

Feb 23 2012

EFPU roundtable: 'Influencing the EU Foreign Policy Process'

Blog editor



In a world where the presence of non-state actors (e.g. multinational corporations, NGOs, international organisations, etc.) has increased exponentially, it has become a burning issue to investigate the influence that they have on the EU. While much ink has been spilled analysing lobbying and advocacy activities in several EU policy areas, EU foreign policy, meaning all EU external relations, has not received particular attention.

Against this backdrop, on 21 February 2012, the LSE's European Foreign Policy Unit hosted the fifth roundtable on 'EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon', entitled 'Influencing the EU Foreign Policy Process'. Chaired by Professor Karen E. Smith of the LSE, the roundtable's speakers were Chiara Biscaldi (International Crisis Group, Brussels), Catherine Woollard (European Peace-building Liaison Office, Brussels) and Heather Grabbe (Open Society Institute, Brussels). Thanks to their daily experience as practitioners in the intricate reality of the EU machinery, the speakers were able to offer a broad perspective on the topic of lobbying and advocacy in the case of EU foreign policy and to provide concrete examples and first-hand evidence of what really goes on in Brussels. In their presentations the speakers addressed

some key issues concerning the role played by NGOs in the EU's foreign policy-making process, such as what impact do they have on EU foreign policy? Which actors and institutions are the targets? Has the Lisbon Treaty changed advocacy strategies?



From L to R: Heather Grabbe, Catherine Woollard, Chiara Biscaldi, and Karen E Smith

In spite of the different nature of their respective organisations, all the panellists shared some common views on advocacy and lobbying in Brussels. First of all, the provision of well-researched analysis, information and evidence from the ground is considered a key component of any good advocacy strategy. By offering such knowledge and expertise, NGOs can show the EU institutions and member states that they can make a valid contribution to the policy-making process. A related point concerns the credibility of the organisation, without which NGOs' voices are not taken into account. By producing relevant and good-quality written material, NGOs build their professional credibility and their chances to be heard in Brussels. Moreover, the timing of when this material is given is crucial. Being able to deliver analyses and reports at the right stage and at the proper time in the EU's policy-making process is a factor that contributes to successful advocacy.

While the professionalism of NGOs is a basic requirement of advocacy strategies, inevitably institutional factors have to be considered. Although the EU offers several access points to NGOs, its institutional structure is also a disadvantage, as the

foreign policy machinery (and not only that) is extremely complicated and difficult to understand. The Lisbon Treaty was supposed to provide a remedy to this problem through the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) by pooling resources, personnel and decision-making. While it sounded like a good idea on paper, in practice, the speakers confirmed that it looked significantly different. Indeed, the introduction of the EEAS has led to a proliferation of desks and units covering the same topics, has given rise to more 'turf wars' among institutions and has not made the policy-making process more coherent. Clearly, this institutional intricacy represents a challenge to most NGOs, as the number of targets multiplies and the identification of the 'right' people to lobby is more difficult. In addition to the 'institutional chaos' the EU faces a lack of leadership in foreign policy. While in the past, the rotating presidency worked as the driver and engine of change, this function has not been taken up by anyone else since.

Finally, some final remarks on member states were necessary. Indeed, the panellists shared the view that member states are key actors in EU foreign policy, so that NGOs cannot avoid taking them into account when doing advocacy. This means going to national capitals as well, where many decisions still come from. Therefore, member states are one of the main targets, together with all EU institutions, of NGOs in their advocacy work. Yet not all member states are the same in dealing with NGOs, so that advocacy can find more or less fertile ground depending on the member state. For example, France does not have a culture of working with NGOs, thus making dialogue and the exchange of information quite difficult. On the contrary, Scandinavian countries and the UK are more familiar with working with NGOs and interacting with them. Clearly, this has an impact on the way in which the contribution of NGOs is taken into account, as member states' different perspectives and cultures on NGOs is a determinant in shaping that.

Thanks to the inside perspectives of the practitioners, the roundtable shed light on the intricate world of advocacy in EU foreign policy. The audience was enlightened on the contribution of NGOs and their activities in Brussels. Even though there was not a clear-cut answer to the question of NGOs' influence, some evidence of their contribution to the EU's policy-making process was offered. Moreover, the discussion also broadened to some more general reflections on the future of EU foreign policy, thus offering a very interesting and stimulating roundtable.

Benedetta Voltolini, PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations, LSE

This entry was posted in [departmental news](#), [EFPU](#) and tagged [EFPU](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).