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Europeanization and Consumer Interests. A Framework for Analysis (with Evidence from the Italian Case)

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Paolo R. Graziano
Department of Institutional Analysis and Public Management
Bocconi University, Milano

Abstract

The literature on European interest groups has flourished over the past years (Eising, 2007; Beyers, Eising, Maloney, 2008). Much attention has been given to more traditional economic interest groups (Greenwood, 2007), whereas social movements have been less analyzed – although recently studies have been growing (Imig and Tarrow, 2001). Surprisingly enough, consumers’ interests have been neglected in studies covering interest groups in Europe, notwithstanding their European tradition (for example, the European Consumers Organisation was founded in 1962) and their increasing relevance both at the European level and at the national level (for example, the recent launch of an European consumer policy strategy 2007-2013). The paper is devoted to the analysis of the emergence of consumers’ interests in Europe and, by adopting an Europeanization approach, it unveils the dynamics of multilevel interaction with respect to consumers’ interest representation. First, the paper analyses the peculiarity of the type of interests with respect to the other more consolidated ones (for example, labour interests), developing a specific framework for analysis; secondly, it describes the political logic behind the development of consumers’ interests in the EU; third, it briefly illustrates the evolution of consumers’ interest groups at the EU level; fourth, it looks at the Italian case in order to understand the role that Europeanization mechanisms have played in the recent development of consumers’ interest representation at the national level. The paper will end with some concluding remarks regarding the reasons that explain the difficult consolidation of consumer interests in Europe, with a particular focus on Italy.

Introduction

Since the late fifties the European political organization has been particularly interesting for the analysis of interest group politics. The shaping of what today is called the European Union was also done by nationally-based interest groups which soon understood how relevant the European level could be for the development of national markets and the promotion of interest groups' preferences (Milward, Brennan and Romero, 1992; Moravcsik, 1998). More specifically, business interests were the most relevant ones both in shaping national governments' preferences and in lobbying the European institutions and still today there is a clear unbalance among interests' represented in Brussels (15,000 to 20,000 lobbyists work in Brussels) since it is estimated that only 10% of interest representation activities in Brussels are conducted by public interest groups, whereas 70% are conducted by business organisations and 20% by cities, regions and international actors (ALTER-UE, 2009; European Parliament, 2003 and 2008). In fact, the public interest group weakness is mirrored in the limited attention that the growing literature on EU interest groups is still paying to the topic and has raised concern also from the European Commission which has recently launched a new initiative on European transparency (Commission, 2006), formally aimed at increasing the transparency EU lobbying activities. Furthermore, if we unpack the general notion of public interest groups (or diffuse interests; see Pollack, 1997) we realise that over the past years the European institutions have given new attention to a specific subgroup of diffuse interests: consumers' associations. Consumers associations are quite peculiar with respect to other EU or national interest groups under three respects: intrinsic interest nature, organisational development and potential coverage. First, consumers' interests are strongly connected to the general aim of the European 'building' from its beginning, i.e. the creation of a European common market guaranteeing freedom of movement (in particular, of products). Consumers' interests therefore have a peculiar nature since they deal with everyday preferences which have been heavily impacted by the development of the European Union. Secondly, consumers associations – in Europe but also in the US – are relatively new in the political landscapes since they are to a certain extent the product of civil rights movements which date back to the sixties but have been increasingly relevant from the seventies on (Maier, 1993; Bignami, 2006). Moving from less formal social movements to increasingly formalized organizations, consumers' associations have gone through an interesting organizational development which has enabled them to become more relevant both at the EU and national level. Third, consumers' association have potentially an incredibly powerful resource: they can represent any individual who is responsible (at least partially) of his or her consumption. Therefore, the consumer interests, if mobilized effectively, could become the most important shared interests among the population and thus build on its enormous membership potential.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 will discuss the topic of consumer interests in Europe and connects the problem of the study of consumer interest representation to the more general literature on Europeanization and interest groups by providing a basic analytical framework. Section 2 will provide an analysis of the evolution of consumers' interests in Europe, paying particular attention to recent institutional developments. Section 3 will cover the Italian case and the hypotheses developed in Section 1. Section 4 concludes.

