

INTEREST REPRESENTATION AT THE EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL: THE CASE OF LITHUANIAN ENVIRONMENTAL INTEREST GROUPS

Liucija Mazilyte, University College London, lmazilyte@yahoo.com, 37037223090
Romualdas Povilaitis, Lithuanian Agriculture University, povilaitis46@yahoo.com

Abstract. An increased number of competences transferred from the national to the European level and a high number of the European Union regulations and directives allow expected changes in traditional patterns of interest representation. Since the 1990s, one can observe increased attempts by business as well as public interest groups to influence decisions at the supranational level. However, not all the interest groups are willing to *Europeanize*, e.g. transfer their activities from the national to the European level. Factors such as organizational arrangements, resources, goals as well as national institutional context may determine their activities' changes. This article examines the case of Lithuanian environmental interest groups and their level of Europeanization. Considering the comparatively short EU membership and rather weak tradition of interest representation, the analysis of environmental interest group activities shows to what extent the EU factor shapes and transforms activities and strategies of non-profit interests. The research combines qualitative data from the interviews with the stakeholders as well as quantitative data of interest groups' organizational resources.

Key words: European Union, interest groups, Lithuania, representation, environment

Introduction

Since the 1990s, a tendency of increasing interest representation of various groups at the European Union level can be seen. Despite the fact that business groups are the most active actors trying to lobby the EU institutions during the various stages of the decision-making process (Greenwood, 2003), there is a general growth of *public interest* representation. On the one hand, the EU institutions are becoming more open. On the other hand, taken into account the fact that the EU regulations affect many spheres of citizens' lives, the growth of *public interest* groups, such as environmental NGOs' or consumer rights advocates', is a possible outcome. More generally, interest groups use various channels of influence as well as different timing to influence the decision outcomes at the EU level. They differ in their goals, connections, reputation, and material resources used in order to influence the decisions. According to S. Hix, only a few European – level environmental associations are “insiders”, e.g. hold formal representational structures at the EU institutions (Hix, 2005). Nevertheless, environmental groups attempt to influence the policy outcomes and use well developed strategies.

One can also look at the interest groups' representation from the domestic perspective. Transferring activities from the national arena to “Brussels” is a processes defined as Europeanization of interest groups. Even though Europeanization is a highly contested concept, one can agree it not only defines processes at the European institutions' level but also takes into account domestic changes caused by EU membership. However, not all interest groups are motivated to Europeanize. The case of Lithuanian environmental groups and their level of Europeanization is

therefore an important research area due to various reasons. Firstly, it would help to outline to what extent Lithuanian environmental interest groups (and what type of groups) are willing to be represented at the European level. Secondly, it presents the patterns of strategies they use in order to have an impact on the decisions. Finally, it allows analyze more general impact of Europeanization on interest group's activities at the national level. In this research, we apply models presented by scholars such as H. Kluever, J. Beyers and B. Kerremans to the Lithuanian case and check to what extent domestic institutional context, interest group's representation at the national level and critical resources restrict activities' Europeanization. In-depth structured interviews with the stakeholders of the most active Lithuanian environmental NGOs are used together with the quantitative data from their websites and reports.

1. Theoretical Background: “European” vs “National” Routes of Interest Representation

In the traditional way, interest groups' goals are to have an effect on the policy outcomes at the national level. Interest groups unite various smaller associations that share common goals and tend to conduct lobbying activities in the executive or legislative bodies. As already mentioned before, the growth of the EU regulations not only on the market relations created a new arena where the interest groups can switch their attention and lobbying resources. However, the very concept of Europeanization (in our case – Europeanization of interest groups) is contested. We find a wider definition by M. Vink most plausible, where the Europeanization is treated as “(...) a domestic change caused by European Integration” (Vink 2003).

