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Research Article

## Beyond the Brussels Bubble? National Civil Society Organisations in the European Union

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## Abstract

Mainstream research on the roles and contribution of civil society in the EU is characterised by a strong focus on European civil society in Brussels. Studies looking at activities and roles of national CSOs in the European Union (EU) depart from mainstream analytical and conceptual perspectives and rarely talk to each other. The contributions of this special issue attempt to bridge empirical and analytical gaps between existing studies on European civil society beyond Brussels. They show that the involvement of national CSOs in EU policymaking and democratisation is broader and more diverse than is usually thought. They approach the object of study from an original analytical perspective: a research agenda inspired by sociological approaches. This agenda hinges on an interactionist and pragmatic analytical framework, a pluralist approach to causality and takes into account the peculiarities and effects of context. Moving beyond Brussels and adopting diverse analytical perspectives, the contributions provide new evidence on the diversity of functions, roles and responses of national CSOs to the EU, and the roles and motivations of national CSOs implementing EU policies.

## Keywords

Civil society organisations; Democratisation; European Union; Europeanization; Political sociology

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Studies of civil society actors in the European Union (EU) have proliferated during the last decade. These Brussels-centred studies cover interest groups' activities, strategies and influence on EU decision-making. The prolific academic output of this well-developed field of inquiry has already been the subject of multiple compilations and reviews (Beyers, Eising and Maloney 2008; Coen and Richardson 2009). From the 2000s, the research focus shifted to civil society organisations (CSOs) in light of debates on improving the EU's democratic legitimacy and reducing the democratic deficit. Scholars' attention moved to Brussels-based participatory governance and the efforts of the European Commission in particular to promote civil society involvement in EU policymaking (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2013; Ruzza 2004).

The Brussels focus of these two branches of research is twofold: firstly, EU decision-making processes or participatory techniques and, secondly, EU-based CSOs. While Brussels-centred studies have the merit of drawing attention to the complex relationships between EU institutions and EU-based CSOs, most do not explicitly cover the EU-related activities of national CSOs. Thus, while relevant and interesting, the mainstream focus on Brussels-based CSOs does not represent the whole picture. Furthermore, an increasing amount of scholarship has shown that the EU-related activities of national CSOs are just as relevant. Until now, however, there has been little cross-fertilisation and cumulative knowledge generation across these studies on the contribution, roles and actions of national CSOs in the EU. There is also little conceptual discussion about appropriate theoretical and analytical frameworks that can better help to understand and explain the drivers, trajectories, patterns and inner logic of national CSOs' participation in EU processes.

This special issue overcomes this existing compartmentalisation of research on national CSOs. We argue that bringing national CSOs into the picture contributes new understandings of the role of CSOs in Europe. Firstly, a move beyond Brussels highlights CSOs' functions that have been largely overlooked by focusing exclusively on Brussels dynamics. These include CSOs' involvement in policy implementation, their engagement in politicisation dynamics and their exercise of scrutiny and

oversight of EU policies at the national level. Secondly, we argue that a change of analytical perspective, namely adopting a pragmatic sociological approach, challenges several assumptions about the role of European civil society. This includes assumptions about how the EU transforms and shapes CSOs and how CSOs contribute to the democratisation of the EU.

These arguments are advanced on the basis of an extensive literature review of over 100 academic sources.<sup>1</sup> This showed that a more nuanced and fine-grained understanding of the nature and role of CSOs emerges once scholars move beyond the Brussels bubble. In the first section, we discuss the challenges and opportunities of conceptualising 'national CSOs in the EU', as well as the academic contribution of the study of national CSOs to European studies. In the second section, we show how the main findings of existing research on national CSOs challenge some of the main assumptions of Brussels-centred research. We also propose a new research agenda to address this challenge illustrated by the articles included in this special issue. We argue that given the multi-faceted character of national CSOs in the EU and the variety of theoretical and analytical perspectives from which they are studied, it is difficult to identify general patterns and offer an overarching conceptualisation that captures both the nature and EU strategies of national CSOs. To overcome these challenges, we propose a pragmatic research agenda inspired by recent work on the sociology of the EU (Guiraudon and Favell 2009; Saurugger 2009).

