

Communication without borders: PR in the enlarged Europe

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**Friends of
the Earth
Europe**

The enlarged Europe and the increasing influence of the European Commission and the European Parliament have led to intensified communication and lobbying efforts by business associations and NGOs in Brussels. This is necessary because more and more issues are – and should be – regulated at the EU level. The EU will have even more influence and significance when and if a European constitution takes shape, which would give more power to the EU Parliament. Those not doing professional communication and lobbying work in Brussels would be left out in the cold.

The balance of power between business representatives and NGOs in Brussels is extremely tilted. An estimated 15,000 lobbyists work in Brussels, of which around two thirds represent business interests. And the business lobby has enormous resources at its disposal, for example the European Chemical Industry Council (CEFIC). The lobby group of the European chemical industry has 150 employees and an annual budget of 40 million Euros, making it possible for them to significantly weaken the EU chemicals directive REACH. As a comparison, not more than 15 people work on REACH at CEFIC's main opponents WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth Europe, European Environmental Bureau and the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

When it comes to communicating content, the European NGOs are fighting against companies that plaster both print and web-based media with misleading messages, systematically distracting from the problems they are causing (BP: "Beyond Petroleum"; ExxonMobil: "Driving for efficiency"). The Online information portal EurActiv.com is, for example, sponsored by Shell, Total, ExxonMobil and Dupont, among others. The strong presence of sectors like oil and chemicals trying to polish up and green-wash their image with massive PR-measures is striking.

Workshops, panel discussions and speeches on the hottest political issues in the EU are organized by think tanks like *Friends of Europe* and usually generate a lot of media attention. *Friends of Europe* and other think tanks are influential and play a central role in the Brussels policy arena. They receive support from a variety of multinational corporations like nuclear power plant manufacturer Areva, Total, Exxon Mobil, the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, Microsoft and the pro-biotech association *Crop Life*. You would be hard-pressed to find EU media or think tanks in Brussels that are not supported by multinationals with advertising or sponsoring.

Some companies even go a step further: An NGO with the misleading name *Green Facts* was founded with financial support from the chemicals company Solvay. Later, other companies and associations such as Total, Ferrari, CEFIC and the 'European Crop Protection Association' (the association of GM crop companies like Monsanto and pesticide producers like Bayer and BASF) joined the league of sponsors. *Green Facts*

assure that their only aim is to make complicated scientific and consensus-orientated reports on health and environment available to non-experts – i.e. Eurocrats and media representatives. But *Green Facts* systematically blurs the line between NGO and business by publishing supposedly neutral reports on the positive sides of issues such as GM-food and nuclear power.

If you want to have your say in EU politics, you need information. But the EU must significantly increase its transparency. NGOs are regularly excluded from meetings taking place behind closed doors and are confronted with business lobbies being granted privileged access to information. NGOs should not be excluded from discussions between business and Eurocrats on planned EU legislation. Furthermore, all lobbyists in Brussels should have to comply with strict ethical rules.

Access to information: The Aarhus convention, named after the Danish city of Aarhus, was signed in 1998. It is the first treaty of international law that grants the public rights to environmental information, to participate in environmental decision-making and for access to justice in environmental matters. The EU and Germany have signed the convention, but implementation seems to be taking time. Many civil servants cling to old beliefs around excessive discreetness, ignoring the fact that better public participation is only possible if NGOs are not confronted with faits accomplis. Fair Lobbying and communication in a democracy can only work if all cards are on the table and everybody has the possibility to influence EU policy making.

Lobby Transparency: The EU Commissioner for Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud, Siim Kallas, published a green paper on a European Transparency Initiative (ETI) in May 2006. The green paper proposes a voluntary register of lobbyists. This, however, is completely insufficient. We need a mandatory register as in the US system, and sanctions against lobbyists who refuse to disclose the data (clients, budgets etc.). The EU Commission must oblige lobbyists to be transparent, otherwise it will remain mostly unclear on whose behalf they are lobbying and how much money is being spent on this. 'Voluntary rules' will only lead to fake transparency.

Real Transparency and strict, obligatory rules for lobbyists are the basis for a democratic Europe. The current system puts NGOs at a disadvantage because information is disclosed selectively and deals are made behind closed doors. This policy of secrecy weakens the democracy in Europe and increases public distrust of the EU.

The above reasons make political communication in the capital of the EU a challenge for NGOs. Fortunately, creative and exciting communication does not have to be expensive. NGOs do not have to organize expensive dinners in luxury hotels in order to lure Eurocrats and journalists. NGOs need much less resources than their political opponents to exert pressure and ignite public debates by:

- consistently asking sharp and poignant questions
- regularly demanding more lobby transparency and access to information
- developing scientific solutions
- mobilising their millions of members and volunteers
- staging creative protests and creating emotional pictures
- exposing scandals
- working in coalitions with other NGOs

- communicating professionally

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Links

- Friends of the Earth Europe, www.foeeurope.org
- Think Tank Friends of Europe, www.friendsofeurope.org
- The weekly newspaper European Voice, www.europeanvoice.com
- European Online News portal EurActive, www.euractiv.com
- European Chemical Industry Council, www.cefic.be
- The front group NGO Green Facts, www.greenfacts.org
- On Lobby Transparency in the EU: www.alter-eu.org, www.lobbycontrol.de and http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/kallas/transparency_de.htm
- On access to information: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/>, www.aarhus-konvention.de and, in German, <http://netzwerk-recherche.de/docs/IFG.pdf>