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## Original Article

# Is this the way to Brussels? CEE civil society involvement in EU governance

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**Abstract** Whereas state actors from new EU member countries receive formal representation and voting rights that safeguard against their marginalisation in the system of EU governance, civil society organisations from new member states find it much harder to gain access to decision-making processes at the EU level. However, as many of them work on issues that are now (at least partly) decided at the EU level, participation in EU governance should become an integral part of their strategy. Based on a quantitative assessment of membership data for European umbrella organisations and on case studies for which interviews with leading civil society actors were conducted, this article gives a first comparative assessment of the actual participation of civil society organisations from the Central and East European member states in EU governance.

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## Introduction

The integration of 10 new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)<sup>1</sup> into the EU as part of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements poses new challenges to EU governance, as the number of countries involved has thereby increased considerably. However, the actors coming from the new member states also face challenges as they attempt to integrate themselves into EU decision-making processes. Whereas state actors from the new member countries receive formal representation and voting rights that safeguard against their marginalisation in the political system of the EU, civil society

organisations from the new member states find it much harder to gain access to decision-making processes at the EU level. As many civil society organisations in the new member states work on issues that are now (at least partly) decided at the EU level, participation in EU governance should, nevertheless, become an integral part of their strategy.

An assessment of their success provides a building block for an analysis of different aspects of EU governance. First, the participation of civil society organisations from new member states at the EU level is an important indicator of EU integration reaching beyond the political elites and it contributes to a bottom-up perspective on European integration that is so far underresearched (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos, 2008). Second, concerning multi-level governance the civil society organisations from the post-socialist member states are prime examples of weak actors and of the challenges they face. Finally, in a normative sense, deliberative democracy at the EU level might not only demand representation of different societal groups but also of different geographic macro-regions like CEE.

As the challenges of EU governance are similar for all non-state actors, this study covers not only NGOs but civil society organisations in the broadest meaning, which is also employed by the EU Commission, and which comprises the social partners and other non-state actors from business and society (Commission of European Communities, 2001).

Although there is ample research on civil society in the Central and East European EU member states, its primary focus has been on the national democratisation process. Its studies have examined the capacity of civil society organisations to foster the transformation from authoritarian regimes with centrally planned economies to pluralist democracies with liberal market economies. The results of these studies unequivocally expose the structural weaknesses of civil society organisations in CEE. For an overview, see, for example, Mudde (2007). More detailed analyses are offered among others by Bauerkämper (2003), Crowley (2004), Drauss (2002), Glenn (2003), Howard (2003), Kopecký and Mudde (2003), Meier-Dallach and Juchler (2002), Mendelson and Glenn (2002) and Zimmer and Priller (2004).

The complexities of the decision-making processes at the EU level have also been analysed in depth. A thorough summary of the research on the role of civil society organisations in EU governance is given by Eising (2008); Finke (2007); Greenwood (2007); Charrad and Eisele (2007). Broader analyses of different aspects of the role of interest groups at the EU level include Beyers (2008), Bouwen (2004), Christiansen and Piattoni (2004), Compston and Greenwood (2001), Dur (2008), Eising and Kohler-Koch (2005), Knodt and Finke (2005), Michalowitz (2004a, b), Ruzza (2004), Saurugger (2008), Smismans (2004) and Warntjen and Wonka (2004).



In summary, there is an abundance of literature on civil society in the CEE countries and there also is a huge amount of analyses of the role of non-state actors in political decision making at the EU level. However, there is hardly any substantial empirical study on the integration of civil society groups from the new Central and East European member states into EU governance. Available studies like Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (2003); Hallstrom (2004) and Hicks (2004) focus on the pre-accession preparations.