## **EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY BEYOND BRUSSELS: DOES IT REALLY MATTER?**

This section addresses two challenges. Firstly, we discuss the possibility of establishing a heuristic conceptual distinction between CSOs in Brussels and CSOs beyond Brussels. Secondly, we argue that research on national CSOs in the EU contributes to a more complete and nuanced understanding of the role and functions of CSOs in the EU.

### ***Civil Society beyond Brussels: A Heuristic Concept?***

For the purpose of this special issue, CSOs are actors outside of the public and market sectors that pursue public policy goals. CSOs are formally democratically accountable and involve some degree of voluntary participation. This definition includes a large range of organisations, such as public interest groups, non-governmental organisations, voluntary organisations and social movements. National CSOs are also broadly understood as including all types of CSOs that have some degree of activity at the local and national levels.

While national CSOs can be analysed separately from EU umbrellas and delegations, the analytical distinction between CSOs in Brussels and national CSOs involved in EU politics is not self-evident. It could be argued that national CSOs involved in EU politics are also active in Brussels. However, recent research shows that the population of CSOs active at the national level working on EU issues is substantially different from the population of CSOs active in Brussels, since national CSOs rarely engage in multi-venue shopping (Binderkrantz and Rasmussen 2015). Even in cases where national CSOs are active in Brussels, it is relevant to establish a distinction between activities directed towards EU institutions in Brussels and the EU-related activities taking place within national and local contexts. National CSOs are not always based in EU member states. Many studies have analysed how the EU has contributed to the transformation of CSOs in third countries in areas such as regional cooperation, the promotion of development and democracy and strengthening civil society (Bruszt and Vedres 2013; Kyris 2013; Sanchez Salgado and Parthenay 2013; Scott 2011).

The focus of this special issue is on the EU. National CSOs deal with EU affairs in multiple ways. They can get involved in the implementation of EU policies or in EU-instigated participation processes. CSOs can also simply try to engage in processes of politicisation of the EU, with more or less success. The analysis of national CSOs in the EU can also highlight many of the classical conceptual challenges related to the concept of CSOs. The study of CSOs beyond Brussels calls for a more differentiated perspective in understanding CSOs in EU studies. For example, to determine to what extent the EU may be excluding relevant grassroots organisations, it is necessary to study CSOs at the national and local levels.

Without seeking to establish a sharp conceptual distinction between European civil society *in* and *beyond* Brussels, the contributors in this special issue opt for placing the emphasis on national CSOs whose EU-related activities are performed at the national or local levels. These EU-related activities can include a whole spectrum of involvement in EU policymaking and implementation processes or politicisation and claims-making about the EU and its policies.

### ***The Study of National CSOs in the EU: Academic Contribution***

The study of national CSOs in the EU considers a broader set of themes and topics and changes our understanding of CSOs in the EU multilevel system. Firstly, when attention is directed towards CSOs beyond Brussels, the analysis tends to shift from an exclusive focus on EU decision-making procedures to a more inclusive focus emphasising CSOs' role in the transposition and implementation of EU policies. Secondly, when analysing the main findings of existing research, it becomes clear that the study of CSOs beyond Brussels has contributed to broadening the Brussels-centred understanding of how CSOs contribute to the democratisation of the EU.

Only articles with a specific focus on national CSOs cover the topic of how national CSOs contribute to the implementation of EU policies. The majority of existing studies cover the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (Armstrong 2006; Brandsen, Pavolini, Ranci, Sitterman et al. 2009; Jacobsson and Johansson 2009) and cohesion policy and structural funds (Gašior-Niemiec 2010; Royles 2006). Interestingly, when the attention is turned away from decision-making at the EU level, existing studies show that CSOs' functions go beyond those that are conventionally discussed by the Brussels-centred studies (the provision of expertise, aggregation and representation of interests and advocacy of public causes). At the national and local levels, CSOs play two additional roles: they contribute to public service delivery and they act as watchdogs. The Brussels approach to CSOs' participation in decision-making offers a picture of an elite-pluralist system of interest representation with a strong business bias (Dür and Mateo 2014; Eising 2007). That being said, an overall quantitative advantage of business interests does not necessarily always translate into increased influence on specific EU legislative acts (Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall 2015). As we will explain, a focus on the national and local levels leads to different conclusions. National CSOs have developed multiple ways to participate in EU politics that cannot be simply characterised as an elite-pluralist system. While analysing how the EU shapes CSOs, Brussels-centred studies also tend to conclude that the EU is promoting a cozy relationship between policymakers and CSOs based on working together (Wolff 2013). The few studies that analyse how the EU has contributed to the transformation of national CSOs beyond Brussels show that the effects of the EU on CSOs are much more diverse (Sanchez Salgado 2014a; Trenz 2007).