Europeanization and Consumers' Interests: A Framework for Analysis

Consumer interest representation in Europe is a quite vast topic. In fact, the 'classic' research questions (Beyers, Eising, Maloney, 2008) could be numerous: How and why do European groups mobilise? What is the institutional configuration which promotes or limits access to decision-making? Which decision making phase is the most permeable to consumers' interest groups? The main common feature of these questions is that they are all focussing on the EU

level whereas the national level is often left on the background. My argument is that, at least with respect to consumers' interest, also the national level is greatly important to understand what are the consequences of the reinforcement of a supranational level of decision making (the European Union) on consumers' associations lobbying strategies, institutionalization and territorial organization. In fact, it probably is the most important level if we want to fully understand the changes in the patterns of consumer interest representation in Europe. For this reason, the Europeanization literature can be quite helpful in unveiling the new functioning mechanisms of consumers' association in the multilevel political system called European Union.

Europeanization has become a quite fashionable term and has led to quite interesting pieces of research also in the interest group research subfield but often it has been used as a mere synonym of 'impact of European integration' at the national level (Eising, 2007: 167; from a more cognitive perspective, Beyers and Kerremans, 2007). However, if this is the definition of Europeanization we fall one again in the conceptual trap of 'putting old wine in new bottles', i.e. inventing new terms which may not be all that necessary (Radaelli, 2003; Radaelli and Pasquier, 2007). In other words, why use the new term of Europeanization when we are only interested in the effects of regional integration? More in general, any new concept needs to 'travel' on its own and not lean too much on already pre-existing ones (Sartori, 1970). Therefore, if we want to take Europeanization seriously then we need further to differentiate the concept from the mere 'effects of the EU' and the most promising (and at the same time parsimonious) definition is the following: Europeanization can be defined as the domestic adaptation to European regional integration (for further definitional details, see Vink and Graziano, 2006). The basic advantage of this definition is that it does not confine 'adaptation' to the EU (i.e. for the purposes of this article, the impact of the EU on national interest groups) but it looks at domestic adaptation in a broader sense by looking at how national actors' lobbying strategies, institutionalization and territorial organization have been changed (or not changed) due to the development of a supranational level of government. Therefore, when we look after Europeanization we will be interested both in the European level and in the national level since our key research question is how has the construction and diffusion of European institutions and policies changed the key features of consumers interest groups: lobbying strategies, institutionalization and organisation. These three definitional components have been selected because they go at the core of any interest group¹. But what do these components mean:

- a) *lobbying strategies*: this dimension deals with the 'repertoire of actions' which can be used by interest groups in order to represent the interests of the members. Strategies may vary significantly in function of the availability of resources and, in the cases of 'poor' organizations, we can assume that in general the most used strategies would be 'grassroots' lobbying via direct mailing and advocacy activities aimed at raising awareness among institutions and political action of members and potential members;
- b) *institutionalization*: a 'classic' feature which deals with the fact that interest groups, although they do not use political resources accessible to politicians or political actors invested of electoral legitimization, may be strongly or poorly embedded (Eising, 2007: 171) in the national or European institutional setting. Such dimension is particularly crucial for consumer associations since national settings vary with respect

¹ Beyers, Eising and Maloney, with the exception of the organisational dimension, use other categories which are political interests (what we label lobbying strategies) and informality which "relates with the fact that interest groups do not normally seek public office or compete in elections, but pursue their goals through frequent informal interactions with politicians and bureaucrats" (Beyers, Eising and Maloney, 2008: 1106-1107). Our definitional components are largely inspired by their categories.

