

SMES´ REPRESENTATION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

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Abstract

This study is based on SMEs Situation Analysis of small and medium sized enterprises´ (SMEs) interests being represented within the European Union (EU) multilevel governing system. It brings empirical research and in order to achieve a better insight into the structure of SMEs representation, the cohesive and pervasive approach of the article derives from qualitative analysis of SMEs´ representation, including broad spectrum of elements that interconnects different modes of interests representing in expert groups, SMEs representations and associations and European SMEs federations. This study explores possibility for SMEs to increase their awareness, to push their interests and to enforce the proper EU decision-making process. Based on empirical study, in-depth interviews among the SMEs sample, article finds out how SMEs interest correspond with EU economic objectives, while existing barriers cause difficulties for SMEs to be influential within the entire decision-making system which leads to less widespread of SME´s interests representation in the whole policy-making process.

Keywords: Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, European Union, SMEs Interest Associations, Decision-making, EU Policy

JEL Classification: M1, M16

1 INTRODUCTION

To get access to institutions and actors in the policy-process, the SMEs have to gain legitimacy for its ideas. The company may be more successful, if it succeeds in framing its interests in an inclusive way. Hence agenda-setting is not just about having an issue considered actively by the policy-makers; it is also about how that issue would be defined once it has made its way into the agenda. It could therefore be of interest to study the way how importantly SMEs issues are regarded and how these interests are framed in the EU policy debates and processes.

Framing in this sense refers to the creation of a specific frame around an image of reality. This image involves problems, solutions, and actions within a policy domain. The EU agenda has historically been driven by a search for economic prosperity and global competitiveness. Changes in the global political economy, which enable large, global enterprises increasingly locate their industries outside of the EU, have increased awareness of the importance of SMEs to create and sustain new jobs in Europe (European Community, 2002).

The SMEs interests are therefore framed as “the backbone of the European economy and the most important creators of new jobs and economic growth”. The growing concern of European leaders that an ordinary citizen feels left out of the integration process has made the Commission to consider some interests more appropriately to boost than others. The Commission has consequently promoted organizations of the least represented social interests in order to achieve a more balanced participation. Hence, through SMEs, the Commission can promote growth and jobs in the EU, in the same way as it promotes weak and social stakeholder (i.e. a small enterprise) instead of the large multinational enterprise.

There are over 20 million enterprises in the European Union (EU) in 2007. Only about 43 000 of these are large-scale enterprises, i.e. 0,2 % of all enterprises (European Commission, 2014 a). Hence, the vast majority of enterprises are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Approximately 90 million people are employed by SMEs. In regards of their policy development, directorate general (DG) Enterprise and Industry of the European Commission (EC) is strengthening the dialogue and consultation with SMEs stakeholders. SMEs prosperity was seen as a crucial factor for achieving higher growth rates, more and better jobs in the EU. SMEs became known as a ‘backbone of the EU’s industry.

2 DEFINITIONS AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

2.1 Definition of SME and representation organization, types, source of financing

Definitions of SME are much depending on criteria such as number of employees and turn over. In 1971, Bolton Report defined SMEs on the basis of number of employees, turnover and an economic definition that was based on the essential characteristics of the small firms. These characteristics were: a small share of the market, operating independently and an owner-managed organization.

Further, EU has also categorized macro, small and medium businesses based on number of employees. According to the EU, SMEs are defined as “any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form. This includes, in particular, self-employed persons and family businesses engaged in craft or other activities, and partnerships or associations regularly engaged in an economic activity” (Commission Regulation (EC) No 70/2001). Micro and small and medium-sized enterprises are defined as enterprises employing fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million and/or annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 43 million.

Tab. 1 - Type of Firms. Source: Commission Regulation (EC) No 70/2001

Type of the firm	Micro	Small	Medium
Number of employees	1-9	10-99	100-499

In the Czech Republic, a company is usually classified as a small and medium sized enterprise when it has up to 250 employees as per Act 47/2002 of 11 Jan 2002 amended 1/2004. It is true that a vibrant small business can make a significant impact on the local economy. Many firms have limited ambitions to grow, but provide an important source of employment in the local communities and give independence and status to their owners. At the same time size, flexibility and fast responsiveness of small businesses allow them to react quickly and change in a competitive environment. Small firms are also seen as a key source of innovation, providing new types of product and services, and new ways of delivering old services.