Most EU-centred studies, while assessing the democratic potential of CSOs, focus on Brussels-based mechanisms of consultation and participation. While these studies give an interesting picture of the role of CSOs in Brussels, their conclusions need to be nuanced. Their pessimistic account of CSOs' role in the democratisation of the EU overlooks a significant number of participatory channels sometimes exclusively available at the national level. Regarding possible channels, CSOs can perform

a representative function, articulating the interest of their members. On this topic, existing articles often refer to national CSOs as members of bigger umbrella associations in Brussels (Johansson and Lee 2014; Kröger 2014). Much less is known about the role of national CSOs in the articulation of interests of their members (Jentges 2012).

The few articles that investigate the relations between CSOs and their members focus on attitudes towards Europe or on the diffusion of an EU identity (Caiani and Ferrer-Fons 2010; Iglıc 2010; Maloney and van Deth 2008) as well as on levels of trust (Zmerli 2010), rather than on the articulation of interests on EU issues (Warleigh 2001). CSOs beyond Brussels are also believed to contribute to the democratisation of the EU through initiating wide debates and deliberation about EU policies. In this way, they contribute to the emergence of an EU public sphere as a space for debate, contestation and exchange of various claims of legitimacy and representation (Fossum and Trenz 2006).

### **NATIONAL CSOS IN THE EU: A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA**

When the attention is turned to national CSOs in the EU, it is remarkable that CSOs have not been investigated in their own right, but rather as a means to explain the processes of European integration and Europeanization. This special issue takes into account recent moves in EU studies to integrate sociological approaches. Sociological approaches refer both to the focus on typically sociological objects of study such as social stratification, social networks or social movements and political fields and to novel research designs that permit scholars to grasp the full range of social effects of the EU (Giraudon and Favell 2009). These sociological approaches are rather heterogeneous (Saurugger 2009). When applied to the study of national CSOs, sociological approaches imply, firstly, a new understanding of Europeanization, not only as a process characterised by top-down or bottom-up dynamics but as the result of the interaction between the organisational and institutional dimensions and the individual dimension. Secondly, they take the national and local context into account, which translates into a pragmatic (pluralistic) approach to causality.

#### ***From Top-down Europeanization to an Interactionist and Pragmatic Approach***

Most studies analysing national CSOs in the EU have drawn on Europeanization as their main approach (Beyers and Kerremans 2012; Caiani and della Porta 2007; Dür and Mateo 2014; Gąsior-Niemiec 2010; Sanchez Salgado 2014a). However, the Europeanization approach has not been used as a specifically delineated analytical framework. The classical model for the analysis of Europeanization processes was designed for the analysis of EU impact on public policies or national administrations (Featherstone and Radaelli 2003). Europeanization was indeed originally understood as a top-down process, broken down into the analysis of EU pressures, the goodness of fit between these pressures and national policies and politics, and the analysis of facilitating or mediating factors. This model cannot be applied automatically to the study of national CSOs in the EU. While analysing CSOs, Europeanization does not lead to integration and convergence, and national pathways are so differentiated that it is difficult to reach collective categorisations which apply across all member states (Kendall 2010).