to their degree of institutionalization. In particular, since potentially any small group of people (i.e. consumers) may form an association, a legitimization issue arises: how representative is the association? And which associations may be considered as representative by national (and EU) institutions? As we will see with respect to the Italian case, some associations may be very poorly institutionalized at the European level and more institutionalized at the national level;

- c) *territorial organization*: this third analytical dimension, which deals with the way through which interests are represented and with the fact that “interest groups politics concerns aggregated individuals and/or organised forms of political behaviour” (Beyers, Eising and Maloney, 2008: 1106), has been vastly explored by the literature on interest groups although not with a specific focus on consumers associations. In particular, of particular relevance in this case is the level or organisational logic which is channelled by associations: some may be only nationally based (in the Italian case, and among others, *Movimento Consumatori*) some may have a multilevel organisational setting (*Altroconsumo*, which is articulated on two levels from the beginning of its activity). Furthermore, there may be strong organizations (which are characterized by a large number of members in various regions) and weak organizations, characterized by a limited number of members.

Table 1. The relevant dimensions of consumers’ interest groups analysis

	European level	National level
Lobbying strategy		
Institutionalization		
Territorial organization		

Assembling all these dimensions (see table 1), and building on some of the key hypotheses available in the interest groups literature (Beyers, Eising and Mahoney, 2008; Beyers and Kerremans, 2007), one could assume that those organizations which are ‘strong’ (i.e. use a varied and effective lobbying strategy, are highly institutionalized and well organized) at the national level will be able to participate more effectively in EU decision making process by adopting following national lines. On the other hand, one could assume that due to national weaknesses consumers’ interest may be better organized at the EU level and use their greater strength in the EU as a tool for national empowerment. But, at least in the case of consumers, this hypothesis seems too naïf for at least two reasons: first, there is no immediate ‘power transfer’ from the EU to the domestic level and therefore, even in those cases where there may be more capacity to be heard at the EU level, domestic interest groups will have to change ‘at home’ in order to be fully embodied into the national decision-making system; secondly, since consumers’ interests do not have a long tradition like other interests (or cleavages), it seems much more difficult to gain autonomously more EU power and use it simultaneously at the national level. Nevertheless, ‘weak’ national organizations may be empowered by other actors’ strategies (in particular, the European Commission) which are looking for allies in the continuous battle against national sovereignty (Milward, Brennan and Romero, 1992). Therefore, the most basic promising hypothesis for our analysis can be that ‘strong’ nationally based consumer associations may use their national strength in order to promote their role in European decision-making whereas ‘weak’ nationally based organizations may eventually benefit as at home from other actors’ strategies at the EU level.

To sum up, building on the analytical dimensions discussed above and on the existing literature on Europeanization and interest groups, the main hypotheses are the following:

- hyp1: the more structured (i.e. characterized by a developed lobbying strategy, highly institutionalized and territorially well organized) is a consumer interest group at the national level, the more probable it is for the group to be included in the EU decision making system. The advantage of this hypothesis is that it does not imply that some countries have a 'national' tradition which is reflected by all the consumer actors but it is more focused on the specific features of any group, whatever its country of origin is;
- hyp. 2: the less structured a consumer group is at the national level, the greater the impact of the European Union institutions and policies - which have greatly developed over the past twenty years – will be on their overall lobbying strategy, institutionalization and territorial organization. Again, we do not take for granted that within typically 'weak' countries in EU decision making we will witness only 'weak' consumer interest groups. It is an empirical question which will have to be dealt in the empirical part of the research.

