



Thema: Universität Salzburg

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Interest group influence in the EU =

Wien (FWF) - Environmental and consumer protection have outstripped business interests in the EU. This is the conclusion drawn by an international study supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF. The reason behind this is a wish on the part of the European institutions to widen their legitimacy.

Brussels is synonymous with European bureaucracy, political elites and powerful business lobbying - at least that is what people generally tend to believe. "That's not an entirely true picture", says Andreas Dür, Professor of International Politics at the University of Salzburg, "since the influence in Brussels of classical lobbyists, i.e. groups associated with the business sphere, is far less than one might assume."

Dür explains the surprising findings in this way: "The data are plausible. With our international team, for the first time, we systematically gathered and analysed data on 70 legislative proposals from the European Commission and on more than 1,000 interest groups." Previously, there had mainly been case studies in this area. The FWF-funded project Interest group influence in the EU (INTEREURO, <http://www.intereuro.eu/public/> (<http://www.intereuro.eu/public/>)) provides a first comprehensive survey of this emotionally charged issue, and the results are clear and unambiguous.

OVERRATED INFLUENCE

"We surveyed the preferences of interest groups, for instance whether a group supports the introduction of an EU-wide regulation on the rights of bus passengers, and then compared these preferences with the results of the EU legislative process", explains Dür. In doing so, the research team found that business groups were far less successful than generally assumed in influencing EU decisions. They were even less successful than civil-society groups that defend broad interests such as environmental or consumer protection.

According to Dür, this can be explained by the current phase of European integration. "Until the 1990s, the EU was mainly about establishing the single market. This goal had absolute priority. Now that has been achieved." The question now arises for institutions such as the European Commission but also the Parliament, as to how they might continue to exercise authority. National governments can distribute funds to achieve that purpose, but this option is hardly available to the EU Commission and European Parliament. Therefore, they tend to place their focus on areas of public visibility such as environmental and consumer protection.

REGULATORY OPTIONS

"Let's take the example of abolishing roaming fees", says Dür. "There was and still is massive resistance from the telecommunication firms. And even if their resistance slowed down the process, ultimately it wasn't able to stop it." This constitutes a classic example of the EU Commission taking the side of consumers. Dür emphasises that this is not an isolated case and there are other examples in the fields of financial services and data protection. "In these spheres, the institution can demonstrate its purpose and relevance: it comes across as consumer-friendly, environmentally friendly, while extending its regulatory purview at the same time."

LOBBYING WITH EMOTION

In this process, organisations fighting for environmental and consumer protection are the European institutions' natural allies. While viewed as the classic antagonists of business-oriented lobbies, these interest groups are actually lobbyists themselves. "What is more, these interest groups have a different approach to lobbying than the business groups. They don't shy away from using emotional arguments, they present themselves as opposition, and they launch public campaigns, such as the ones against ACTA, TTIP and CETA." Might Brussels even be a secret stronghold of civil society and the NGOs?

"Not at all", says Dür. Business interests still have a much stronger presence in Brussels than anybody else. But they are no longer necessarily the more successful ones and have to come up against very effective competition.

According to the political scientist, all these aspects are giving rise to something new. "In the final analysis, what we see here is a politicisation of the European Union. We get a clearer sense of the clashing of interests than in the past." What would be required now is a mandatory register of lobbying groups such as exists in the USA. The debate on this is ongoing, but as yet this has not been implemented. Such a register would also benefit the business lobbyists, because they could demonstrate clearly what they achieve - and what not. That would be a step towards more transparency, according to the expert.

Personal details

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Publications

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