The analysis of the EU's impact on social actors required research designs making it possible to grasp fully the social effects of the EU (Sanchez Salgado 2014a). Europeanization has been combined with other concepts more adapted to this purpose such as political opportunities, multilevel governance, venue shopping or usages of Europe (Beyers, Eising and Maloney 2008; Bouza Garcia 2015; Princen

and Kerremans 2008; Sanchez Salgado 2014a; Woll and Jacquot 2010). The main research question is then: given the existence of new EU opportunities, to what extent, how and why have CSOs decided to turn their attention and activities to the EU level? While interesting, these studies only cover one specific dimension of the Europeanization process: the use of EU opportunities. In sum, it seems most authors agree that there are relevant EU opportunities for national CSOs. Thus, it is not only important to look at European political opportunities, it is also necessary to analyse how these opportunities unfold and for this, sociological approaches can be useful.

One of the main contributions to many studies on national CSOs in the EU concerns the integration of sociological approaches to EU studies. Sociological approaches reveal the difficulties related to making clear-cut distinctions between the top-down and bottom-up logics of Europeanization (Saurugger 2009). As a way to address this challenge, sociological approaches focus on collective actors' intentions and perceptions, and integrate the individual dimension to the study of the Europeanization process.

The relevant role of domestic actors in using creatively European opportunities has already been stressed by the 'usages of Europe' approach (Sanchez Salgado 2014b; Woll and Jacquot 2010). The integration in the analysis of actors' intentions and perceptions also reveals the need to move from a normative understanding of the role of CSOs to a more contextual and realistic picture. Scholars arrive at radically different conclusions when they do not assume in advance what constitutes the democratisation effect of CSOs' involvement, but actually take stock of existing practices of participation or, alternatively, inquire how actors themselves conceptualise democracy and participation. For instance, CSOs in central and eastern European (CEE) member states viewed the partnership principle as a tool for exercising scrutiny and oversight over the domestic authorities and Structural Funds spending (Batory and Cartwright 2011). This type of scrutiny was the primary way of democratising EU-related policymaking. Demidov (2016) finds that a close inspection of actors' self-perceptions and institutional identities explains how they see their democratising role. These findings nuance existing research concluding that involvement of civil society actors does not really democratise EU policymaking.

### ***Taking Contexts Seriously: a Pluralistic Approach to Causality***

Although the qualitative case-study methodology adopted by most studies on CSOs beyond Brussels may be seen as problematic for wider generalisation (Beyers and Kerremans 2012), when considered together, these studies cover a wide range of policies and member states. Some conclusions can be established about the role of national CSOs in the EU.

#### *The Predominance of Diversity*

While Brussels-based research is done within the relatively homogeneous context of the Brussels bubble, research on national CSOs in the EU takes into account a diversity of national contexts in old and new member states and in third countries. It is therefore not surprising that diversity of EU effects is the most remarkable finding (Batory and Cartwright 2011; Brandsen, Pavolini, Ranci, Sitterman et al. 2005; Sanchez Salgado 2014b). The type of impact differs in old and new member states (Mahoney and Beckstrand 2011) and in pre-accession and post-accession contexts (Kyris 2013). This diversity seems to be even greater when external relations are taken into account, since the EU also promotes different types of relationships between the state and civil society depending on geopolitical interests. Overall, the EU's geopolitics seems to be largely indeterminate and leaves much room for negotiation and mutual accommodation between the EU and third countries (Scott 2011).

In contrast to studies of CSOs active in Brussels, studies of national CSOs draw attention to the contribution of CSOs to OMC processes, the implementation of EU directives and potential effects of EU funding opportunities. Member states have implemented EU norms and procedures in different ways, leading to highly differentiated involvement of CSOs in EU policymaking at the national level (Brandsen, Pavolini, Ranci, Sitterman et al. 2005). EU funds are generally considered to be excessively demanding and bureaucratic, but they have different effects in different contexts. Seemingly fair and transparent EU funds favour organisations that have consistently worked with the state while CSOs that possess expertise in the field remain excluded (Rumbul 2013). However, some CSOs have been able to use European funding opportunities successfully to develop their own activities and have not only adopted, but also contributed to the professionalisation process (Sanchez Salgado 2014b).