Once the general hypotheses are set out, the problem of indicators and operationalization arises. In particular, we need to operationalize the following variables: lobbying strategy, institutionalization and territorial organization. First, with respect to the lobbying strategy the key indicators could be the set of lobbying practices which are used by the consumer group. For instance, institutional lobbying, grassroots lobbying and legal actions are typically the most diffused types of interest group activities (Graziano, 2001). The more diversified and continuous, the 'stronger' the lobbying strategy is. This, of course, does not imply that all the techniques may be used for the same issue. There may be strategic reasons that explain why a consumer interest group decides to use only one of the techniques in specific cases. But since we are interested in mapping the overall lobbying strategy, we will look for the general use of such techniques in the various activities carried out by consumer interest groups. Secondly, institutionalization whose 'classic' definition (Huntington, 1975) is centred on the notion of functional specialization. We add to this basic definition also two other indicators which such as internal elite change and relationship with public institutions. With respect to functional specialization, we will look at the division of labour within each consumer interest group. With respect to the internal elite change indicator, we will look at the top seats of the interest associations in order to assess how personalistic or institutionalized the interest group is. Finally, with regards to the relationship with institutions, we will look if at the ministerial level there are permanent institutional fora which include the consumers associations. From this standpoint, high institutionalization will be characterized by the presence and continuous activity of such fora, whereas a low degree of institutionalization will be characterized by the absence or limited activity of such fora. Territorial organization, as we have defined it previously, differs from institutionalization basically because it looks at the diffusion of the association in the selected country. For this variable, we will use three indicators: the first one regards the national levels of representation involved (national, subnational), the second deals with the presence/absence of an administrative unit in Brussels, and the third one regards the overall number of group members. Here following is a table which summarizes the key variables and indicators which used in our paper.

Table 2. Selected indicators of the key variables

	Indicator 1	Indicator 2	Indicator 3
Lobbying strategy	Number of overall lobbying techniques used		
Institutionalization	Number of offices/division dealing with specific aspects of the consumer interest group activity	Leadership* change during the period 1988-2008**	Presence/absence of institutional for a
Territorial organization	Number of regional headquarters***	Membership	Presence/absence of an administrative unit in Brussels

* President, Secretary or Porte-parole of the consumer group

** If the association was founded after 1988, the foundation year is taken into consideration.

*** Number of regions covered by the association

To sum up, in this section we have illustrated the key analytical features of our analysis. First, we argued that Europeanization is a challenging analytical perspective in order to look into the functioning of European consumer interest groups. Secondly, we focused on the structure of interest groups and not on their capacity to influence or not decision making processes (which would constitute another, very relevant, question, but which would require further analytical tools). Third, we identified the key variables for the our analysis – lobbying strategy, institutionalization and territorial organization – and their respective indicators. In the following section we will look at the evolution of the EU consumer strategy before we turn to the Italian case in order to have some preliminary feedbacks on the validity of the conceptual framework suggested in this paper.

The Consumer Strategy of the European Union: Open Method of Coordination in disguise?

Until the end of the eighties, the European Union did not even have an administrative unit dealing with consumer interest. It was only in 1989 that “the European Community determination to implement consumer policy in Europe lead the Commission to establish the Consumer Policy Service [and] one of his tasks has been to keep tabs on Member States’ legal instruments in this field (Commission, 1998: 3). But it was only the Amsterdam Treaty which gave new impetus to the European Union on consumer issues by stating that “(...) in order to promote the interest of consumers and to ensure a high level of consumer protection, the Community shall contribute to protecting the health, safety and economic interests of consumers as well as to promote their right to information, education and to organise themselves to safeguard their interests” (Amsterdam Treaty, art. 153). In the same year, the Consumer Policy Service was upgraded to a Directorate General for Consumer Policy and Consumer Health Protection, setting therefore new premises for a stronger role of the EU in both European and national consumer policy. One of the first acts of the Commission was to promote a more intense scrutiny over existing policies at the national level by sending out a questionnaire to all the Member States asking specific information on how consumer protection was guaranteed at the national level.

