

Portrait

Will the real lobbyist please stand up?

According to figures given by the EU and the international press, there are some 15,000 lobbyists in Brussels. But what defines a lobbyist?

BY KRISTOF DAMS

PHOTOS BY SANDER DE WILDE

A string of academic articles and well-received books on lobbying (most notably *Machiavelli in Brussels*) have made Dutchman Rinus van Schendelen, 67, the elder statesman of lobbying scholarship. A professor of political science at the University of Rotterdam, he is also a partner in the lobbying firm Bureau Brussels, which has its offices at Rond-Point Schuman. When asked about the oft-touted '15,000 lobbyists' figure, Van Schendelen is quick to reply. "That number is sacrosanct in EU circles. In 2007, during the European Transparency Initiative [to set a framework for relations between EU institutions

and interest representatives], the magical number came under much discussion in the European Parliament. Neither Commissioner Siim Kallas nor the *rapporteur*, the then MEP Alexander Stubb, knew what to make of it. I remained silent."

Despite these misgivings, the holy number found its way, once again, to the final report. "But in the upcoming German-language version of my book *More Machiavelli in Brussels*," says Van Schendelen, "I reveal that I was actually at the source of that '15,000 lobbyists' figure. It happened on the fringes of the first European Parliament hearings into lobbying in 1992, to which I was witness.



Rinus van Schendelen,
the elder statesman of
lobbying scholarship

I came up with the figure through a simple and in itself logical calculation. If there are 2,500 interest groups in Brussels, as was stated then, and they employ on average six people, then there must be about 15,000 lobbyists in Brussels. I told this in the company of a group of journalists, and one of them wrote a piece on it. So now you know!”

Thus, the holy number came about as the result of a scholar thinking out loud in the presence of a newspaper man. But if the number of 15,000 is in fact based on an informed guess from 20 years ago, what does the lobbying scene look like today?

Frunk Schwalba-Hoth, 59, meets us for lunch in the European Parliament canteen. After serving as a Green MEP in the 1980s and as regional director of Greenpeace in the 1990s, he ran his own consultancy firm, *Conseillé & Partners*. Today, he works as an ‘independent political analyst and strategist’. This mostly entails cycling around the city, free from all structures and hierarchies (“like Clint Eastwood on a bike”) in order to “coach people who want to be like a fish in the EU-Brussels waters”.

This year, Schwalba-Hoth published the first edition of *Stakeholder.eu – The Directory for Brussels*. Available in book form and online, the directory gives the particulars of those involved in shaping EU policy. We skim through the directory, with its 4,500 offices and 14,000 personal addresses, and express amazement at the sheer scale of EU stakeholdership. “Yes,” he answers, “there

are 269 regional offices, 23 UN offices, 162 law firms, more than 80 think-thanks and 208 consultancy firms: people you can hire, if you don’t have a representation here. On top of that, you have 300 NGOs, 37 chambers of commerce and some 800 European Federations, like the Confederation of European Forest Owners, and national associations like the German association of airports... The list goes on and on.”

How many people are working in these offices? “Some of them, like the headquarters of the chemical industries, employ more than 100 people. Others have only one employee – or even only a desk, with someone regularly travelling over from London, Paris, Copenhagen. I always advise small organisations from, say, Paris not to open an office in Brussels. Better just to come on over a couple of times a year for a few days. If you have any social skills, you will get more visibility by doing that than from sitting behind a desk near the European Parliament.”

According to Van Schendelen, roughly 100,000 experts representing public or private interests attend meetings of around 2,000 of the European Commission’s expert groups. The EU affairs information website EurActiv puts the number of those indirectly involved in lobbying or policy across the EU at 500,000.

So, should we speak of 500,000 lobbyists instead? Schwalba-Hoth thinks not: “The definition of a ‘lobbyist’ is not very clear. If there are twenty people working with a European Association or an NGO, are they all

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*Independent political analyst and strategist
Frank Schwalba-Hoth*

lobbyists? Some of them are in contact with policy-makers and civil servants. Others do research or administrative work. To me, a 'lobbyist' is the one who is actually asking for a meeting, knocking on doors, meeting people. Based on the lobbyists' register of the European Commission and the European Parliament, there's only a few thousand of those."

