

# Machiavelli in Brussels: Public Affairs and the European Multilevel Governance System

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Interview with Rinus van Schendelen

**How can German stakeholders promote their interests in Brussels? Why makes public affairs management such an efficient and effective difference in European multilevel governance? These were some of the questions raised at EM Germany's panel discussion "EBD Exklusiv" where Rinus van Schendelen, political science professor at Rotterdam's Erasmus University, discussed the issue with more than 60 representatives from EM Germany's (EBD) member organisations. After the event, van Schendelen shared his views in an exclusive interview for EU-in-BRIEF.**

*Representation of interests in the European multilevel governance system poses new challenges for interest groups, but also for state players. Concerning European issues, what should the Federal Government's modern public affairs management be like?*

For me, there are three main points: firstly I would recommend reserving national coordination only for crucial dossiers – which is a maximum of 5%, I'd even say rather 2%, at COREPER II level. The other 95% to 98% should be left to the specialist ministries, it's up to them to oversee these dossiers in the Council. Decentralise it! That would be my first recommendation because if you want to coordinate everything you in fact coordinate nothing.

Secondly, the more decentralised PA units of

the Federal ministries must learn to share their interests with the German interest groups already acting in Brussels. "Shared listing" as it is called, starts at home! If you try to do it only in Brussels, then you're missing the point. At home you have the German interest groups that come to you. Every day, 30 to 40 groups enter the Wirtschaftsministerium (Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology) for talks. Then you can say: "This is your side, this is our side, this is our agenda. We'll help you, you help us" – that is shared listing.

If you want to coordinate everything you coordinate nothing

Besides that you must make your PA activities cross-sectoral and more international. Why just work with BASF, there are more BASFs in Europe, which has a strong chemical industry, so also push your interests to the German chemicals association VCI, and in addition look for other allies: the chemical industry mainly produces for the industry, not for private households. Your clients: get them involved! A problem for the chemical industry could also be a problem for the car industry, so get them involved. If you do this the platform at home in the Wirtschaftsministerium becomes most relevant. Dividing the work is a good idea, too: if it's helpful to do so, put someone in the Wirtschaftsministerium in charge, but if it is better for the end result that somebody from the industry or from an NGO takes the lead: even better! So that would be my second point: start everything at home and leave behind those beliefs that the ministry is always better equipped or has more expertise than anybody else.

And finally, build up a network of a few people in your own ministry that have already been identified as gifted with individual PA expertise. Give them career prospects and organise a PA unit within your ministry– I have done that in my own country, they have just the same sort of problems. A PA person should always have a good knowledge of the organisation, its issues and networks, those are the basics. It's about the perception of the issues but also of the networks inside the ministry, and before an outsider understands that network in the ministry you have wasted two years. When you have a small number – five, ten – of these gifted people in PA, organise a sort of task force within your ministry. Always ask for the green light from a higher-ranking official – preferably the minister or state secretary – because then there is usually also a small budget for the PA group and allocated time during working hours. Then the ball starts to roll, and you'll probably end up having more

people with the talent and skills than you need for your PA unit – because a real PA unit should be small. When we need three or four people for a real PA unit to take off, and we have an ambitious group of about 15 candidates– perfect! The best three, four get the position. That is my third point: start with the gifted people in your ministry.

*Are there ministries at national level that have a PA unit already installed?*

Various countries have tried it – Britain, a few Scandinavian countries, in my own country – and then you see a very typical process: it starts fine, well, and then the rest of the organisation becomes sceptical –what is that? - and if the minister who has protected your unit so far leaves, and a new minister arrives, then the sceptical ones in the organisation may say to the minister: “Get them out!” Then the unit disappears for a while, but a few years later it gets the chance to reestablish. That's life, sometimes you get knocked down...