Existing research also conveys a mixed message regarding the democratising potential of national CSOs. Some consider that CSOs' internal governance procedures are insufficiently democratic (Warleigh 2001) or that national CSOs are not mobilising citizens as much as they could (Maloney and van Deth 2008). Others have found that CSOs contribute to the socialisation of their members, resulting in more engaged European citizens and citizens more open to a European identity (Caiani and Ferrer-Fons 2010, Iglıc 2010). More often than not, national CSOs have experienced many problems in taking advantage of new participatory opportunities because of external blockages and internal weaknesses (Gąsior-Niemiec 2010). However, on some occasions, EU processes have provided CSOs with reasons to mobilise, develop a common agenda and act (Bruszt and Vedres 2013; Johansson and Lee 2014). The EU has also contributed to the empowerment of social movements in EU accession processes (Parau 2009). Regarding CSOs' politicisation function, it is often argued that national CSOs do not appear to be contributing to the democratisation of the EU through co-creation of its public sphere. However, national CSOs can be considered as active politicisers of EU agendas when they campaign for or against EU legislative proposals (della Porta and Caiani 2009).

#### *From EU-level Generalisations to Context-based Multiple Causal Pathways*

While it is tempting to analyse the influence of potential explanatory factors leading to generalisations, this task seems difficult to accomplish when national and local levels are the primary focus of the analysis. A few European general trends can still be established, but these trends have very different manifestations in different member states since there are several national factors that lead to different outcomes. For example, from an exclusive EU perspective, it can be claimed that the more EU opportunities are developed in a specific policy area, the more effects or interactions there are in this area (Mahoney 2004; Sanchez Salgado 2014b). CSOs' participation is thus more developed in particular policy areas such as cohesion policy, the OMC on social protection and social inclusion, and within the framework of specific pieces of legislation such as the Water Framework Directive. However, while trying to explain how and why CSOs engage in EU policies, it is too complex to identify the most relevant explanatory factors.

Given the difficulty in reaching generalisations, the study of national CSOs in the EU calls for developing new ways of approaching causality. In this respect, sociological approaches in EU studies are based on a pluralistic epistemology but at the same time call for rigorous research designs, including quantitative surveys and qualitative case studies based on interviews (Saurugger 2009). The establishment of causal paths seems to be more of a pragmatic research goal than the establishment of general patterns. Instead of trying to find a single relevant explanatory factor determining why national organisations decide to engage in EU issues, a context-sensitive analysis envisages different types of engagement with EU issues at the national level, as well as distinct causal pathways. Until now, most of the attention has been given to one single causal pathway: the European route where national CSOs go to Brussels with the ambition to influence EU policymaking.

However, there are many other different routes to Europe that deserve further attention (Ruzza and Bozzini 2008), including the national route in which national CSOs participate in national politics with the ambition of influencing EU policymaking.

Regarding EU shaping of national CSOs and their potential contribution to the democratic process, there seems to be at least two relevant causal pathways. First, exclusionary dynamics where organisational resources and relational variables have substantial explanatory power. This causal pathway can also include confrontation between EU institutions and stakeholders and strategic usages and instrumentalisation of EU resources and opportunities. Second, a causal pathway leading to empowerment: weak access to domestic policymakers and lack of economic resources leads to seeking funding and access at the EU level. The empowerment pathway would also imply learning dynamics in which new organisational models, priorities and strategies are the result of regular interactions between EU officials and CSOs. These ideal-type causal pathways can take multiple forms depending on the specific combination of the most relevant variables at work.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The first series of articles in this special issue analyses the participation of national CSOs in EU policymaking beyond Brussels, with a particular focus on the routes that national CSOs take for such engagement. Most importantly, they focus on how national and local contexts affect these choices. Bringing up the cases of Sweden, Spain and Slovenia and employing various methods, including survey data, semi-structured interviews and social network analysis, these contributions seek to establish what affects decisions of national CSOs to Europeanize by scrutinising the specifics of the national route and the influence of national contexts. These context-sensitive analyses show that although oft-mentioned factors such as economic resources undoubtedly trigger national CSOs' decision to mobilise at the EU level and seek influence in Brussels, there is a plethora of overlooked context-specific factors.

