

Lobbying the European Union: Institutions, Actors and Issues.
David Coen and Jeremy Richardson (eds.), Oxford University Press, UK, 2009, ISBN 978-0-19-920735-0

Book Review by Alexandra Pop*

Abstract: *The volume “Lobbying the European Union: Institutions, Actors and Issues”, collects 16 articles on interest group politics at EU level, focusing on the main elements of European lobbying – the existing relations between the EU institutions and the special interests, the main differences between NGO and business lobbying, the specific lobbying strategies adopted in EU’s main policy sectors or lobbying regulations. The volume captures the main changes that took place on the European lobbying scene in the last two decades, period in which most EU institutions developed new points of access for lobbyists, while the interest groups became more specialized. The success of an EU lobbying campaign seems to be determined by a combination of various factors such as: a good knowledge of the EU environment, a wise usage of both financial resources and expertise, direct lobbying complemented by an efficient usage of domestic routes and the capability of creating smart alliances.*

Keywords: *EU lobbying, interest groups politics, lobbying strategies, lobbying resources, lobbying regulation*

The debate on interest groups active at European level is not new but it is more actual than ever, EU lobbying registering a significant growth with each treaty change and deepening of EU competences. European lobbying is a concept that creeps into the debates on the European Union more and more often, but a full understanding of this complex phenomenon can represent a challenge even for those specialized in EU affairs. A “newbie” in the world of European lobbying will most probably have the impression of entering “a wonderland”, with paths as tangled as those encountered by a particular Alice in her adventures.

The good news is that there are academic works such as *Lobbying the European Union: Institutions, Actors and Issues*, edited by famous specialists in EU affairs David Coen and Jeremy Richardson that offer for those interested a guide to understanding what EU lobbying is all about. Organized into five main sections, the volume collects 16 very specific studies on EU lobbying, which complement each other and finally create

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one of the most complex and coherent collection on interest group politics. Focusing on the institutional and actors approach to lobbying, the volume transmits a clear message: for understanding EU lobbying one must understand the differences between those who lobby – whom they represent, which institutions they prefer to approach, in which stage of the decision making process they want to get involved, which resources they offer and what kind of lobbying strategy they adopt.

In the introductory section of the volume, editors Coen and Richardson promise that all these issues will be tackled by the volume's subsequent chapters. *Lobbying the European Union* revolves around three main factors: the multilevel feature of lobbying, lobbying resources and political approaches. The first issue is addressed in the second section of the volume, which focuses on European lobbying from an institutional point of view and offers an impressively complex analysis of the specific relations that each EU institution has with special interests. Naturally, the first study deals with the **European Commission** (EC), the EU institution which has the oldest and most complex relation with interest groups. Issues such as the Commission's dependence on external expertise, the multiple access points it offers to lobbyists, its transparency demands and the importance of "early lobbying", are all tackled by Pieter Bouwen. The focus then shifts to the **European Parliament** (EP) depicted by author Wilhelm Lehmann as an institution which became extremely attractive in the eyes of lobbyists in the last two decades, due to the gradual increase of its legislative powers. As for the **Council of Ministers** (CofM) and **European Council**, Fiona Hayes-Renshaw argues that they do not fully deserve their reputation of "impossible to lobby" bodies, as there are several successful ways of approaching them. Thus, for those "brave" enough to try to lobby them, there are various routes to take, varying from domestic lobbying to direct approaches, case in which earlier lobbying, started at the lower levels of the institutions, might be the smartest bet.

The volume does not limit its analysis only to those bodies that play the main roles in the policy making process, but it looks also to other EU actors as well. Thus, the last chapters of the *Institutional Demands* section focus on actors such as the **European Court of Justice** (ECJ) and the **European Economic and Social Committee** (EECS) which offer alternative lobbying routes and are more open to special interests than it's traditionally considered. For example, EECS can offer access to privileged information due to its consultations with the Commission, in the early stages of the decision-making process. Another chapter deals with **COREPER**, which is depicted as a valuable source of information or access point for lobbyists, since it has relations with both intergovernmental and supranational EU actors.

The third section of the book, entitled *Actor Supply*, focuses on the lobbying options of the main players in Brussels - business interests and NGOs – and the resources they use as currencies for more political influence. David Coen does a solid job of explaining the success of **business lobbyists** in Brussels, pointing out to the capacity of business players to make themselves essential to the EU institutions, due to their financial resources and expertise and efficient usage of both domestic routes and direct EU lobbying. By contrast, **environmental NGOs** are less resourceful but they have also managed to successfully adapt to the ever changing environment in Brussels, by establishing a very good collaboration with the EC, by creating smart alliances within their sphere of influence, but not restricted to it, and by knowing how to use the media in their advantage.