The representation organizations are defined as organizations that have been set up by and are representing the private sector. They can be distinguished and include SMEs in general, co-operatives and social economy enterprises, craft enterprises, women enterprises, ethnic minority enterprises, young entrepreneurs, high-tech enterprises, family business (European Commission, 2013 a). However, the representation organizations perform a **range of activities** not only to promote the interest of their members but also support their members.

This includes, among others: political lobbying, participation in fairs, exhibitions, networking, fostering cooperation and exchange of information between members, participation in business delegations, providing education and training, counseling and performing research. Support is provided in export, business transfer, starting a business, access to finance, tax policy, social security, environmental laws, health and safety laws, innovation and technology. Some organizations also focus on more general issues such as reducing administrative burdens. Organizations receive their **finance** from membership fees. Some obtain additional income from selling products or services and government subsidies. Other sources are: European funds, donations, sponsoring and participation in projects (European Commission, 2013 a).

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Current theory refers mainly to the logic of membership and adopts a 'bottom up' perspective. It asks why and under what conditions members of a group would be willing to form and join an interest association, and what associations have to do in order to recruit and keep members. The main criticism against current theories is that they ignore the social aspect of associations and the possibility to associate in order to achieve 'common goods', such as benefits from the implementation of specific policies (Olson, 1971). However, this discussion is relevant in relation to SMEs at the national and EU level. Once a decision has been made to associate at the national level it is also rational to associate at the European level. The collective action problems are therefore no more than background factors to the constituency of EU federations (associations of associations), since these European federations, unlike the national associations, draw their membership constituency primarily from those who are already politically active. Hence, participation in an EU federation is means to advance the interests of the national grouping (Aspinwall and Greenwood, 1998).

It is widely accepted that external circumstances and institutional organization have important consequences for interest associations and their possibility to influence SMEs. It is regarded as important to retain a sense of limits as to what interest associations can and do contribute to **policymaking and SMEs** support generally (Cram, 1998). A central feature of the European lobbying system is that, it is essentially a multi-arena, multi-level, decision-making system, in which all actors necessarily participate in a complex series of 'nested games' at both national and European levels. Thus, it is a system of multiple access points created by institutionalized multi-level governance. The fact that there are so many different venues for lobbying means that the EU is a multifaceted policy process (Brodsky and Striteska, 2007).

A policy sub-domain concept, which makes it possible to study interest in different arenas, is useful when **analyzing influence of SMEs on EU policymaking**. It allows for comparison of the influence of an interest between different policy sub-domains, since the influence of this interest can differ between different areas and levels. The EU political system is therefore often described as one, in which no type of interest can routinely dominate due to the highly pluralistic, competitive, complex and multi-level system of networks, which is accessible to a range of interests.

However, according to several authors some interests can prevail over general policies under certain circumstances. According to Greenwood, (Greenwood, 2007) one example is an interest with a highly technical character, with a narrow sectional interest, where the costs are diffused widely across the society. Dominance may also arise where the interest of a particular constituency is uniformed with the broader aim of the European integration and within the climate in which policymaking takes place. This allows for the interest's constituency to define and 'frame' issues from which policy initiatives follows. Furthermore,

interest will be widely shared and accepted if it is relevant to a burning issue and promises a successful problem solving (Kohler-Koch, 1997).

Several authors also emphasize that the EU and national institutions play an active role in the SME policy process (Cram, 1998). Institutions are said not just to be 'political arenas', but actors actively shaping norms and values, able to develop their own agenda - not only a structure, in which other actors - SMEs - pursue their goals. The European SME Federations (association of associations) are said to be multilevel actors through the work done at national level by National Associations. EU SMEs Federations keep contacts with the EU institutions and concentrate mainly on the agenda-setting and policy formulation. Hence, these Organizations are specialized in representing SMEs interests at the EU level during the early stage of the policymaking process.

To answer the question how, and to what degree SMEs and its associations can influence the EU policy-making, the mechanisms of influencing SMEs' associations need to be considered. Yet, they are not acting in vacuum, and therefore one also has to reconsider the structure of policymaking on both the national level and on the EU. Euro Commerce was the only federation that mentioned co-operation between different kinds of SMEs' federations, which could indicate a low degree of co-operation between horizontal and sectorial SMEs federations. Without the collaboration between general and sectorial federations, the SMEs' influence would most likely/probably be less far-reaching. Hence, co-operation between horizontal and sectorial organizations could strengthen the SME representation in the dual EU policymaking structure. Obstacles for SMEs representation are heterogeneous preferences within the federations due to national differences, a division between service - and policy representation and competition between different federations. (Richardson, 2001)

4 OBJECTIVE, EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODS

The study examines the system of SMEs representation organizations, the cohesive and pervasive approach of the article derives from empirical research and from qualitative situation analysis of representation organizations, including broad spectrum of elements that interconnects different modes of interests representing in expert groups, SMEs representations and associations and European SMEs federations. The purpose is to reveal how these possibilities may affect or enhance SMEs' awareness, push their interests and enforce the proper EU decision-making process. The intention is to analyze current situation by conceptualizing research in this area.

