

# Pressure Groups and Lobbying in the EU

A pressure group is an organisation that tries to influence public policy in the interest of a particular cause. Lobbying refers to the attempt made by such a group to influence policy makers into adopting a particular course of action that will be beneficial to their cause. The number of pressure groups involved in lobbying in the EU has steadily increased since its creation and pressure groups now have a profound impact on policy making in the EU.

## Types of Pressure Groups

Pressure groups in the EU vary in size and in the causes they pursue. Some groups are associations of many national pressure groups whereas others are specific to one country or act solely at the EU level. The groups can generally be divided into two types: those pursuing private economic interests and those pursuing public or social interests.

*Private economic interest groups:* A vast array of private business and economic interests are represented in Brussels. Economic pressure groups are mostly interested in influencing competition policy, trade policy and other areas which affect their members' businesses. Business pressure groups outnumber public interest groups by approximately four to one. An example is the Committee of European Agricultural Organisations in the EU (COPA).

*Public or social interest groups:* These groups tend to be non-profit organisations representing public interests such as the environment, human rights and animal welfare. An example is Human Rights Watch. Environmental groups have been particularly efficient at pursuing their causes and have effectively influenced the Commission's sustainable development policies.

## How does Lobbying in the EU work?

Most pressure groups will target their lobbying at the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP). The Council of Ministers and the European Council are not lobbied as much as the other institutions, as it is more effective to target individual governments and ministers at the national level, who can then represent the pressure group's cause at the EU level.

The Commission is an important target for pressure groups due to its monopoly over the initiation of laws. Pressure groups lobby Directorates General that represent the particular policy areas that their cause relates to. The Commission welcomes input from pressure groups, as a channel of representation of *civil society*, and regularly engages in consultation with them. The Commission can provide funding and support for pressure groups pursuing public interests that request it.

The EP is less likely to consult pressure groups when making decisions, as it sees itself and national parliaments as the most effective channels of representation for EU citizens. In 1996, the EP established a register of pressure groups: groups had to sign the register and agree to a code of conduct to be given a pass granting them access to the EP, valid for just one year.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was established to channel the interests of pressure groups into EU policy making. However, pressure groups have tended to bypass the EESC due to its lack of policy-making powers and institutional weight, and have instead pursued links with the more powerful Commission and EP.

The Commission has consistently sought to improve relationships with pressure groups and the transparency of the lobbying process. In 2001 it launched a paper outlining general principles and minimal standards for interest group representation, which attempted to ensure that all relevant

interests were properly consulted in the policy-making process. The European Transparency Initiative (ITI) was subsequently launched in 2005 with a view to enhancing the accountability of EU funding provided for pressure groups and to impose stricter rules on lobbying. This led to the introduction of a Register of Interest Representatives in 2008, similar to that which existed in the EP. Pressure groups could voluntarily sign up to the register and by doing so pledged to observe a code of conduct which specified the standards that pressure groups need to meet in lobbying the Commission.

In June 2011, a new Transparency Register was launched, which is run jointly by the Commission and the EP and replaces both of the old registers. The register includes information about who is engaged in lobbying activity, what the cause is that they are trying to pursue, and what resources or funding are involved. It also includes a new code of conduct that those who sign on to the register must comply with.

## Facts and Figures

- In the week following the launch of the Transparency Register in June 2011, there were 171 registrants on the Register, and 3,874 registrants were in the process of transferring from the old Commission Register of Interest Representatives to the new Transparency Register.
- The European Women's Lobby, which is the largest alliance of women's NGOs in Europe and campaigns for equality between men and women, is comprised of more than 2,500 member organisations in 30 countries, and 21 Europe-wide networks.

## Arguments

### For

- Pressure groups play an important role in connecting EU institutions with their citizens and mediating between them, and provide the citizens with a voice between elections.
- The expert knowledge provided by pressure groups is invaluable to the Commission.
- The support provided by the EU for smaller and weaker pressure groups allows under-represented minorities a say in the policy-making process.

### Against

- Pressure groups are not really representative of society. Some represent such narrow interests that they can undermine the legitimacy and accountability of the EU institutions.
- The largest and richest pressure groups have the most influence; smaller and more specialised groups get sidelined.
- The Transparency Register remains voluntary, so there is no guarantee that citizens are being provided with the full picture of lobbying activities taking place.

## Quotes

*'Lobbyists can have a considerable influence on legislation, in particular on proposals of a technical nature, but their transparency is too deficient in comparison to the impact of their activities.'* Commissioner for Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud, Siim Kallas, on the launch of the ITI, 2005.

*'By launching this joint register for interest representatives between the Commission and the Parliament, I hope that we will help to instil a more solid culture of transparency in Brussels.'* Diana Wallis, Vice President of the EP, on the launch of the Transparency Register, 2011.

## Technical Terms

**Civil Society:** voluntary social organisations and relationships that form the basis of functioning society.

## Links

- [http://europa.eu/transparency-register/index\\_en.htm#en](http://europa.eu/transparency-register/index_en.htm#en)