Against this background this article offers a first comparative assessment of the actual participation of civil society organisations from the CEE member states. However, concerning the direct participation of civil society groups in EU decision-making processes, full data are not available. The European Commission does not provide comprehensive data on direct consultations. Even the registry of standing expert groups does not give any details about civil society organisations involved (see [ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert](http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert)). The national representatives in the Council of Ministers are not accountable concerning their consultation practices. The European Parliament has a register of lobbyists. But as every non-member who wants to enter the building has to register, this register does not allow for conclusions about actual consultations. Moreover, 'dialogue with parliamentary intergroups is characterized by a low degree of formalisation and transparency, which contrasts with their role as the main existing structured dialogue channel between Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and civil society organisations' (Fazi and Smith, 2006, p. 32).

In reaction to the lack of data on access to actual decision-making bodies, this study employs (1) data on membership in European umbrella organisations of civil society, (2) interview data on direct representation of CEE interest groups in EU governance and (3) case studies of actual participation in EU governance.

The participation of civil society groups in EU-wide umbrella organisations is taken as a first proxy to assess their quantitative engagement at the EU level. In order to get a better understanding of direct access of CEE civil society organisations to EU decision-making bodies, trade unions, employers' associations and environmental NGOs from the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have been selected for case studies. With that three major groups of organisations (workers, employers and NGOs) are covered. At the same time the specific civil society organisations were consciously chosen as cases of maximum influence potential rather than as representative of the CEE member states in general. This is owing to the prevailing assumption of the relative weakness of civil society organisations from the new member states at the EU level. The results thus offer a best case scenario of what CEE civil society organisations are able to achieve in EU governance.

## NGO Membership in European Umbrella Organisations

It can be assumed that most civil society organisations active at the EU level join a European umbrella organisation. This is especially true for weak and for new actors, like those from the CEE member states, as they are in need of organisational support. Accordingly an analysis of the respective umbrella organisations offers an overview of civil society organisations formally represented at the EU level. In order to get a fair assessment of the participation of civil society groups from CEE those umbrella organisations were chosen that are active in a policy field that is of interest to most CEE member countries and where the EU has relevant competencies (so that civil society groups are interested in participation at the EU level). The social partners were excluded, as they will be covered in the following case study.

The major relevant umbrella organisations active in the civil dialogue at the EU level are united in the EU Civil Society Contact Group.<sup>2</sup> They are in alphabetical order CONCORD (European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development, [www.concordeurope.org](http://www.concordeurope.org)), EFAH/FEAP (Culture Action Europe), EPHA (European Public Health Alliance, [www.epha.org](http://www.epha.org)), EUCIS-LLL (European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning), EWL (European Women's Lobby, [www.womenlobby.org](http://www.womenlobby.org)), GREEN 10 (10 leading environmental non-governmental organisations, [www.foeeurope.org/links/green10.htm](http://www.foeeurope.org/links/green10.htm)), HRDN (Human Rights and Democracy Network, [www.rightsdemocracy.net](http://www.rightsdemocracy.net)), SOCIALPLATFORM (Platform of European Social NGOs, [www.socialplatform.org](http://www.socialplatform.org)). (See the list of members at: [www.act4europe.org/code/en/about.asp?Page=3&menuPage=3](http://www.act4europe.org/code/en/about.asp?Page=3&menuPage=3)).

EFAH/FEAP, EPHA, EUCIS-LLL and EWL have been excluded from the analysis because they have as a rule only one or two national umbrella organisations from a given country as members and their membership base thus does not allow for conclusions about the quantitative dimension of civil society organisation participation by country. For the remaining four major umbrella organisations of civil society at the EU-level membership information has been obtained directly from the individual umbrella organisations, because common EU-wide membership databases are not reliable (see Berkhout and Lowery, 2008). The analysis of quantitative participation in the civil dialogue at the EU level thus covers the policy fields of environment, social policy (in the broadest sense), development aid and human rights, which taken together comprise the core topics of value based NGOs.