Research is based on qualitative research method. Qualitative research is the process of searching for the essence, based on different methodological traditions, exploring the social or human problem. Researcher creates a complex, holistic picture, analyzes the different types of texts, informing about the views of the respondents. For qualitative research it is typical that hypotheses are generated only during the research, trying to understand a new problem.

The reason for choosing this method is that this area is quite complex. It involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The main characteristic of the method held was an in-depth insight that has been applied. It was an empirical study of 30 enterprises, which actively export or import and have more than 5 years of international performance experience. Data were obtained by interviews with managers or owners of businesses. The procedure of empirical data collection: respondents were recorded and then the text has been transcribed literally. 200 pages of text have been obtained. The research has been carried out during the past 2 years. The text confirms or refutes identified questions.

In order to get statistically representative sample, SMEs were selected and divided by the sector. The examined companies sample corresponds by its number and structure to NACE classification. Subsequently, the data were processed and analyzed.

From the methodological point of view, the question is how to determine situation regarding representation organizations aiming to provide relevant situation analysis based on empirical research. Therefore substantive questions were created accordingly with following results (see chap. 5.1.):

- *Does your company push your interests via national institutions or via supranational institutions in Brussels?*
- *If it does via supranational institutions, do you practice contact with European Commission and DG Enter or you rather prefer contact with Czech Permanent Representation?*

5 RESEARCH OUTCOME AND SITUATION ANALYSIS

5.1 Czech SME – research outcome

Tab. 2: Forms of SMEs' Representation Source: Author

	Number of companies in %	
A: We push our interests via national institutions	15	50
B: We push our interests via supranational institutions in Brussels	26	86
Ba: We have regular contact with European Commission and DG Enter	12	40
Bb: We have regular contact with Czech Permanent Representation	18	60

Answers were grouped into A and B groups. In case the answer was B, second question has been asked. These answers were grouped into Ba and Bb groups.

By processing answers, there have been found and described the strongest dependencies: 50 % of companies with international performance push their interests via national institutions only. But majority of sample companies push their interests via supranational institutions in Brussels, which they see as fast and the strongest possibility to influence legislation in progress. They do it via EC Directorate General ENTER (40 %) or via Czech Permanent Representation (60 %). (Tab. 2)

Czech SMEs organizations are represented in all levels of the EU policy-process and SMEs interests have access to both national and supranational institutions. Both UEAPME and BUSINESSEUROPE are Social Partners and all groups have regular contacts with the Commission. Hence the Horizontal SMEs Federations can be seen as an 'included group' in DG ENTER (DG= Directorate General), which additionally is seen as a powerful part of the Commission. However, the distinction between more widely policy-concentrated DGs and

more regulative DGs affects SMEs interests negatively since SMEs interests are less represented in the more regulative body.

Financial restrictions are mentioned by the Czech SMEs Associations as a restriction, and this could also be important in this particular case since the Structural Funds could be only seen as an indirect SMEs issue.

The Czech associations are represented in both Czech Republic and Brussels (European Union institutions) and the Czech officials seem interested in promoting SMEs interests in the EU policy-process. However, the Permanent Representation venues seem to be the least successful. Focusing upon SMEs and their interest associations therefore adds a further dimension to the research on business interests of SMEs.

5.2 Mechanisms to test impact of the EU legislation

The policy-making process in the European Union sees legislative proposals from the European Commission debated both by Members of the European Parliament and by representatives of Member States' governments within the Council of the European Union. And in general, the Commission consults with interested parties both formally and informally before it draws up its proposals, such as the Small Business Act for Europe. So there are opportunities for those affected (or potentially affected) by policy to make their views known at several stages in the process.

For SMEs - often the largest group of enterprises to be affected by new policy - there are clear difficulties in putting their views across to policy-makers. **SMEs do not usually have the resources which large firms dedicate to influencing policy-making or lobbying.** For this reason, the Commission has appointed a SMEs Envoy and encourages an effective and wide-ranging consultation of SMEs as one element of its Think Small First principle. The Commission is also encouraging Member States and regions to adopt similar measures, ensuring greater representation of SME interests at all levels of policy-making. To this end, it has sought to identify and share examples of effective SMEs consultation and involvement in policy-making.