National interest groups vary in their goals, resources and to what extent they are willing to choose the “Brussels route” to achieve certain policy outcomes. It would be too superficial to claim that material resources are the only reason why certain groups, e.g. large business companies, are better represented at the EU level. Scholars emphasize various reasons why interest groups switch or do not switch their activities to the EU level. H. Kluever presents her model of interest representation while combining two approaches: resource mobilization and rational choice institutionalism, where the former emphasizes the role of material resources and the latter looks at the way institutional context shapes and restricts groups' activities. While distinguishing between interest groups that declare a need to transfer their attention and strategies to the EU institutions and those who remain active at the national level, she claims that the material resources the group possesses is not the only determining factor. H. Kluever's main argument refers to the “embeddedness” of an interest group in the national institutional context, namely the degree of representativeness at the state's level including contacts with the officials, dependence on the national funds and

involvement into the decision-making process (Kluever 2010). To some extent similar approach is offered by J. Beyers' and B. Kerremans' that neglect the most influential role of the material resources (Beyers, Kerremans 2007). According to those scholars, the factors implementing Europeanization is interest group's immediate environment, critical resource dependency and policy domain. If a group is well represented at the national level, dependent on government funds and raises issues important in that particular national context, its level of Europeanization is rather low (Beyers, Kerremans 2007). One can also agree it is the *issues* interest groups raise and their declared goals determine representation at the national or supranational level. Since environmental groups raise global issues, one can expect them to be more willing to Europeanize and achieve European-level policy outcomes.

2. Lithuanian Environmental Interest Groups and Europeanization: Research Design

Lithuania is a new Member State accessed the EU in 2004 together with seven other Central-Eastern European countries. Furthermore, it is a post-communist country, re-gained Independence in 1990, and has a rather short tradition of interest representation and intermediation. One has to keep it in mind while applying foreign models to the case of Lithuania.

However, models used by foreign scholars to test Europeanization of interest groups in Western countries can be applied to the case of Lithuanian environmental groups and their activities at the national and supranational levels. Following the assumptions of H. Kluever, J. Beyers and B. Kerremans, we test to what extent the embeddedness of an interest group and its resource dependency restricts its Europeanization. We assume that the more interest group is involved into decision-making process at the national level, the less willing it is to Europeanize. Secondly, we assume that critical resource dependency on the domestic funding restricts the Europeanization as well. By the same token, we look at the strategies environmental groups use in order to influence the decisions at both levels.

While using the method of in-depth interviews with 5 most active groups, we tended to find out to what extent Lithuanian environmental interest groups consider themselves represented at the national level, e.g. embedded in the Lithuanian institutional context. Furthermore, we asked representatives of the groups to outline their strategies used to influence the decisions at the national level, contacts with the officials, funding etc. A second part of interviews was related to the EU factor: groups' declared importance of the EU decisions on its activities, contacts with the EU institutions, or monitoring of the EU directives. Analysis of the groups' websites and reports allowed us to analyze their resource dependency, funding venues, membership and activities.

3. Results and Discussion: Level of Europeanization and Institutionalization

We divide our results into the following passages on membership in the European associations, contacts with the EU officials and participation in the meetings, critical resource dependency and embeddedness into the domestic institutional context.

Membership in the European Associations

Most of the environmental NGOs are members of the European environmental associations. The majority of stakeholders interviewed point out that a Lithuanian “voice” can be better heard while represented through bigger and more influential associations that already have a reputation in the European institutions and use well developed lobbying strategies. For instance, Lithuanian Wind Power Association declares an active membership and considers itself well represented through the European Wind Energy Association. Groups declare active membership in transnational associations that allows them not only be represented at the European level but also gain important information and learn sophisticated lobbying strategies. Even though it is difficult to measure the actual input of Lithuanian environmental NGOs into the activities of the European level associations, their motivation to participate indicates willingness to Europeanize.

Stakeholders also express a need of associations that unite NGOs from “new” Member States from Central and Eastern Europe in order to “counterweigh” “old” ones and their position. A difference between Member States in terms of environmental issues was expressed by a representative of Lithuanian Environmental NGOs Coalition: the “new” Member States are still behind Western standards and face different challenges while complying with all the requirements of environmental policies’ implementation. Their voice in front of the European Commission or European Parliament needs to be strengthened through Central-Eastern European associations (Respondent from “Atgaja”, 2011). However, Active participation in the decision-making process at the EU level should be considered, as well as changes in the domestic activities.