The follow up of this exercise was the adoption of the first consumer policy action plan 1999-2001 which described how the Commission intended to intervene in the field. The general objectives were to provide a more powerful ‘voice’ for the consumer throughout the EU, provide a high level of health and safety for EU consumers and assure full respect for the economic interests of EU consumers (Commission, 1999). In a nutshell, the overall strategy was aimed at increasing the role of consumers at the EU level but also – although more implicitly – at providing a supranational ‘tutoring’ to those consumer associations who were not fully incorporated in the national decision making system. The procedure is very similar to the one that was being adopted for the European Employment Strategy which became the most cited example of the Open Method of Coordination in action, characterized by constant monitoring, benchmarking and best practice promotion (Borras, 2004; Zeitlin and Pochet, 2005).

The following consumer policy strategy 2002-2006 is even more aimed at empowering “consumers to understand policies that affect them and to make an input into these policies” by setting three mid-term objectives: provide a high common level of consumer protection across the EU, support effective enforcement of consumer protection rules and guarantee a proper involvement of consumer organisations in EU policies” (Commission, 2002). Again, a set of very general objectives were laid out in the strategy which was considered to be effective by the Commission at least with respect to the increasing participation of European consumer organisations (Commission, 2007). Finally, the most recent Consumer Policy Strategy (2007-2013) does not innovate the basic goals which remain the empowering of consumers, to enhance consumer welfare in terms of price, choice, quality and safety, and to protect consumers effectively from serious risks and threats (Commission, 2007). Unlike other policies, consumer policy is clearly an ‘horizontal’ one since it deals with many other EU policies connected to the making and consolidation of the internal market. In fact, over the years specific consumer groups dealing with many different topics have developed at the EU level but their consultative powers often did not lead consumer associations (i.e. European consumer networks such as BEUC or those national consumer associations which were able to operate at the EU level or) to be effective in their interest representation at the EU nor did it lead to the empowerment of consumers in national policy-making. As the Commission puts it, using the findings of the *ex post* evaluation which was carried out by three consultancy agencies (CIVIC, GHK and Van Dijk, 2006): “the EU strategy had an impact on national consumer policies but it was smaller than the impact on the priorities of the domestic policy, the concerns of the public and the legislation resulting from membership of the EU. Without the EU strategy (..) most of the national policies would have been different, but to a limited extent only” (Commission, 2007: 3). Furthermore, unlike other policy areas, it seems that the consumer policy strategy has been only partially successful; this statement surely holds with respect to the effective protection of consumer in Member States of the EU and the development of effective European consumer networks (Commission, 1998; Civic, GHK and Van Dijk, 2007) but the story may be different if we look at the representation of consumer interests in various states where consumer associations were very marginal in the decision making system before the (soft) intervention of the EU.

Europeanization and Italian Consumer Interest Groups

Until very recent years, the system of consumer representation was very informal. To be sure, Italian consumer associations started to develop informally during the sixties with the exception of Unione Nazionale Consumatori which was founded in 1955, whereas many others were founded between the second half of the eighties and the early nineties. Therefore, consumer associations or interest groups were active and – on a irregular basis – consulted by the Italian government (in particular, the Industry Ministry; Commission, 1998) but there was no institutionalized consultative body operating on a regular basis. This situation is primarily

due to a lack of legislation on consumer interest representation; in fact, only in 1998 a specific Law dedicated to consumer interest representation was issued and therefore the most representative associations become visible and more active in national decision making processes. Currently, 17 national consumer associations have national headquarters and sufficient territorial diffusion to be included in the National Consumers Council (*Consiglio Nazionale dei Consumatori e Utenti* - CNCU) which is a consultative body within the Economic Development Ministry.

The 1998 Law was of great importance since for the first time specific procedures regarding the inclusion of consumer associations in a consultative ministerial board were adopted and the most representative associations became part of the above mentioned CNCU. As stated in the parliamentary discussion on the Law, one of the main arguments that the centre-left parliamentary majority made was that “today Italy is the only EU member which has not yet adopted legislation regarding interest consumer representation”². The Law was strongly opposed by the centre-right coalition but after four Parliamentary readings it was approved on Aug. 14th, 1998. Furthermore, a dedicated register of consumer associations was created by the Law, which also established that in order to be part of the CNCU each association needed to fulfil a membership requirement, i.e. to represent at least 0,005% of the Italian population and be located in at least five Italian regions³.