The result of the quantitative analysis, summarised in Tables 1 and 2, offers comparative data on the formal presence of national NGOs at the EU level. The data are grouped by country in order to show how well organisations from the CEE member states are represented. In order to allow for a comparison



**Table 1:** Number of member organisations in major EU-wide umbrella organisations by country (absolute figures, countries in alphabetical order)

	<i>Concord</i>	<i>Social platform</i>	<i>Green 10</i>	<i>HDRN</i>
AUSTRIA	48	63	12	12
BELGIUM	20	111	33	28
BULGARIA	8	53	11	7
CYPRUS	1	27	4	3
CZECH REPUBLIC	39	41	17	17
DENMARK	29	56	16	20
ESTONIA	4	32	6	3
FINLAND	47	58	11	11
FRANCE	153	175	34	32
GERMANY	136	180	32	60
GREECE	3	52	13	11
HUNGARY	18	72	21	15
IRELAND	51	77	15	11
ITALY	162	124	14	19
LATVIA	32	21	6	6
LITHUANIA	7	32	5	11
LUXEMBOURG	6	53	13	7
MALTA	0	16	6	5
NETHERLANDS	125	57	26	21
POLAND	57	51	11	12
PORTUGAL	60	73	12	8
ROMANIA	10	61	8	9
SLOVAKIA	29	40	8	10
SLOVENIA	30	25	7	7
SPAIN	111	121	18	37
SWEDEN	52	50	11	15
UNITED KINGDOM	324	351	52	50
Total	1562	2072	422	447
of which CEE	234	428	100	97
	(15%)	(21%)	(24%)	(22%)

*Source:* Websites of umbrella organisations as of July 2008. [www.concordeurope.org](http://www.concordeurope.org); [www.foeurope.org/links/green10.htm](http://www.foeurope.org/links/green10.htm), [www.rightsdemocracy.net](http://www.rightsdemocracy.net), [www.socialplatform.org](http://www.socialplatform.org), [eesc.europa.eu](http://eesc.europa.eu). Compiled by Wojciech Rośkiewicz.

between populous old member states and the new member states, which are relatively small, data for the representation of NGOs by country is also shown on a per capita basis.

As Table 1 shows, eastern enlargement has led to a considerable influx of new NGOs to EU umbrella organisations. The Social Platform has 428 member organisations from the 10 Central and East European member states that joined in 2004 and 2007, Concord has 234, the Green 10 have 100 and the

**Table 2:** Relative representation in major EU-wide umbrella organisations by country (number of member organisations per one million inhabitants, in order of total membership figure)

	<i>Population</i>	<i>Concord</i>	<i>Social platform</i>	<i>Green 10</i>	<i>HDRN</i>	<i>Total</i>
LUXEMBOURG	0.5	12.0	106.0	26.0	14.0	158.0
MALTA	0.4	0.0	40.0	15.0	12.5	67.5
CYPRUS	0.8	1.3	33.8	5.0	3.8	43.8
IRELAND	4.2	12.1	18.3	3.6	2.6	36.7
ESTONIA	1.3	3.1	24.6	4.6	2.3	34.6
SLOVENIA	2	15.0	12.5	3.5	3.5	34.5
LATVIA	2.2	14.5	9.5	2.7	2.7	29.5
FINLAND	5.2	9.0	11.2	2.1	2.1	24.4
DENMARK	5.5	5.3	10.2	2.9	3.6	22.0
BELGIUM	10.4	1.9	10.7	3.2	2.7	18.5
AUSTRIA	8.2	5.9	7.7	1.5	1.5	16.5
SLOVAKIA	5.5	5.3	7.3	1.5	1.8	15.8
LITHUANIA	3.6	1.9	8.9	1.4	3.1	15.3
PORTUGAL	10.7	5.6	6.8	1.1	0.7	14.3
SWEDEN	9	5.8	5.6	1.2	1.7	14.2
NETHERLANDS	16.6	7.5	3.4	1.6	1.3	13.8
UNITED KINGDOM	60.9	5.3	5.8	0.9	0.8	12.8
HUNGARY	9.9	1.8	7.3	2.1	1.5	12.7
CZECH REPUBLIC	10.2	3.8	4.0	1.7	1.7	11.2
BULGARIA	7.3	1.1	7.3	1.5	1.0	10.8
GREECE	10.7	0.3	4.9	1.2	1.0	7.4
SPAIN	40.5	2.7	3.0	0.4	0.9	7.1
FRANCE	64.1	2.4	2.7	0.5	0.5	6.1
ITALY	58.1	2.8	2.1	0.2	0.3	5.5
GERMANY	82.4	1.7	2.2	0.4	0.7	5.0
ROMANIA	22.2	0.5	2.7	0.4	0.4	4.0
POLAND	38.5	1.5	1.3	0.3	0.3	3.4
Average	18.2	4.8	13.3	3.2	2.6	23.9
Average for all countries with at least 2 million inhabitants	21.2	4.9	6.8	1.6	1.6	14.8
Average CEE	10.3	4.9	8.5	2.0	1.8	17.2