Contacts with the European institutions, participation in the meetings

Some groups declare they tend to contact the EU officials (Lithuanian Wind Power Association or “Atgaja”). Their “targets” are Directorate General Environment, Directorate General Climate as well as members of the European Parliament, mostly representatives of “Green” parties. Those contacts are rather new and not institutionalized yet, however, their very existence shows important attempts of communication with the EU institutions. It is evident from the interviews that

Lithuanian environmental interest groups possess high levels of information on European environmental issues, directives and other regulations. On the other hand, they also express a more skeptical view towards general representation of interest groups at the European level. According to them, DG Environment invites various groups from different Member States into “round table” discussions, however, there is no guarantee their opinion and position will be taken into account in the decision-making process (Respondent from the Environmental Centre for Administration and Technology, 2011). This remark outlines a good understanding of the problems of interest representation at the EU level: there is no guarantee that an environmental group’s position will be reflected in the decisions, they are only invited into the consultation procedures. Similar patterns exist at the national level, however, the domestic interest groups have more access to monitoring activities. On the other hand, as we can see from the interviews, Lithuanian environmental interest groups do visit European institutions and participate in the discussions, allocate material resources for those activities, if they assume a broader benefit will be achieved. Analyzing their trends of behavior, one can treat them as rational players counting costs and benefits of the attempts to influence the decisions at the supranational level.

Willingness to Europeanize: critical resource dependency and embeddedness into the national context

Our initial assumption that an interest group is less willing to Europeanize when it is dependent on the national governmental funding, is not supported by empirical evidence. Even though scholars use the factor of government funding in their analyses of Western cases, this factor does not exist in Lithuania. None of the analyzed NGOs are dependent on governmental funding: their revenues consist of membership fees and resources of project funding (mostly EU-funded projects). The dependence on the EU funding is related to interest groups’ Europeanization from two sides. Firstly, once the group is supported by the EU funds, its activities are restricted and their goal remains to ensure fulfillment of the EU requirements on funding. On the other hand, the groups tend to influence decisions on environmental policies, thus they seek to be heard at the institutions’ level and use material resources from their projects. This dependency, to some extent, may restrict the group’s willingness to Europeanize. It is not the lack of resources but the type of NGOs funding that has an impact on their activities at the supranational level.

Another aspect is the *history* of Lithuanian environmental NGOs. While some of them, for instance “Atgaja” was created in the late 1980s, quite a few were established by the initiative of the EU before the accession. Even though the organizational structure, goals and membership might

have changed, the existing ties with the European Commission remain. One can agree, this factor may reinforce more active interest representation at the European level and involvement into the decision-making process.

The other assumption that the group's embeddedness into the domestic context restricts its Europeanization can be partly supported in the case of Lithuanian environmental interest groups. Their proclaimed involvement into the decision-making process, especially after the establishment of Lithuanian Environmental NGOs Coalition (Coalition) five years ago, shows their actual embeddedness into domestic institutional context. All interviewed environmental groups claim the governmental institutions welcome their position on various policies, discuss issues. Nevertheless, the groups tend to use the factor of the EU membership and a need of compliance with the EU directives in their negotiations with the national government. Furthermore, it reflects a more general tendency of greater *institutionalization* of environmental interest groups in Lithuania. It does not mean that they don't vary in their goals and activities. Firstly, they show organizational capacities in presenting their united position through Coalition. Secondly, it encourages a higher level of cooperation, sharing information and learning. Those processes are parallel to the process of Europeanization. It opens a wider perspective for future research, where the impact of interest groups' institutionalization and Europeanization on the consolidation of democracy can be tested.

Conclusions

1. Lithuanian environmental interest groups are increasingly affected by the processes of Europeanization. Even though they do not transfer their activities from the national level to the European one directly, they do evaluate contacts with the European institutions' officials, are members of European environmental associations and monitor decision-making processes.
2. A double-sided relationship with the European institutions is evident, though to some extent. A number of environmental organizations are directly dependent on the European funding, some of them were originally created by European Commission. They critically assess European environmental policies, monitor new European-level decisions and, where applicable, use "the EU factor" in their domestic lobbying activities.
3. Process parallel to the Europeanization of the activities is an *institutionalization* of the relations with the domestic governmental institutions. The two processes are related to each other and outline an active presence of environmental NGOs and their rational decisions. Their willingness to Europeanize seems to be an outcome of cost-benefit

analysis rather than determined by the level of information or material resources. The activities and attempts to influence environmental policies are more related to the national level today, however, the degree of attention paid to the European-level processes is increasing.

Appendix

In-depth interviews with the representatives of the following NGOs: Environmental Centre for Administration and Technology, “Atgaja”, “Lithuanian Wind Power Association”, “Baltic Environmental Forum”, “Lithuanian Environmental NGOs Coalition”.

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