Each association has of course its own story but the common trait of (almost all) the Italian consumers associations is that they all originate from other organizations or interest groups (such as trade unions or green movements) which saw a further opportunity of representation in the field of consumer rights. For example, the most important Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) contributed to the foundation of three of the most important consumer interest groups (*Federconsumatori*, *Adiconsum* and *ADOC*). Other groups are strongly connected to other existing environmental associations (*Movimento a Difesa del Cittadino* is linked to *Legambiente*, one of the most important Italian environmental association; *Movimento Consumatori* is linked to *ARCI*, one of the most important cultural association whose origins are strongly connected to the consolidation during the fifties of the Italian Communist Party; *Lega consumatori* is linked to *ACLI*, another very important cultural association whose origins are strongly connected to the consolidation during late forties of the Christian-Democratic Party). Only a few (such as *Cittadinanzattiva*, *Codacons* and *Confconsumatori*) have an autonomous origin in the sense that they were not a ‘product’ of other existing and powerful civil society or political actors. The following table provides some basic information on the Italian consumer interest groups or associations.

² *Caponi*, in *Senato*, 1997: 5.

³ The only exception is represented by *Centro Tutela Consumatori e Utenti* which is located in a Special Statute region and therefore has a special ‘treatment’ with respect to its representativeness.

Table 3. The 'identity card' of Italian consumer interest groups

Association	Foundation	Membership	Standardized membership*	Territorial diffusion**	Office in Brussels
ACU	1984	107.703	1,9	20	Y
ADICONSUM	1987	110.327	1,9	20	N
ADOC	1988	70.000	1,2	20	N
ADUSBEP	1987	35.207	0,6	17	N
ALTROCONSUMO	1973	300.000	5,2	5	N
ASSOUTENTI	1982	36.000	0,6	16	N
CASA DEL CONSUMATORE	2000	31.698	0,5	20	N
CTCU	1993	2.195	0,04	1	N
CITTADINANZATTIVA	1978	92.000		19	Y
CODACONS	1986	30.082	0,5	20	N
CODICI	1993	33.320	0,6	15	N
CONFCONSUMATORI	1976	28.721	0,5	20	N
FEDERCONSUMATORI	1988	59.696	1,6	20	N
LEGA CONSUMATORI	1971	43.100	0,7	17	N
MOVIMENTO CONSUMATORI	1985	41.147	0,7	15	N
MOVIMENTO DIFESA CITTADINO	1987	32.329	0,5	16	N
UNIONE CONSUMATORI NAZ.	1955	45.644	0,8	17	N

* members every 1,000 inhabitants (in 2002, when the calculations were made, the Italian population summed up to 56.993.742); ** Number of regions;

Source: own elaboration on Economic Development Ministry (*Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico*) data.

The table clearly shows the limited representativeness guaranteed by consumers associations in Italy. If we consider that the most representative trade union (CGIL) has over five million members, we fully understand the limits of consumers interest representation in Italy. Nevertheless, from 1998 the consumers interest groups started to become increasingly visible in public debates. But what was the reason for such 'upgrading'? Was it primarily to the presence of autonomous association capacity building or do we have to look for other explanatory factors? Answering these questions is crucial for the testing of the hypotheses discussed in the previous section. In order to provide an adequate answer, let's look at the specificities of Italian consumer associations by using the lobbying strategy, institutionalization and territorial organization variables presented previously⁴.