*Source:* Population figures are estimates as of July 2008 from the CIA World Factbook online version. Membership figures are from Table 1.

HRDN has 97. As a result, 15–24 per cent of the member organisations of the four European umbrella organisations are now from CEE.

In this context it is important to note that the analysis looks at member organisations and not at individual members (that is not at physical persons). Accordingly the figures presented here cannot be treated as indicators of the strength of civil society in a given country. For this the membership base of



national civil society organisations as share of the population would be an appropriate indicator. It is also obvious that umbrella organisations with a broad focus, like the Social Platform that covers issues ranging from poverty over children's rights to equal opportunity and lifelong learning, have more member organisations than umbrella organisations with one clear focus, for example human rights. Accordingly, the numbers for the different umbrella organisations cannot be seen as indicators of the popularity of the respective policy fields, as here again the membership base of civil society organisations as share of the population would be an appropriate indicator.

Instead the number of national member organisations of European umbrella organisations is meant to indicate the degree of formal representation at the EU level. As at the EU level organisations and not individuals are represented, it makes sense to count national organisations independently of their respective membership base. However, large countries are likely to have a higher number of civil society organisations than smaller ones. As the CEE member states are rather small, with four of them having a population of less than four million people, and all eight which joined in 2004 together having less inhabitants than Germany, it seems to be justified to adjust figures to population size, as has been done in Table 2. It has to be kept in mind, though, that small countries tend to have relatively more civil society organisations in relation to their population, because in more populous states membership numbers of individual organisations increase faster than the number of organisations.

The figures for national member organisations adjusted to population size still show a wide range. However, in most cases the CEE states are within or above the range set by the old member states. Although much of this may be due to their small size – a hypothesis also supported by the fact that Poland, which is generally seen as having a relatively strong civil society, is the major outlier in terms of the relative number of member organisations in EU umbrella organisations – there are no signs of a gross underrepresentation of the new member states in EU-wide umbrella organisations in the civil dialogue. Formal representation in umbrella organisations is, however, only a weak indicator of actual participation and influence in decision-making processes.

## Case Study Design

In order to get a better understanding of direct access of CEE civil society organisations to EU decision making, the experiences of environmental NGOs, trade unions and employers' associations from the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have been examined. With that three major groups of organisations (NGOs, workers' and employers' associations) are covered. In reaction to the prevailing assumption of the relative weakness of civil society organisations

from the new member states at the EU level, the strongest organisations were selected for inclusion in the case studies. The results thus offer a best case scenario of what CEE civil society organisations are able to achieve in EU governance. That means the case studies are not representative of CEE civil society organisations in EU governance, but illustrate the maximum of engagement achieved so far.

