

Lobbying in the EU: The Case of Confindustria

In Brussels' so called "Quartier Européen" you can breathe a crisp air of construction: this particular atmosphere becomes tangible looking at the several building yards around Rond Schuman - the very heart of the area - and the thousands of offices close to the European Commission's Directorates General and the European Parliament.

In these offices, you can find the heterogeneous lobbyists' category: nowadays it is impossible to draw a classification because of their huge number and their flowing presence. Under the general name "lobbyists", consultants, single companies or associations of them, sub-national entities' representatives (beside the Member States' Permanent Representations), European and (inter) national federations are included. The common *raison d'être* of all these different actors is well explained by the President of SEAP (Society of European Affaires Practioners), an association created to deepen the cooperation between those who try to influence and those who have decision power and aimed at making it more transparent: "I represent the interests of my industry, a specific interest that can be considered as part of the general interest".

Besides the representative logic, lobbyists have a strong will to influence

public powers' decisions and to promote their own group's specific interest. For their part, EU Institutions support the pressure groups and look for a dialogue with them because of several reasons such as the need to acquire information and expertise in very technical areas of legislation or the awareness that lobbyists can act in favour of the Institution in terms of legitimation.

The great openness towards the lobbyists, who are becoming a sort of *trait-d'union* between citizens and EU Institutions, is part of a precise Commission and Parliament policy. The first is the privileged interlocutor for the pressure group because of its exclusive power to bring in a bill, while the Parliament has become a very important actor in the EU policy-making process since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. Both Institutions do not want to put into force any binding regulation for the pressure groups (they use only instruments of soft law), as they prefer to leave out any possibility of restriction to groups' accession to them, even if the lack of regulation can benefit the biggest, best organized and richest groups.

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Some of them enjoy a privileged status in the EU political process by participating to the social dialogue started by the Commission thanks to some Maastricht Treaty provisions. We refer here to the so called Eurogroups, the first to settle in Brussels, during the '50s; they represent the big business sectors' interests (but also the consumers' or the environmental ones) and solve their internal disagreements before presenting their proposal to the

Commission. This allows them to be more effective in supporting their specific interests.

Among the Eurogroups, the most influential is Unice (Union des Confédérations de l'Industrie et des Employeurs d'Europe), the collective voice of 30 national industrial federations in 22 different Countries: Directorates General policies are strongly influenced by Unice working groups' proposals on single specific issues, but not only. Unice has anticipated EU decisions both on the use of particular instruments to carry on certain policies (the practice of benchmarking, for example) and on big EU objectives: in a 1991 Unice document, you can read "We want a strong, prosperous and united Europe and, in the meantime, in-depth and enlarged. And we want it as soon as possible [...] We're ready to invest on this project and to support it totally".

Apart from working together in Unice, the single national industrial delegations (Confindustria for Italy) have all their own office in Brussels to spread quick and reliable information on EU policies to their associate members. Besides traditional activities linked to the passive phase of the EU law-making process, Confindustria's delegation in Brussels actively lobbies through several instruments. In the last few years, an attempt to intervene in the phases prior to the passage of some EU provisions has been made by the drafting of programmatic documents that identify Confindustria's priorities in different areas of legislation (enterprises, environment, energy, research, consumers' protection, employment and so on). These documents are written by the delegation's officers every six months: the third of them was presented

during the EU Council held in Copenhagen last December and it was sent to the Directorates General officers and to European Deputies. The document includes macroeconomic analysis and sectorial studies and includes proposals representing a balanced synthesis of Confindustria system's interests and needs, (as more as possible) in line with Unice's positions and in the framework of single DG programmes and policies. This ticklish work well represents the forum political environment stated especially by the Commission in order to increase social participation to EU life and make it more transparent.