## Public affairs need a new dimension of public diplomacy at home

*As far as EU representation of interests is concerned, we're witnessing some kind of cultural shock between the Foreign Office and the specialist ministries. Although the main part of EU-coordination is run by the Foreign Office, the interest groups and how they work is not a key aspect in the training of future diplomats. Actually there's a need for a new form of public diplomacy. How should interest groups respond to this?*

This is a good point. On shaping EU decision-making and legislation, the well-organised civil society interest groups increasingly bypass their central governments and address their interests at EU-level. In effect, this gives a new dimension to Public Diplomacy

because so far diplomacy was for foreign countries. Now, diplomats have to account for themselves more and more at home, in their home country at civil society level. This also concerns the modern form of Public Affairs officials, the successors of the diplomats: they do have to tell their story at home. And there is still room for improvement. Here, networks like Netzwerk EBD can play an important role, not only telling the interest groups here what is happening in Brussels, but also on the other side by asking the government to report back from Brussels. Civil Society here will discover that thanks to the support of, for example, British or Spanish or maybe non-EU – let's say Turkish – groups, the issue has been solved to the satisfaction of the Germans. Here we all still have a lot to do, particularly in countries in which Public Affairs is a recent phenomenon.

Public Affairs started – if you allow for a little bit of history – in Great Britain, not thanks to the British, but thanks to the Anglo-Saxon axis, or the Americans. PA entered the continent via my country, the Netherlands, and then spread to a few Scandinavian countries, and then step-by-step it also reached Belgium, Austria, the smaller countries. And now for a little over ten years it is on the up in Germany in a real sense.

In all countries it starts with normative questions: what is democracy? And you still have full-page articles in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* asking the question, but also *Das Parlament* has had special issues asking „PA – is it allowed?“, those sorts of questions. And then, some years later, the mass media start to make a report about a so-called expert going for one or two days to an expert group or committee in Brussels and then the journalist discovers that this is not exciting at all. It is boring, administrative work, you have to listen and to read through heaps of papers. Ok, it's not standard stuff – but there is hardly

anything like bribery or corruption in expert groups or in Comitology.

All those sorts of emotions are just nowhere to be seen at EU-workflows in Brussels. Sometimes these journalists come home with that sort of perception turned into stories – “Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte” had a number of issues with those kind of stories, perfect – that's the second phase.

## The more German interest groups fight for their interests, the better for Germany!

And the third phase is – and the Germans are close to that phase – that PA is finally fully accepted. Of course, you have to fight for your interests, and of course you cannot organise a grass-roots campaign through national coordination, you have to decentralise it. The more German interest groups fight for their interests, the better for Germany!

*But isn't that already the strength of German-EU coordination: unlike in France, there is no centralisation in our federal country with thousands of very strong cooperatives and interest groups.*

It is a matter of managing expectations. Most citizens expect that there is a central unit in the country – called Angela Merkel and her ministers – that coordinates the whole country. You have to educate people that it is different – and you can do it in more efficient ways: stimulate journalists to write reports on what is really happening in Brussels. That PA is not exciting at all, but hard work. If they come back with these stories, that would be real transparency!

*That is why EM Germany changed into “Netzwerk EBD” (network EM Germany) under our former president Monika Wulf-Mathies, a*

*former commissioner and trade unionist and also a lobbyist for Deutsche Post. She taught us to ask “what is the interest? Who is doing what?”, in order to find out about the players and their interests. That is democracy too. But for a long time, people blamed us for “only dealing with lobbyists”.*

Competition of interests is the oldest definition of “democracy”: interest group democracy has been around for 2000 years and more. For 110 years we’ve had the definition of parliamentary democracy, and now you have to convey to the people on the streets that we have more than one sort of democracy. We should feel happy that we are not depending on only one form.

## Competition of interests is the oldest form of democracy.

*What does that mean for EM Germany’s work?*

EM Germany needs to help correct Brussels’ image of non-transparent back room lobbying. EM Germany needs to tell citizens and civil society about what really happens in Brussels: hard public affairs work. Of course the system in Brussels is not perfect, it isn’t a perfect democracy for sure – but the democratic deficit is more visible at national level than at European level. Even at European level it can be improved but it is obvious that transparency in Brussels is higher than transparency at national levels. Some rare cases of bribery and corruption are mainly linked to Members of the European Parliament, that means party politicians. In many cases they are MEPs from new member states, such as Bulgaria or Romania. Now and then a single person from an ‘old’ member state, like the Austrian MEP Strasser, see the Guardian scandal. So tell people what happened after that: all four representatives lost their seats – pushed by their own faction. This brought back that

value of prudence again. Brussels is so transparent that if you do something wrong and a political opponent – it may also be another MEP – sees it, you’re close to being strung up.