For the study of NGOs, seven of eight genuinely Czech environmental NGOs that are members of a transnational umbrella organisation formally active at the EU level and that have a broader focus on nature or environmental issues were selected (with the eighth not being available for an interview). For the trade unions, national umbrella organisations as well as the branch unions for the metal and mining industries were selected for each of the three countries. The trade union study thereby includes the strongest trade unions in the largest of those CEE states that joined the EU in 2004. In addition eight major employers' associations from these countries were included in the study. A list of all organisations covered in the study is given in the appendix.

The country studies are first of all based on altogether 86 full face-to-face interviews conducted in summer and autumn 2007.<sup>3</sup> For each respondent they included a survey with 43 questions as well as semi-structured interviews. Among the civil society organisations, leading members were selected whose area of responsibility includes their organisation's relations with the EU (department heads or board members). To obtain a representative statement on the organisations' position, at least two representatives were interviewed per organisation where possible. This measure was meant to ensure that the testimony was not influenced by the personal references of a dissenter within the organisation.

Because all of the representatives interviewed hold leadership positions with respect to their organisation's relations at the EU level (sometimes in a department for international relations), they are particularly well informed about the interview topic. At the same time, it must be assumed that they generally rank the EU's importance higher than other representatives of their organisation.

### **Czech Environmental NGOs: Actors or Agents?**

With Czech environmental NGOs, the case study of actual participation in the EU civil dialogue focuses on some of the strongest civil society organisations in a larger EU member state from CEE and analyses a policy field where the EU level has a decisive influence on national politics. The case study thus represents a best case scenario with respect to participatory potential at the EU level.





Nevertheless, the Czech environmental NGOs lack direct access to EU decision makers (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Question Q16). In the interviews conducted in fall 2007, none of the Czech environmental NGOs claimed to act often independently at the EU level. Instead they all engage at the EU level in cooperation with other organisations and namely through a Green 10 member (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Question Q18). Cooperation with the transnational umbrella organisations is generally evaluated positively with only one Czech NGO representative reporting a mixed balance and none giving a negative assessment (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Question Q19).

All environmental NGOs included in the sample, that is all (but one) of the genuinely Czech environmental NGOs active at the EU level, consider the EU level to be at least as important as the national level. They evaluate the influence of the EU on their organisation positively and most of them desire an increased influence of the EU on the national level. All respondents claim that their organisation uses the EU 'often' as an argument in domestic politics (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Questions Q2 – Q4, Q35).

As recent examples of a positive influence of the EU on national Czech environmental policy the creation of nature reserves (NATURA 2000), climate policy (emissions trade), transportation policy and new guidelines for chemicals (REACH) are cited. However, two NGOs also quote the EU waste framework directive as a negative example, where EU standards might in fact lower national standards (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Question Q5, open question).

At the same time the Czech environmental NGOs are aware that their own organisation is less influential at the EU level than at the national level and satisfaction with the own role at the EU level is lower than with the own role at the national level (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Question Q29 – Q32). Asked in an open question about their biggest problems with representation at the EU-level, five of the seven respondents name the lack of information and communication channels and four added the lack of finance.

Miroslav Suta from the Czech Society of Sustainable Living, for example, who at the time of the interview also was a member of the Executive Committee of the European Environmental Bureau, stated that he could deal with EU matters only on the weekends.

Ondrej Rut, the EU coordinator of the Czech Green Circle, elaborated: 'Employees are not paid well [by environmental NGOs] but are expected to be highly professional and perform as well as those working in private business. As a result, there is a high fluctuation of employees who take the know-how with them when they leave the organisation. This hinders the organisation from further improvement including its ability to engage at the EU level'.

Nevertheless, the EU has promoted the internationalisation of Czech environmental NGOs and has contributed to their professionalisation.<sup>4</sup> But most

importantly EU regulation has strengthened the position of environmental NGOs within the Czech Republic. As a result, Czech environmental NGOs regularly promote and monitor the implementation of EU environmental policy at the national and regional levels. In this respect they cooperate with the European Commission, namely with the Directorate General (DG) Environment (Pleines and Bušková, 2007, and more generally Hallstrom, 2004).

This relation between the DG Environment and the environmental NGOs can be attributed to common interests, as both want to strengthen environmental regulation. 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. This means, 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 organisations 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 a watchdog for the implementation of EU environmental regulation in the Czech Republic.

### **Social Partners: Powerless but Rather Happy**

The social partners from CEE, too, assign great relevance to the EU level. All interviewees from employers' associations and 82 per cent of those from the trade unions consider the EU level to be at least as important as the national level. A large majority in both groups (70 per cent and 89 per cent, respectively) evaluates the influence of the EU on their organisation positively and about half of them (44 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively) desire an increased influence of the EU on the national level. Even more claim that their organisation uses the EU 'often' as an argument in domestic politics, the others do so 'sometimes' (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Questions Q2 – Q4, Q35).

Like the Czech environmental NGOs, the 13 trade unions from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia surveyed in the study barely exert any influence on EU decision-making processes via direct consultations with EU organs. Direct consultations with the European Commission are a rare exception and were cited by only two trade unions. Consultations with the national representatives in the Council of Ministers were mentioned by three trade unions. Consultations with the European Parliament occur somewhat more frequently. Five of the trade unions polled have access to the Parliament,



mostly because some trade union members are Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). In summary only the three largest national umbrella organisations from Poland and the Czech Republic have any meaningful access to direct consultations.

For the employers' associations the situation is somewhat better, as several claim direct access to the European Commission and the European Parliament, while the others are restricted to participation in European umbrella organisations (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q16).

One reason for the limited use of direct consultations by trade unions from CEE could be that none of them has an office in Brussels (Krech, 2008, p. 58). The responsible trade union members tend to travel to Brussels only when they have a concrete appointment there.<sup>5</sup> Their interests are instead represented by a European umbrella organisation (10 of the 13 trade unions) and by the Economic and Social Committee (eight) (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q16). Accordingly, only 3 per cent of the interviewees felt that their trade union was capable of representing their interests on the EU level adequately. The great majority depend on a European umbrella organisation to further their interests, and roughly a third relies on cooperation with other national trade unions (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q18).

The fixation on the European umbrella organisations is also underscored by the fact that nearly every trade union questioned named these as the best cooperation partners on the EU level. Three trade unions cited the European Economic and Social Committee as a valuable partner, and the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and its industry federations specified Polish MEPs (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q22, open responses). The participation of the Polish, Czech and Slovak trade unions in the decision-making processes at the EU level thus takes place almost exclusively via EU-wide umbrella organisations or through membership in EU committees (namely the European Economic and Social Committee).

Of the 13 trade unions from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia included in the study, 11 are members in a European umbrella organisation, mostly in European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) or in the relevant industry organisation.<sup>6</sup> However, Józef Niemiec from Poland's Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union *Solidarność* (NSZZ *Solidarność*) is the only trade union representative from the three countries under review to hold a leadership position in one of the corresponding European umbrella organisations.

The trade union representatives from the CEE member states are not dissatisfied with this situation, however. The interviewed representatives perceive cooperation with the European umbrella organisations as overwhelmingly positive. Only 4 per cent reported having had primarily negative experiences (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q19).

Employers' associations, of which two have a representative office in Brussels, follow a different strategy, mainly because their integration into European umbrella organisations is weaker. Accordingly, 21 per cent of the respondents declared that they represent their interests at the EU level 'mostly alone', while the others are half split between bilateral cooperation and membership in a European umbrella organisation. However, although two-thirds assessed cooperation with European umbrella associations positively, none named an umbrella organisation as best cooperation partner at the EU level.

As explained above, the most influential trade unions and employers' associations from the CEE member states were consciously chosen for this investigation. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that they have very limited access to direct channels of influence at the EU level. The trade unions from the CEE member states primarily rely (if they are active at the EU level at all) on collective interest representation through the European trade union movement, those employers' associations that do not gain direct access seem not to be visible at all.

## Conclusion

Formally civil society organisations from the CEE member states have been integrated into EU governance. Compared to the other EU member states they are in quantitative terms adequately represented in European umbrella organisations and (by statute) in the European Economic and Social Committee. However, for most organisations this means only a symbolic participation in decision-making processes at the EU level. Only representatives of a very few CEE civil society organisations are physically present in Brussels for more than a couple of days a year, hardly any have leadership positions in European umbrella organisations or direct access to key EU decision makers. However, as the analyses presented here cover just the first four years of EU membership, it can be argued that the glass is not half empty but already half full and that civil society organisations from CEE are likely to make further progress to turn their formal representation into meaningful participation.

Still, in a normative interpretation this assessment questions the claim by the EU Commission that the integration of civil society organisations is the best way to increase the democratic legitimacy of EU decision making. It shows that the integration into international umbrella organisations, which is being favoured by the EU Commission, does not necessarily give individual members a voice in EU governance. Even more importantly, it demonstrates that the integration of civil society organisations can be in the direct political interest of the EU Commission as they support and promote EU policies at the national



level. The EU Commission can at least in some policy fields, like environmental policy, even use them to monitor the implementation of EU policies at the national and regional level. Thus civil society organisations 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 sub-national governments.

If the assessment of the actual integration of civil society organisations from CEE member states into decision-making processes at the EU level is not to be based solely on normative considerations, it requires a comparison with civil society organisations from old member states. For this comparison the two aspects of central relevance are the access to different channels of influence at the EU level and satisfaction with EU policies of concern to the interests represented.

Concerning channels of influence, the case studies presented here have shown that even the strongest civil society organisations from CEE find it hard to get independent access to EU decision-making bodies. Only a handful of them have contacts with the European Commission or with the European Parliament, mainly through personal acquaintance with an EU bureaucrat or an MEP. With the exception of one trade union and two employers' associations, none claims to be able to represent interests at the EU level on its own. Instead environmental NGOs and most trade unions rely first of all on support from European umbrella organisations, while the remaining trade unions and the employers' associations forge bi- or multilateral alliances with suitable partners.

This is different for civil society organisations from the big old member states. For example, a study of German and British environmental NGOs, conducted in 2000/2001, showed that about half of the major organisations had regular contacts with the European Commission and with the European Parliament, with slightly less being connected to the Council of Ministers (Roose, 2003, p. 157, 159, 160). All of the large German trade unions, included as a control case in the study presented above, exert influence via direct consultations with the European Commission, national representatives in the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q16). However, the big organisations from the big member states are the clear outliers and, for example, the trade unions from CEE fit into the general picture as summarised by Greenwood: 'Labour organization as a whole is over-reliant upon ETUC [the European umbrella organisation] to directly engage the European level' (Greenwood, 2007, p. 173).

In addition, as CEE civil society organisations are largely satisfied with EU policies, it can be argued that many of them do not see a need for active participation at the EU level. While, for example, 89 per cent of the interviewed

trade unionists from CEE claimed that the EU has a positive impact, none of the German respondents supported this view (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q4). One German respondent tellingly stated that ‘all bad things come from Brussels’.

This illustrates an important difference. While civil society organisations in the big old member states have already consolidated their influence at the national level and have already contributed to the introduction of high standard regulation in their respective policy fields, the civil society organisations in the CEE member states (and to a certain degree also in southern member states) profit from EU guidelines and standards that bolster their position in negotiations with the national government and they also support the implementation of EU regulation in their policy fields as EU standards are regularly higher than their respective national standards.

Accordingly, the most important task for CEE civil society organisations is – in their own perception – not to participate in EU governance but to support reforms at the national and sub-national level. And for this task the EU Commission is on many occasions a very powerful and helpful ally. At the same time the limited impact of CEE civil society organisations on EU governance does not imply that the assumption of a watchdog function is the only consequence of their encounter with the EU. Their formal integration into European umbrella organisations creates information flows and claims on solidarity that have started to form an EU-competent and EU-friendly elite of civil society actors. How far these actors will influence the development of their organisations or of civil society and public debates in their respective countries remains to be seen.

