The main purpose of this research was to explore the lobbying efforts by the Finnish government during the EU legislative process. As an EU member state Finland takes part in decision-making in the Council, which is the body representing interests of national governments in the EU. Alone or with the European Parliament, the Council decides which new EU legislation is adopted and in what form. It should however be noted that the Finnish bargaining-power in the Council is relatively low since we are one of the smallest member states in the Union. Accordingly, the Finnish government must look for alternative and supplementary ways of influencing decision-making on new EU legislation.

This research report draws on empirical data, which was obtained through a large number of interviews. Most of the interviewees are civil servants who work for the Finnish government or the European institutions. Data was further collected through interviews with some NGO representatives. All interviewees are Finnish citizens and they all have a considerable background in EU affairs.

We feel it would have been inadequate to study the Finnish impact on EU legislative process without briefly looking at how national EU policy is formulated in Finland. The basic features of our EU policy coordination system were established already in connection with Finland’s European Economic Area membership in 1994. All ministries are involved in handling EU affairs. The work distribution between the ministries is comparable to that in domestic matters. However, in EU affairs there is a stronger element of coordination and cooperation within the state bureaucracy. At the bottom of the coordination system, there are 36 sections or subcommittees. These subcommittees meet in two compositions: either attendance is limited to civil servants or interest groups are also present. If a subcommittee fails to reach agreement, the issue will be brought to the Committee for EU Matters comprising of high-
level officials and, ultimately, to the Cabinet Committee on EU Affairs. The formal co-ordination process is complemented by informal interaction where necessary.

In practice, the middle and lower ranking civil servants in the sectorial ministries usually play a large role in defining the Finnish position. Considerable responsibility is entrusted to these officials, based on their experience and substantive knowledge. Ministers or MPs, or even high-level officials, rarely possess similar expertise. The middle and lower ranking officials hold, in fact, considerable power as they prepare the policy options for the key decision makers.

The focus of attention in this study has been on how Finland tries to lobby the European institutions, especially the Commission, the Council (the president and the other member states) and the European Parliament. In the research report we have also tried to highlight in what ways Finland could further enhance its influence in the Union. The report does not focus on the formal negotiations, but on the informal co-operation between Finland and other interested parties. The set of expert interviews conducted for the research confirm that Finnish officials, like other member state representatives, have developed various strategies for influencing decision-making in the European institutions.

It appears that Finnish civil servants maintain relatively close links with the Commission bureaucracy. The majority of interviewees stressed that it is important to lobby the Commission as early as possible in the EU legislative process. The contacts can either be formalized in the shape of various committees and working groups, or conducted on an ad hoc basis. Despite the ever-growing volume of lobbying in Brussels, the Commission still attaches special attention to impartial and accurate information. The success of a small member state like Finland comes namely from expertise and information. Several interviewees maintained that Commission officials warmly welcome technical expertise when they are drafting new legislation.

For the representatives of the Finnish government, most important is to nurture relations with responsible desk officers and their superiors (Head of Unit, Director, Director General) at the Commission. Sometimes Commission civil servants of Finnish nationality or Finnish national experts may back up the government’s lobbying efforts e.g. by making it easier to gain access to key policy-makers in the Commission. The Commissioner appointed by Finland has usually not acted in the interest of

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1 See Bunse et al. 2005, 27.
his national government in a conspicuous way. Nevertheless the Finnish Commissioner and his cabinet are important partners for government officials and ministers, especially in files that are nationally exceptionally sensitive. The other Commissioners, who each hold a portfolio over a specific sector, are the last resort when a draft proposal contains serious problems *vis-à-vis* Finland. The Commissioner ultimately responsible for the file should only be appealed when all other means have failed to deliver the desired result.

Once the legislative proposal has been formally adopted by the Commission, attention shifts to national governments forming the Council, and to the European parliament. Despite the extended application of the co-decision procedure, the Council still remains ahead of the EP in its legislative powers. The most of the important policy decisions are taken by the heads of governments in the summits of the European Council. It should also be borne in mind that the role of the Commission in initiating and implementing legislation is overseen by national governments. Their civil servants participate in the hundreds of committees and working groups that draft the EU’s legislative initiatives and oversee their eventual implementation.3

Finland’s structural power in the Council is relatively low. According to the rules set by the Treaties, Finland has only 7 of all 345 votes in the Council under qualified majority voting. Thus, it is imperative that the Finnish representatives search for allies and partners. The weight of the Finnish arguments is best increased when working together with one or two big Member states or the Council presidency4. A good national representative can make use of the personal contacts and friendships he or she has built up over time, for example, before a formal meeting or at lunch time.

Several interviewees stressed how important it is to build alliances with all member states, depending on the issue as well as the national positions and sensitivities. In practice, however, Finland frequently aligns itself with the Northern liberals including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands5. Cooperation with Southern European countries, for example, may sometimes be virtually impossible due to different legislative traditions. On the other hand, the Finnish civil servants should not to be discouraged by language barriers or cultural differences. As one interviewee put it: “Finns should seek partners in those member states that they are not yet familiar with.”

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3 O’Brennan & Raunio 2007, 2.  
4 See Bomberg et al. 2008, 56–57.  
5 Bunse et al. 2005, 32.
The European Parliament’s legislative powers have grown significantly over the last decade. In deciding most of EU legislation, the Parliament enjoys equal power with the Council. Moreover, the Parliament has proved capable of extracting maximum influence from limited formal powers. Unfortunately, Finland’s efforts to influence the outcome of the Parliament’s decision-making have not yet developed accordingly. There is some interaction between Finnish officials and Members of the European Parliament – in most cases Finnish MEPs. Closer contacts with key decision-makers, such as rapporteurs, draftsmen/-women, committee administrators and political group leaders, need to be established apace. The assistants of the key MEPs as well as civil servants in the Parliament’s administration may also serve as valuable sources of information.

We will conclude with a few thoughts on how Finnish civil servants ought to present their case to the European institutions. First, they need to be sensitive to the timing and stages of the EU legislative process. A key to successful lobbying is to know precisely when to talk and to whom. Second, modern communication tools such as e-mails are made good use of, when Finnish officials maintain a dialogue with the institutions. However, personal contacts are still essential when trying to influence decision-making in the EU. Third, creativity is an asset in European negotiations. In short, he or she who manages to craft a compromise usually wins in Brussels.

References: