

‘The Internal Legitimacy of European Interest Groups. Analyses of National Interest Groups Perspectives’

PhD by Samuel Defacqz (Université catholique de Louvain),
supervisors: Virginie Van Ingelgom, Benoît Rihoux & Theodoros
Koutroubas.

Stéphanie Yates*

This thesis examines the legitimacy of European Interest Groups (EIGs), as perceived by their national interest groups’ (NIGs’) members. The subject appears particularly relevant considering the valorization of an emerging participatory model within European institutions that aims to give a direct voice to NIGs, bypassing their European representatives. ‘During the last decade, the EU shifted its EU-society relations model from the promotion of consultations with European groups (partnership model) to a system where citizens and national groups should play a more important role (participatory model)’ (p. 1). Thus, the current context is marked by a certain mistrust of EIGs, fed by a ‘puzzling disconnection’ (p. 1) between them and the NIGs they pretend to represent.

Starting from this perspective, the author asked ‘What are the perceptions of “European interest groups’ legitimacy” by national interest groups’ (RQ1) (p. 8)? He also wanted to see ‘Under which conditions do national interest groups perceive their policy positions as congruent (or not congruent) with the policy positions of their

European interest groups’ (RQ2) (p. 8)? Hence, for the purpose of this dissertation, legitimacy is understood both as a perception (RQ1) and as an assumption (RQ2): ‘in order to consider an EIG as legitimate, its member organisations (NIGs) have to perceive their EIG’s positions as congruent with their own positions’ (p. 10). To answer the first question, the author conducted interviews with a total of 111 staff members of NIGs based in five member states of the EU and then proceeded to an inductive qualitative analysis (conceptual thematic analysis) of the interview transcripts. A qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) was processed in order to answer the second question.

Following its empirical analysis, the author exposes several interesting conclusions about the relationship between NIGs and their EIGs’ counterparts. First, it appears that EIGs are conceived mainly as *trustees* – or ‘trusted champions of broad political objectives’ (p. 304) – by their NIGs’ members, and much less as *delegates* whose first mission would be to systematically and loyally transmit their NIGs’

* Ph.D., Université du Québec à Montréal.

Stéphanie Yates

policy position. As such, 'EIGs are legitimised by their members for what they are, and less for what they do' (p. II).

In this context and contrary to the author's first assumption, the congruence between NIGs' and EIGs' positions does not stand out as a crucial element on which NIGs assess the legitimacy of their European interest representatives. Even if congruence is not at the core of EIGs' legitimacy, the QCA still provides interesting findings on position alignments of national and European actors. First, and somehow surprisingly, 'the vast majority of NIGs perceive their EIGs' positions as congruent with their own' (p. 287). Following the QCA, which 'allowed to identify conditions that participate in the understanding of positions alignment between national and European groups' (p. I), socialization mechanisms, and, more precisely, the interactions and familiarity between national and European actors, explain this result. The QCA highlights that 'A small staff having frequent contacts within a single "European networking venue", constitutes a configuration that better explains perceived congruence of positions than the environment within which NIGs work' (p. 304). It also underlines that globally speaking, 'alignment depends on variables upon which actors can act', such as socialization. 'It means that alignment is not a matter of factors in which national groups are *de facto* and *ad infinitum* embedded in' (p. 304).

The results of the qualitative analysis show that, apart from congruence, several other elements are considered by NIGs when assessing the legitimacy of their European umbrella organization. Overall, elements relating to

input legitimacy, such as expertise provided by the European representatives, participation of the NIG in the EIG's decision-making process as well as functional and substantive representation offered by the umbrella organization are seen as the most important. Elements pertaining to *output legitimacy*, though less frequent in NIGs' discourse, are also taken into consideration, such as the EIG's status (its legal recognition or its reputation, for instance) or its lobbying efforts and the outcomes of these endeavours. The results also show that EIGs' monopoly of representation within the European institutions is indeed appreciated by national members. 'This great diffuse support (...) is the consequence of NIGs' beliefs that their EIGs fulfil EU institutions' requirements to be considered as relevant stakeholders in consultations on EU issues' (p. II).

Overall, the findings lead the author to conclude that 'NIGs have not (yet) taken advantage of this participatory turn observed in the EU to "enter the game" of the European interest representation system. European groups managed to keep their privileges intact and still occupy the central position in the EU interest representation system' (p. 305). The partnership model still prevails. The author stresses that such findings should be considered by European institutions in their elaboration of initiatives pertaining to the participatory model. NIGs may not be ready, willing or eager to participate in these initiatives, and special efforts might be needed to encourage their direct participation. According to the author, this direct involvement of citizens and national actors on European issues is key to EU legitimacy. Consequently, 'European

groups – of which the creation resulted from the Commission's consultation practices – become now the organisations to bypass' (p. II).

We agree with this statement on the necessity for the EU to take a more participatory turn. Indeed, the very positive assessment of EIGs' legitimacy that follows the thesis' empirical analysis should be tempered by the fact that the interviews were conducted only with national organizations that are members of EIGs. Hence, NIGs that are not part of a European umbrella organization were excluded from the study. And yet we can think that the organizations studied, since they chose to become members of an EIG, may have presented a biased perception of their EIG's legitimacy, in an (potentially unconscious) effort to appear coherent with their decision to join the umbrella organization. Thus, the decision to focus uniquely on EIGs' legitimacy as perceived by their members appears to be one important limitation of the study. The integration of non-members' perceptions would have added to the understanding of the EU interest representation ecosystem and of its actors' perceived legitimacy.

In the end, this dissertation is a valuable contribution on the legitimacy of European umbrella organizations, as perceived by their member organizations and provides interesting findings in this regard. The dissertation should also be praised for its methodological aspects. The conceptual thematic analysis is done in a state-of-the-art manner; the transparency of each step undertaken to build the thematization list and the thematic tree allows for a deep understanding of the process (and makes it replicable for other studies). The QCA

is also explained with a level of detail that could prove noteworthy for any researcher who intends to use this method.