Asking how Swedish CSOs choose routes of gaining political influence in the EU, Johansson, Scaramuzzino and Wennerhag corroborate the assumption that although being embedded in a multilevel context and having access to multiple routes of influence, Swedish CSOs mostly use national channels to target EU policies and remain rooted in the national setting. However, when asking which factors affect these choices, they highlight the importance of organisational factors such as type of organisation, organisational resources and level of activity. Importantly, they stress the analytical significance of how CSOs perceive different levels, a highly context-specific factor in itself. The authors find that Swedish CSOs are more willing and ready to engage in influencing EU policies when these policies are in conflict with national ones, thus highlighting the decisive role of the level of contention between the EU and national levels.

Similarly, Oleart and Bouza Garcia ask how Spanish CSOs mobilise around EU issues and whether this mobilisation is similar to that around strictly national issues. They scrutinise this by looking at the dynamics of Spanish CSOs' politicisation in the case of the negotiations about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and find that the positioning of Spanish CSOs towards the EU has changed and the era of 'permissive consensus' regarding the EU among Spanish CSOs has ended. The authors find that this process was far from being exclusively top-down or initiated by professional Spanish CSOs, but that socially skilled EU-critical cause entrepreneurs contributed to a campaign more critical of the EU and led to a greater politicisation of Spanish civil society, especially in the field of EU politics.

Novak and Lajh's article discusses the inclusion of Slovenian CSOs in the formation of national positions and in the transposition and implementation of EU legislation. As expected by mainstream research, there is little direct participation in Brussels from Slovenian CSOs and thus it can be concluded that organisational resources and relational variables play a significant role in explaining exclusionary dynamics when direct participation in Brussels is concerned. However, Novak and Lajh also show that Slovenian CSOs are not completely silent regarding EU politics. They participate in EU policymaking using the national route, including participation in EU umbrella organisations and contacts with national policymakers.

The second series of articles focuses on the meanings that members and leaders of national organisations attribute to their involvement in EU issues. By including CSOs from western Europe (Belgium and France), eastern Europe (Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and Poland) and third countries (Georgia, Armenia and Ukraine), they illustrate the variety of perceptions and meanings attributed by national CSOs to the EU, including their potential to contribute to the reduction of the democratic deficit.

Defacqz unpacks the concept of organisational legitimacy and asks how Belgian CSOs perceive their European networks. Analysing actors' perceptions, he arrives at an interesting conclusion about the assumed relationship between the European networks of CSOs and their national members. Belgian CSOs do not see their EU-level umbrella platforms as transmitters between national CSOs and the EU institutions but rather legitimise them as champions of greater policy objectives. Odasso, employing ethnographic methods and looking at how French CSOs 'use Europe' when deciding to join a European network of CSOs, finds that apart from more conventional factors such as economic and human resources, views and perceptions of individuals working in French CSOs, which are closely linked to their age, education and organisational positions, are just as important for understanding why national CSOs seek membership in EU-wide networks. Lafon, in turn, shows how national CSOs react and adapt to newly created EU networks in the case of the French and Belgian CSOs and European Women's Lobby. Drawing on rich empirical data, she compares two distinct outcomes of Europeanization and identifies three causal paths: cultural, organisational and individual.

Looking at how engagement of civil society relates to the legitimacy of EU policymaking, Demidov analyses how national actors, including CSOs, perceive the purpose of and their role in implementation of the EU civil society requirements, namely the partnership principle for the Structural Funds in four CEE member states. He finds that these perceptions differ across countries, types of actors (state officials vs. CSOs), and within groups of actors (types of CSOs), thus also emphasising the importance of national and local contexts.

Moving not only beyond Brussels but also beyond the EU, Buzogány asks what happens to the EU civil society agenda abroad and what civil society actors make of it. Looking at how CSOs in Georgia and Ukraine react to internal changes of the EU civil society discourse, Buzogány finds that local CSOs in the Neighbourhood countries readily accept the new role of watchdogs imposed by the EU, yet also immediately direct their scrutiny and oversight towards the EU itself.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Using the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) a search with the criteria 'civil society' and 'European Union' produced around 70 relevant results. Additional articles were added with the criteria 'interest groups' and 'European Union', leading to a total of around 99 relevant articles. In addition, we reviewed a range of book chapters and edited collections. We limit ourselves in this introduction to providing an overview of the main themes in this literature.

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