

Czech Environmental NGOs: Actors or agents in EU multi-level governance?

Heiko Pleines (Research Centre for East European Studies, Bremen)

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is a unique case of independent states transferring considerable powers to a supranational body in order to meet the challenges of changing societies and globalisation. As policy-making powers are transferred to the supranational level, groups representing societal interests have to become active at the supranational level. Recent research on the role of interest groups at the EU level has been focused on two topics. First, it has been broadly discussed whether the integration of interest groups (or 'civil society organisations', in EU parlance) can help compensate for the perceived deficit of democracy at the EU level, attributed to the inefficacy of the EU parliament. Second, issues of multi-level governance, i.e. of the division of decision-making powers and implementation of directives between the still-sovereign member states and the EU, have been widely examined.

The eastern enlargement of the EU has posed new challenges in both areas. On the one hand, the number of member states has risen from 15 to 27, thus making unanimous agreements more difficult to reach. On the other hand, representatives of the new member states, including their interest groups, deserve equal representation in EU decision-making processes. Particularly with regard to the representation of interest groups, fears have been voiced that the newcomers will not be capable of meaningful participation in EU governance due to the weak state of civil society as well as lack of experience in their post-socialist countries.

When the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004, considerable competencies in the field of environmental policy were transferred to the EU level. Accordingly,

Czech environmental NGOs, which are among the strongest civil society organisations in the Czech Republic, were also faced with the challenge of EU multi-level governance, and in particular the challenge of gaining access to relevant decision-making processes at all levels. As their influence is likely to differ between the different levels, with influence at the EU level being weaker at least in the initial phase of EU membership, Czech environmental NGOs need powerful partners if they want to be heard. Here the question arises whether they remain independent actors or risk to become instrumentalized as agents of other actors. In this case study we will examine how Czech environmental NGOs have responded to this challenge.

2. Representation at the EU level

At the EU level decision-making procedures in the field of economic policy start with the European Commission putting forward a proposal which is then passed on to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. As the EU has acquired an important role in shaping environmental regulation of member countries, environmental NGOs as well as representatives of industries having an environmental impact are active at the EU level. Environmental NGOs participate in EU expert panels and in preparatory and implementation committees, contributing to the formulation of EU policies, programmes and initiatives. In addition, NGOs regularly form part of the EU delegation to international environment-related negotiations, such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio and most sessions of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

In order to coordinate their engagement at the EU level and to increase their impact, environmental NGOs have signed on with a number of European associations with representative offices in Brussels. The biggest environmental NGOs and NGO associations active in Brussels have formed the Green 10, which consist of BirdLife International (European Community Office), Climate Action Network Europe (CAN Europe), CEE Bankwatch Network, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Federation of Transport and Environment (T&E), EPHA Environment Network (EEN), Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE), Greenpeace Europe, International Friends of Nature (IFN), and the WWF European Policy Office.

According to its mission statement, the Green 10

work with the EU law-making institutions – the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers – to ensure that the environment is placed at the heart of policymaking. This includes working with our member organisations in the Member States to facilitate their input into the EU decision-making process.

While campaigning at EU level, Green 10 NGOs encourage the full implementation of EU environmental laws and policies in the Member States; lobby for new environmental proposals, as appropriate; work with the EU institutions to ensure that policies under consideration are as environmentally effective as possible; promote EU environmental leadership in the global political arena.

In terms of public awareness raising, Green 10 NGOs inform their members and the wider public of environmental developments at EU level, and encourage them to make their voice heard; give voice to thousands of locally-based associations, which would otherwise have no access to EU decision-makers; contribute to the strengthening of civil society across Europe through training in advocacy skills, policy analysis and the EU decision-making process.

In summary, the role of environmental associations at the EU level is twofold. On the one hand they lobby EU bodies on environ-

mental issues in order to influence related EU regulations. On the other hand they cooperate with EU bodies (and especially with DG Environment of the European Commission) in order to compel their national governments to implement EU guidelines. Whereas the first task requires strong representation in Brussels, realization of the second task demands political influence at the national, regional and local levels.

Whereas Czech environmental NGOs can boast considerable experience in national politics (having joined the fray by the late 1980s), lobbying in Brussels is a newer task (with official contacts first starting in 1999). Two years after their country joined the EU, 13 environmental NGOs from the Czech Republic had become full members of at least one Green 10 partner; of these, four are national branches of international NGOs. The highest number of Czech environmental NGOs can be found in the European Environmental Bureau (EEB).

Czech environmental NGOs can certainly be said to profit from their engagement at

NEWGOV Policy Briefs

NEWGOV Policy Briefs are produced by the Integrated Project “New Modes of Governance – NEWGOV”. The pan-European project examines the transformation of governance in and beyond Europe by mapping, evaluating and analysing new modes of governance. It is funded by the European Union under the Sixth Framework Programme from 2004 up to 2008. NEWGOV includes 24 projects and 3 transversal task forces and has more than 100 participating researchers from 35 institutions in Western and Eastern Europe.