The fourth section of the book is the most specific one as it deals with **case studies**, concrete examples of EU lobbying strategies applied in different policy arenas being offered to the reader. These sectoral studies show us that the interest groups in Brussels did not have similar evolutions, some groups becoming active faster than others, evolutions usually depending on the strengths of EU's competences in the policy domain they represent. Thus, while some special interests are visible and active in Brussels, such as those active in EU's **trade policy**, others are developing slower, for example those representing the **health policy** sector, in which the EU still has limited competences. However it is very possible that health lobbying will further develop at EU level, due to the desire of special interest actors to influence the EU agenda and the EC's quest for more legislative powers.

Health related issues are raised again in one of the most interesting chapters of the volume, dealing with a controversial episode in the history of EU lobbying, the **tobacco advertising ban** policy. The authors successfully manage to compare the different lobbying strategies and routes adopted by the two main "camps" involved in the debate, the well resourced *tobacco industry* and the then developing *European public health interest groups*. While the tobacco industry's preferred to directly lobby the national policy makers from the Council of Ministers, the public health interest groups worked mostly with the Commission and focused on developing awareness campaigns. The main achievement of this study is that it manages to illustrate the differences between the business and NGO lobbying but also to emphasize the institutions' availability and preferences in granting access to these groups. It also shows that the EU actors themselves can contribute to the development of such groups – the Commission being the example given by the author in this regard – as its need for external back-up in promoting the anti-tobacco law determined it to fund and support the development of public health lobbying at European level.

The importance of being able to quickly adapt must be one of the main themes of the volume, being stressed in almost every study of the book's fourth section. It is highlighted in Grant and Stocker's chapter on **agro-industry lobbying**, the authors giving examples of representative groups that adopted different, more or less efficient, approaches to lobbying the EU. COPA's decline from being one of the main interlocutors of the EC regarding the agricultural policy, contrasts with the rise of CIAA, a less cohesive group which however managed to establish itself as one of the most influential discussion partners of the EC and EP. The author concludes that those special interest groups that wish to survive in an environment that constantly changes, should be able to use all the resources they possess in a proactive manner, to develop successful routes and strategies in lobbying the EU. The same theme can be noticed in the chapter on **social policy**, a sector that had a surprising evolution from EU's underdog to one of the fields in which EU is very active. Concepts such as "EU's social partners", "sectoral corporatism" and "bargain legislation" are explained to the readers, who have the chance to discover a surprising EU arena in which the social actors are formally included in the decision-making process by the EC, but only "the lucky few" can have a final say.

As no volume on lobbying the EU would be complete without references to **lobbying regulation**, a whole chapter deals with analyzing the degrees of lobby regulating of the main EU Institutions, the focus falling of course on the Commission. Its trajectory in

regulating lobbying is described as a rather slow one, the small steps approach adopted being illustrated by the few measures taken in time, generally considered insufficient and weak. Author Daniela Obradovic argues that the EC's refusal to introduce stricter rules and to address serious ethic issues proves that full transparency remains for now a utopian goal, especially as long as the EU's general approach to lobbying will remain inconsistent. In the conclusive chapter of the volume, Coen and Richardson address another problematic aspect of EU lobbying - the difficulties of estimating the overall **impact of interest groups**, due to their incredible variety, as showed throughout the volume.

All in all, the volume *Lobbying the European Union* is an extremely satisfying reading. From time to time, it can be noticeable that some author's opinions seem to differ from other views expressed throughout the book, but it is understandable as the volume collects writing pieces from a variety of experts. Despite the small inconsistencies, the book gives the impression of a gigantic puzzle, whose pieces fit together, offering a coherent final image. All contributing authors do a solid job in dealing with their subjects in a comprehensive and professional way, yet using an unpretentious language.

Being written nearly 20 years after its predecessor (*Lobbying in the European Community*, edited by Mazey and Richardson), this volume manages to capture all the important evolutions of the last two decades – the explosion of interest groups activity at EU level and the specialization of European lobbyists being in accordance with the changes the EU itself went through (the doubling of its member states, the gain of new competencies, the EP's growing role in the policy process, the more recent economic and financial crisis). Only time can tell how interests representation at EU level will evolve in the future but it is safe to assume that lobbyists will continue to consolidate their influence at the highest levels of the EU political system.