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### **Notes**

- 1 The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU in May 2004. Bulgaria and Romania joined in January 2007.
- 2 According to its own mission statement ‘the EU Civil Society Contact Group brings together eight large rights and value based NGO sectors – culture, environment, education, development, human rights, public health, social and women. The ETUC, representing European union workers is an observer to the group. The members of these sectoral platforms are European NGO networks. They bring together the voices of hundreds of thousands of associations across



the Union, linking the national with the European level, representing a large range of organised interests. Jointly we aim to represent the views and interests of rights and value-based civil society organisations across the EU on major issues, which affect us across our sectors of activity. Our objective is to encourage and promote a transparent and structured civil dialogue that is accessible, properly facilitated, inclusive, fair and respectful of the autonomy of NGOs' (www.act4europe.org, accessed 22 August 2008).

- 3 The study on environmental NGOs has been conducted as part of the Integrated Project 'New Modes of Governance' (www.eu-newgov.org), financially supported by the EU under the 6th Framework programme (Contract No CIT1-CT-2004-506392). Interviews in Prague were conducted by Kristýna Bušková (then Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, now Cambridge University) and in Brussels by Brigitte Krech (independent consultant). The study of trade unions and employers' associations has been funded by the Otto-Brenner-Foundation. Interviews were conducted by the Institute for Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Koszalin Institute of Comparative European Studies. Brigitte Krech was responsible for the interviews in Brussels.
- 4 The representatives of Czech environmental NGOs, interviewed in autumn 2007, considered the pre-accession support measures from the EU to be sufficient. As the most important measures they named financial support, trainings, international networking and supply of information. However, only two out of seven NGOs claimed that their organisation was well prepared for work at the EU level at the time of accession in 2004. But most of the others stated that the situation has improved since then (Project Questionnaire, Autumn 2007, Questions Q6 – Q10).
- 5 Nevertheless, two-thirds of the interviewed trade union representatives consider an office in Brussels important (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q21).
- 6 Two trade unions – the Confederation of Arts and Culture (KUK) from the Czech Republic and the Union of Workers in Mines, Geology and Oil Industry (OZ PBGN) from Slovakia – are not represented at the European level at all (Project Questionnaire, Summer 2007, Question Q17, open responses).

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## Appendix

Table A1: List of respondents (Number of interviewees and abbreviation of organisation)

	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>Czech Republic</i>	<i>Brussels</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Trade unions	2 Solidarnosc 2 OPZZ 2 FZZ 2 FZZ Metalowcy 2 ZZG	5 KOZ SR 2 OZ KOVO 2 OZ PBGN	4 CMKOS 2 ASO 1 KUK 1 KOVO 2 OS PHGN	1 ETUC 1 EMF (Metal) 1 EFFAT 1 DGB 1 UPA 1 UGT 1 GMB	2 DGB 2 IG Metall 2 IG BCE
Employers' association	1 KPP 1 PKPP Lewiatan 1 BCC	2 RUZ 1 AZZZ	1 SP CR 1 Economic Chamber 1 SCMVD	2 CEEP	—
Environmental NGOs	—	—	1 Arnika 1 Czech and Slovak Traffic Club 1 Environmental Law Service 1 Rainbow Movement 1 Society for Sustainable Living 1 Institute for Environmental Policy 1 Green Circle	1 Greenpeace 1 CEE Bankwatch Network 1 CAN 1 Birdlife 1 Naturfreunde	—
Political administrations	2 Ministry of Labour	1 Ministry of Labour 1 MEP	1 MEP	4 EU Commission (DG Employment, DG Environment)	—
Experts	2 academics 1 NGO	2 academics	2 academics 2 NGO	1 NGO 2 analysts	—