*We have strong and decentralised interest groups or civil society structures in the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries, even Italy and Spain sometimes...*

... Northern Italy, and North-Eastern Spain...

*... but not in France. If Germans – media, people – are now expecting that France and Germany go forward together in EU-politics: how can this very cooperative and Anglo-Saxon way of thinking also be implemented in French civil society?*

France is changing, it has changed already. The façade – façade is a French word! – still looks like a centralist government. The French *réalité* is very different. You can’t say it is now decentralised, but it goes on, and nobody can predict France in five or ten years from now. But you see for example that François Hollande has great difficulties in getting support for his position on Brussels, on Europe from his own people and organisations. How are the French represented, particularly in Brussels, by their own organisations? The façade is also kept up at EU-coordination. The Secretary-General of SGAE, the French coordination office, is the main producer of so-called instructions for the French Permanent Representative in Brussels. They have a lot of people, ...

... *the Federal Foreign Office has roughly 10 ...*

... the Netherlands has one-and-a-half for coordinating, and then once a week people from the other ministries come in, plus a part-time secretary, that is all. But back to France: when SGAE envelopes arrive from Paris, they are opened and neatly stapled,

but they don't make much difference for the French PA people.

## Brussels is so transparent that if you do something wrong it can get you close to being strung up

*What is the situation for French civil society? Is it changing as fast?*

I can speak from practical experience, as a professor, and as a member on the advisory board of the French multinational Groupe de Suez, and its German waste management division SITA. Who makes the PA policies for SITA at corporate level? The Suez headquarters in Paris. What role does the French ministry play in that? If they are going to be useful, we go to them, if they are not going to be useful, we don't keep them informed because once we inform them, they want to intervene. Here you have a real case. And this is a mixed private-and-state owned multinational, not a state multinational. We previously mentioned the distance between national ministries and their own interest groups and people. In France, but also in many other countries, you can almost smell the distance of interest groups from their domestic ministries –the other way around!

*We'll have general elections in Germany in September. What do you think - should a European Affairs Minister be part of the Federal Government in the next legislative period?*

It depends. In most countries only the Minister sits at the table of the core cabinet. Not a State Secretary, like in Germany. In any case you should have a minister in charge of European affairs – not foreign affairs, only European affairs, and that might also include relations with Turkey or the US or whatever if they are related to EU dossiers – positioned close to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. That

first and foremost. Secondly, the Minister of European Affairs should be in charge of the sensitive dossiers – the COREPER II dossiers – at the moment the euro crisis dossiers.

Then of course there is the post above the Minister of European Affairs. In your country that is Angela Merkel, who is in charge of the "Chefsachen". The Multiannual Financial Framework is not necessarily a Chefsache; as long as there are no big conflicts, the Minister of European Affairs can handle it, in cooperation with the Minister of Finance of course. Flexible structures are key, but you have to have a central point for all categories of dossiers, and the central point for EU dossiers is the Minister of European Affairs. It can be a small ministry, no issue: brains make the difference. The main thing is flexible coordination within the Federal Government and on the outside with the interest groups in Germany in that sort of domain. That was my second point: shared listing – the Minister of European Affairs should take care to improve PA or, to put it differently, its effectiveness regarding all issues.

*Thank you for this interview, Professor van Schendelen.*

Interviewers: Karoline Münz, deputy Secretary-General, and Bernd Hüttemann, Secretary-General of EM Germany

## About the author

**Rinus van Schendelen** has been a professor of Political Science at Erasmus University in Rotterdam since 1980. Analyzing the representation of interests between politics, administration and lobby groups within EU multilevel governance, his main work, „Machiavelli in Brussels“, is considered a standard analysis of EU-Lobbying since many years. Its fourth, revised edition, „The Art of Lobbying the EU. More Macchiavelli in Brussels“ was published in 2013.

This text is based on an interview after the “EBD Exklusiv” panel discussion: „EU-Coordination and Lobbying in Brussels and Berlin“ on 11 October 2012.

**Contact:** [vanschendelen@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:vanschendelen@fsw.eur.nl)

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Sophienstr. 28/29 | D-10178 Berlin  
T +49 30 3036201-10 | F -19  
[info@netzwerk-ebd.de](mailto:info@netzwerk-ebd.de)

Editor: Bernd Hüttemann (V.i.S.d.P.)

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