not correlated to that of the other EU Member States (G8 Research Group 2010; also see Huigens and Niemann 2009).

¹¹ When preferences are defined in terms of outcomes, our notion of 'preferences' would more aptly be referred to as 'strategies'. On the definition of 'preferences' (and 'strategies'), see Frieden (1999).

¹² The subsequent draws on Niemann (1998; 2006: ch. 2).

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