

Public Service Ethics in the European Commission ~ towards a model of ethical decision-making ~

Andreea NASTASE

PhD Student

CEU Department of Public Policy

Abstract

The focus of the research project presented in this paper is on understanding how ethical dilemmas are processed by civil servants in the European Commission. I take ethics to broadly refer to appropriate behaviour in public office (as such, it is connected to public roles and duties); an ethical dilemma represents a situation where judgment on what is ethical is usually perceived as difficult. To the extent that the European Union is a *sui generis* political entity, the ethical challenges of the supra-national environment are wholly singular. And since it is “at the heart of the Union” (Nugent 1997), it would be safe to assume that the European Commission showcases these challenges most visibly. There has been very little systematic academic investigation along these lines.

Research on the European Commission has largely left untouched the issue of public ethics. The few studies that have been written on this topic adopt a public management perspective and are primarily directed at benchmarking the reforms contained in the *White Paper on European Governance*. Other parts of the literature touch on the issues of socialization, identity and values, but without making explicit the implications for public service ethics. On the other hand, the burgeoning field of administrative ethics exhibits a clear tendency to deal with ethics in national contexts and explain decision-making mainly by individual psychological characteristics.

In developing a model of ethical decision-making attuned to the peculiarities of the European Commission, the project takes a neo-institutionalist perspective. It assumes that “institutionalized contradictions” (Christiansen 1997) - such as the need to be accountable simultaneously to the Member States and to the citizens of Europe, and the Commission's dual function of providing executive government and public administration - affect role conceptions of civil-servants, which in turn shade into differentiated resolution of ethically ambiguous situations. This perspective will be explored using the comparative method, taking Directorates General as units of comparison.

Prepared for the Annual Doctoral Conference 2009