The opinions of SMEs are important when developing new EU legislation or programs that have a direct impact on their operations. The system is called "Listening to SMEs". This is why the Commission, through the Enterprise Europe Network, operates two mechanisms to test the impact of EU legislation and programs i.e., in advance via SMEs panel and retrospectively via the SMEs feedback mechanism.

1. In advance via SMEs panels:

SMEs Panels are organized to consult SMEs about forthcoming EU legislation and policies. The Enterprise Europe Network partners will select suitable SME participants, run the SMEs panels and provide the Commission with the results. The result will be used when preparing new legislative or policy proposals. SMEs panels will be operated in liaison with the SMEs Envoy to ensure that the needs of SMEs are continuously taken into account in EU lawmaking.

2. Retrospectively via the SMEs feedback mechanism:

The SMEs feedback mechanism allows the Enterprise Europe Network partners to collect the views and feedback from SMEs on a broad range of EU policy initiatives, actions, legislation or programs related to the internal market. The typical policy areas where feedback will be requested include the environment, sustainability, employment and social affairs, innovation

support, taxation and customs and, in more general terms, better regulation and simplification (European Commission, 2013 b).

There seems to be a general concern about SMEs issues. Still, SMEs' Interest Associations and Federations are not satisfied. UEAPME (Union Européenne de l'Artisanat et des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises i.e. the European Union of Crafts and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) states that "better regulation" tops the list of the most frequent buzzwords in Brussels. Additionally BUSINESSEUROPE states that much more should be done for the European SMEs, and EUROCHAMBRES says that it is time to move from "think small first" to "act small first". Although it might be in their interest to complain, in order to further strengthen their interests and organizational power, there might be some features that complicate the realization of wider representation of SMEs interests in the EU settings.

5.3 Large enterprises versus SMEs

SMEs associations are not acting in a vacuum, and to understand these associations' possibility to influence the EU and national policies, it is important to take the multilevel policymaking arrangement into account. First of all, some of the most important European Union tools for businesses in Europe, such as the Single European Market (SEM) and the Competition Policies, were created with large enterprises in mind. It is a widely held opinion that the creation of the SEM tends to favor big businesses. The SMEs Associations, Federations and the Commission also highlight the problem for **SMEs to benefit from the Internal Market**. We dare to say that „it goes without saying that the Internal Market is yet not a reality for SMEs". Large enterprises have necessary resources to overcome trade barriers, but not the SMEs.

Legislation is still drafted from big organizations and enterprises' points of view. This is due to the fact that most officials creating legislations come from big administrations or are employees in big enterprises. There is much more focus on big firms in the EU. This focus will however be shifted step-by-step. Competition policy has a special place in the European policy environment, because it defends the essential mobilizing principle of the EU, and collective interests in economic efficiency have been secured through the creation of a common market. There seems to be a tension between competition policy and company support, such as policies to encourage SMEs, since competition policies were mainly created to reduce problems with monopolies and state aids. However, exceptions from competition policies are made for SMEs; instead of them, new legislations should be made for SMEs.

One of the reasons why SMEs are still exceptions is that only eight percent of SMEs are involved in export. Commission takes SMEs into consideration when regulating consumer goods. (Yet one can imagine these concerns to be less influential if the large enterprises are pleased.) Additionally, 90 percent of all SMEs are actually micro-enterprises, with five employees on average. These micro-enterprises account for 53 percent of all jobs in Europe, so they are of great importance to the European economy. However, large enterprises are main employers, when separating micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, with a 32.9 % share. One can therefore argue that there are still incentives for politicians and officials to take great considerations of large firms when creating European economic policies. Hence, there are still some 'practical barriers', such as institutional factors and economic importance of SMEs.

5.4 Situation analysis

There is a large variety of SMEs business representation organizations active in the EU, such as trade and professional associations and federations, entrepreneurs associations, representative organizations of the self-employed/sole proprietorships, etc.

The wide range of enterprise constituency is probably also affecting the SME interest representation. Different European federations stand against each other and this could hinder the possibility of working united for the interest of SMEs. This could thereby weaken the possibility for SME interests to be influential in the policy-process.