Our new figure is now 'a couple of thousand' lobbyists. But that's still too large an estimate, if Daniel Guéguen, 62, is to be believed. The former head of the European farmers' federation COPA-COGECA and founder of CLAN Public Affairs is not certain but he thinks he might be the longest-serving lobbyist in Brussels: "I've been doing this since 1975. I think that's a record." In lectures, he has claimed that the number of 'real lobbyists' might be as low as 300. When we call on him in his office in Rue Froissart for clarification, he says: "This is a good time to talk about lobbying. You see, you catch me at a point when I'm about to start up a new company, to adapt to the changing nature of lobbying. The Treaty of Lisbon changed everything for lobbying, and not in the right direction. It's making everything more complex and more legal."

WHO'S WHO IN LOBBYING

For a guide to the biggest lobby players operating in Brussels, see the latest edition of 'Lobby Planet' by lobby watchdog Corporate Europe Observatory. See www.corporateeurope.org for information

Guéguen is sometimes criticised by the Brussels lobby community for not being a discreet, Anglo-Saxon-style lobbyist, but rather an outspoken French intellectual. He expressed his concerns about the way the EU is going in the recent pamphlet *Comitology: Hijacking European Power?* "There are decisions taken by the visible power and decisions taken by a hidden power. The visible powers are the Commission and the Parliament. But they are only producing fifty regulations each year. Today, with 27 member states, the directives or guidelines to all the key technical matters are adopted through 'comitology' – that is, by civil servants and expert groups.

"This is the hidden power – and it's adopting 2,500 regulations a year. Can you imagine that? 2,500 against 50! [Van Schendelen disputes these figures: official statistics indicate a ratio of 1,400 against 200 in recent years] How many in Brussels are aware of this?

"And if you don't understand how it works, are you really a lobbyist? You may have a big network, you may have all the best arguments – but if you're not able to understand the decision-making procedure, you are lost. In Brussels, there are thousands of lobbyists who are top experts in their fields: transport, agriculture, energy... But the number of lobbyists who fully

"It's not about strolling around the corridors of Parliament or attending cocktail parties"



Daniel Guéguen, possibly Brussels' longest-serving lobbyist

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understand the decision-making process is becoming very, very limited. It's not about strolling around the corridors of Parliament or attending cocktail parties. There are two pillars: you have the 'what?' and you have the 'how to?' I'm a specialist of the 'how to?' And when I have a dossier, I look for a top expert in the 'what'. And we create a team – a *winning team*."

Lobbying has possibly the worst public image of any profession not forbidden by law. Alter-EU, the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation, calls them "democracy demolition squads". Both Schwalba-Hoth and Guéguen take exception to that. "Lobbying is a counter-power," Guéguen says. "It expresses the voice of industry and civil society." Schwalba-Hoth says: "The places in the world where you have no lobbying are those places with a very autocratic political structure: China, Vietnam, Cuba, Myanmar. Countries with an open political structure, like the US and Germany, have a developed culture of influencing from the outside." And especially in the EU, lobbying is crucial, he adds: "You may have studied in three countries and have a partner from a fourth country, but you will never be able to imagine what a piece of legislation will practically mean for Lithuania, for Portugal, for 25 other countries. For that, you need lobbyists."

But lest we should get too rosy a picture of lobbying, Guéguen reminds us that lobbying is not diplomacy – it is war, industrial war. "Everyone wants to be so awfully consensual nowadays, especially the younger generations. But lobbying is not consensual. In any lobbying dossier you have friends and opponents. And you have to win the case. I for one am not afraid to take a dossier and really push it all the way through in order to win."

Indeed, who wins? American activist Susan George has claimed that "industry has won most of the battles". Both Schwalba-Hoth and Guéguen emphatically deny this. "Those who say that don't know the situation on the terrain," says Schwalba-Hoth. Guéguen stresses the professionalism of NGO lobbying – or 'advocacy', as the organisations prefer to call it: "I think that today, on average, NGOs are more professional and successful than business. They have great expertise, excellent staff. They've made huge progress."

Since 2011, the European Commission and the European Parliament have established a joint register to which lobbyists are requested to sign up. However, since it is not mandatory for lobbyists to enter their details on the register, transparency in the system is still a way off. Says Guéguen: "I am totally in favour of compulsory regulation. Today, anyone can describe himself as a 'top lobbyist' and open an office without any qualifications at all. We have to organise ourselves, like solicitors, in a professional order. We're doing a useful job and if we want to improve our image then we'll have to accept total transparency. There is no other option." ■