Turn to our website www.eu-newgov.org which offers topical information concerning the project, in particular publications, re-ports, articles and working papers of the Research Consortium for download, links to other information sources relating to the project's research fields, as well as regularly updated information on events organised in the framework of NEWGOV.

the EU level. First, they become integrated into an international network. This helps them to professionalize not only through direct training but also through the additional knowledge and experience they gain, including, among other things, improved language and communication skills, acquaintance with different organizational models, and access to additional expert knowledge abroad. Second, they receive information and advice about funding opportunities at the EU level. Third, they acquire first-hand information about EU environmental policies, which gives them an edge in negotiations with Czech state agencies. Fourth, they have the power to monitor the activities of Czech representatives at the EU level. However, as they participate only indirectly in EU decision-making processes through their partnerships with Green 10 members, they do not have any visible impact on EU policy.

Measured by the accumulated number of member organizations in the Green 10, Czech environmental NGOs fall in the middle range. Of the post-socialist EU member states, only Hungary (with 19 NGOs) is better represented than the Czech Republic. However, the NGOs from the five most active countries account for 45% of Green 10 member organizations, whereas NGOs from the Czech Republic have a share of only 4%.

In addition, it has to be noted that there is no shortage of tension among the Green 10 partners as they focus on different topics, exhibit varying degrees of willingness to compromise and pursue distinct lobbying strategies. WWF and Birdlife, for example, concentrate on nature preservation and are willing to join forces with businesses and politicians to reach compromises, thereby pursuing a cooperative strategy of lobbying based on voluntary support and negotiations. Greenpeace, on the other hand, zeroes in on industry-related issues such as emissions and nuclear policy and is much more confrontational. Accordingly, its lobbying strategy is often predicated on public pressure and showdowns with business and politics.

These tensions make it even harder for smaller environmental NGOs such as those from the Czech Republic to work in Brussels. One result of the divisions within the Green 10 is that much of the environmental NGOs'

work at the EU level is still being done individually by the partners. Furthermore, the internal tensions limit the ability of the Green 10 to provide adequate support to smaller member NGOs. Last but not least, the infighting makes it harder for Czech NGOs with different Green 10 affiliations to cooperate and sometimes actually ends up alienating NGO members active in Brussels from their national organizations.

3. Conclusion

The EU has promoted the internationalization of Czech environmental NGOs and has contributed to their professionalization. EU regulation has also strengthened the position of environmental NGOs within the Czech Republic. As a result, Czech environmental NGOs regularly support EU envi-

Further reading

This policy brief is based on research carried out within the NEWGOV project no. 24 on "Democratisation/Participation of Civil Society in New Modes of Governance". The project is focused on the accountability implications of the participation of interest groups in the new forms of social and economic governance within an enlarged European Union. It analyses whether the involvement of civil society groups in European social and economic governance enhances or hinders accountability/answerability in the Union; identifies new mechanisms for ensuring the accountability/answerability of civic groups engaged in governance; and sets out guidelines for the design of new accountability/answerability mechanisms. Although the principal focus of the project is directed towards new modes of governance at the EU level, the particular emphasis will be placed upon the accountability situation of civic groups emerging in the new EU member states. The project is co-ordinated by the Faculty of Law at the University of Amsterdam (UvA).

Further information can be found on the NEWGOV Website in the [special section](#) of project no. 24.

ronmental policy at the national and regional levels. They promote and monitor the implementation of EU regulations. In this respect they cooperate with the European Commission, and specifically with DG Environment. However, Czech environmental NGOs have thus far failed to gain momentum as a lobbying force capable of influencing EU decisions. They are too small to make a difference in the major international environmental associations they have joined at the EU level.

Accordingly, the impact of the engagement of Czech environmental NGOs at the EU level is felt primarily at the national and regional levels within the Czech Republic itself. The EU has a much bigger impact on Czech environmental organizations than the latter have on EU decision-making processes. In fact, pre-accession EU support has not so much helped to integrate Czech environmental NGOs into EU decision-making structures, but has considerably improved their capacity to influence domestic politics at home. In so doing, the EU Commission has strengthened an ally for the implementation of EU environmental regulation in the Czech Republic.

This relation between the DG Environment and the environmental NGOs can be attributed to common interests, as both want to strengthen environmental regulation. However, in cases of conflicting interests, Czech environmental NGOs are not in a position to defend their position at the EU level. In this respect they have not yet mastered the challenge of multi-level governance. This assessment also questions the claim by the

Bibliography

- Heiko Pleines, Kristýna Bušková (2007), "Czech environmental NGOs. Actors or agents in EU multilevel governance?", in: *Contemporary European Studies*, 1/2007, pp. 37-50.
- Daniela Obradovic, Heiko Pleines (eds.) (2007), *The Capacity of Central and East European Interest Groups to Participate in EU Governance*, Stuttgart: Ibidem-Publishers.

EU Commission that the integration of civil society organizations is the best way to increase the democratic legitimacy of EU decision-making.

This situation has important implications for an analysis of multi-level governance. First, it shows that the integration into international umbrella organizations, which is being favoured by the EU Commission, does not necessarily give individual members a voice in EU governance. Second, and more importantly, it demonstrates that the integration of NGOs can be in the direct political interest of the EU Commission, as it can, at least in some policy fields, use NGOs to monitor the implementation of EU policies at the national and regional level. Thus, NGOs provide not only – and in the case of Czech environmental NGOs not even primarily – a link between national societies and the EU Commission, but they offer a further control mechanism between the EU Commission and the national and regional governments.