Euro centers work to act as a two-way street between SMEs and EU decision-makers to encourage enterprises to interact with policy-makers at the EU level. The policy part is restricted to distributing consultation forms from the European Commission (EC) to the SMEs members in the Network. Hence, there is a direct contact between the EC and the SMEs. Also, a majority of former European International Contractors (EIC) representatives consider the European Commission to be keen to listen to the SMEs. This method can be seen as important since all stakeholders, and not only the organized ones, have a possibility to give their feedback to the Commission. Yet, if the forms are complicated, it is less probable that there is a high degree of SMEs participation. The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) is considered to be an important tool to promote SME Interests according to both the Commission and the European Parliament (EP), and both institutions have been involved from the very beginning. There is a trend for some parts of the European Commission to bypass Associations and Federations in favor of direct contact with entrepreneurs.

It has been argued that the main problem for business federations is not the creation of federation, but the heterogeneous rather than homogenous association members, as well as the members will to keep some autonomous characteristics. The relationship between these heterogeneous actors affects the possibility for the association to act. Furthermore, one problem with wide federations is the slow and cumbersome 'lowest common denominator proneness' that can be found among associations seeking to represent a membership wide constituency (Greenwood, 2007 and 2001).

Despite the fact that a large member constituency can cause problems, it also gives higher legitimacy in the EU policy-process (Rainer, 2009). A common position from different SME Associations strengthens the legitimacy of SME Interests. The power of Business Interests Associations (BIA) is additionally considered to depend upon the association's capacity to link several levels of the multilevel system. That is, to effectively gather support through lobbying all relevant policy areas, i.e. in both Member States and Brussels (Katz, 2001).

Associations that manage to be present throughout the different policy levels, multilevel players, are considered to be the most successful ones. SME interests need to be supported from a powerful coalition of member governments, EU and national institutions. Interest representation requires becoming influential in policymaking. Resources and market power are said to be yet another important power tool for business interests. However, Greenwood and Webster (Greenwood and Webster, 2010) argue that market power does not automatically translate into political power and claims that it is possible for BIAs with special interests to prevail in certain types of circumstances. Finally, BIAs are not rational actors, which take rational decisions.

Associations do not always understand what they are doing and what the outcomes of their decisions may be, since they are involved in a whole series of policy games at different levels of the national and EU system. This explains why they may appear to settle for sub-optimal choices.

SMEs interests should dominate in general policymaking due to their importance for the European competitiveness, its wide constituency and since its interests can be related to the European integration. Wide variety of national business representations ranges from very small to very large. Some are very experienced and professional in defending the interest of their members and very well informed about their needs. Others are rather young and still learning. Some have mainly individual enterprises as member, others are umbrella organizations. Given the great variety of business organizations, there is room for a learning process: some organizations are so well developed and experienced that they may offer their knowledge and experience to other organizations.

6 CONCLUSION

To achieve better insight into system of SMEs' representations, it is essential to take into consideration: whether they are sufficiently involved in policy making, which includes development of collective agreements, influencing policy, participation in official committees and standardization committees, whether the organization has an office in Brussels and whether it is a member of European organization. Hence, to analyze how the interests of SMEs are represented in the national and European multileveled policy-process, we examined SMEs interests seem to be considered as important by both European and Czech institutions. As such, SMEs still use the common market to a less extent than large enterprises. However, barriers and problems remain because institutional arrangements were formed especially for large enterprises.

The results show that SMEs are represented by both private and public national associations and by horizontal and sectorial federations. Czech Associations are represented at both national and European level, but it is the horizontal federations that are seen as the 'official' SMEs' organizations by the Commission. The fact that the Commission makes a distinction between horizontal and sectorial federations creates one of important issues for SMEs interests representation since many parts of the policy-process have been designed for sectorial interests. However, the wide constituency in horizontal federations gives SMEs interests legitimacy in general business strategies, but at the same time weakens representation in specific sector policies, since only sector federations are represented in particular industry policymaking.

Funding is however an important issue for the Czech SMEs. Hence if this was unfamiliar for the Czech Associations, arrangement with separated lobbying organizations and EU service providers might be problematic. The results of the EU legislative changes will be felt years after the legislative discussions. This makes the immediate effects of missed opportunities negligible, whereas the long-term consequences may be considerable. SMEs should not be regarded as uninteresting for the EU just because they are uninteresting by its structure. This may indicate that the membership incentives differ among different Czech BIAs.

The analysis shows that SME interests can frame the EU economic objectives, but that institutional arrangements and barriers make it difficult for SMEs interests to be influential within the entire EU policymaking system. In addition, SMEs interest representation is mostly horizontal, with a cross-constituency, and EU policymaking is often conducted in sectorial settings. This leads to a less widespread SMEs' interests' representation in the EU policy-process.

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