- a) *Lobbying strategy*. All the consumer associations do not have a predefined lobbying strategy based on specific 'political' targets. Primarily, they provide consultancy services to their members on various issues such as food security, energy providers, banking frauds, etc. In some cases, conferences on specific 'consumer' topics are organized but this activity does not appear to be crucial in the overall goals pursued by

⁴ This section is based on the analysis of activity reports of the Italian consumer associations and three preliminary interviews carried out with top representatives of three of the most important associations. The next step in the research strategy will be to conduct semi-structured interviews with all top representatives (i.e. national presidents) of the associations and top ministerial bureaucrats.

the associations. For example, media or protest events are (rarely) organized, but they usually are not part of a predefined lobbying strategy. The second most important activity is to produce press releases commenting on policy proposals or decisions which have been adopted by the legislature, and only rarely do (some) consumers associations conduct legislative lobbying (i.e. proposing amendments to legislative proposals). The most used lobbying technique could be seen in the litigation activities, but these have only 'reactive' features and typically are aimed at gaining financial resources out of companies adopting fraudulent behaviour. Again, there is no systematic 'autonomous' political agenda set out by consumer associations similar to more traditional interest groups who typically are focused on lobbying legislators who may be in principle in favour of interest groups requests, against or uncommitted (Austen Smith and Wright, 1994). Unlike other diffuse interests (such as environmental interest groups; Diani, 2000) consumers have not moved from the 'reactive' stage of interest representation to a more 'proactive' one based on a well defined policy agenda and specific political targets. Furthermore, the activity of Italian consumer associations is strikingly different from other consumer associations who set lobbying campaigns and use a large variety of lobbying techniques (such as Public Citizen in the US).

- b) *Institutionalization*. If we look at the first indicator of institutionalization, we learn that none of the 17 have a significant degree of functional specialization. To be sure, they all have a Secretariat or a governing body where thematic areas are divided among the board members, but this does not entail an *ad hoc* organizational division of labour with a clear division of responsibilities. In other words, all the associations cover different topics relevant for consumers, but they have a very limited degree of specialization in the topics covered. Also at 'street-level' activity, often consultancy is provided by people who do not have a specific training covering the issues related to the advice required. Therefore, with respect to this first indicator, all score very low⁵. The second selected indicator reveals the 'personalization' of the associations and of 17 associations only one (CITTADINANZATTIVA) has changed its leader over the past twenty years (or from the association's foundation). In other terms, these interest groups are managed by governing bodies which are been untouched by leadership change, unlike more traditional interest groups such as trade unions or other consumer association elsewhere. With respect to the third indicator, from 1998 thanks to the Law 281 all the consumer associations fulfilling the representativeness criterion are part of the national Council which meets on a regular basis and plays a consultative role in Italian decision making. In fact, all the above mentioned associations are part of the Council, but the most relevant issues discussed in the meetings are often those regarding the project-related funds distribution among the various associations. In fact, often this is the most important reason to take part in regular meetings: make sure that the represented association does not miss any fund distribution. To be sure, the *Consiglio Nazionale dei Consumatori e degli Utenti* – CNCU is also a forum where general advice on legislative proposals is provided, but according to the people interviewed so far the impact of such consultations is very limited. To sum up, consumer interest groups are very weakly istituzionalized, with the exception of their consultative role played within the CNCU where, in any case, very limited

⁵ There is an 'external' functional specialization (i.e. some consumer associations are more specialized in health care issues whereas others are specialized in banking frauds) but with respect to the Ministry and the media all the associations define themselves as generalist consumer interest groups which can (and should, in their eyes) have a saying on every policy which entails consumer issues – which means virtually any kind of policy.

contestation takes places since excessive criticism may turn out into reduced funds for consumer associations maintenance.

- c) *Territorial organization.* As shown in Table 3, all the associations are quite spread out in the country since almost 50% of the association have headquarters in all the Italian regions and all of them (with the already mentioned exception of CTCU) have offices in more than 75% of Italian regions. This could be a sign of effective representation but if we acknowledge that in many cases hospitality for associations' headquarters is offered by other more powerful associations, we may wonder if the territorial presence is truly effective or not. This hold particularly true if we look at the membership numbers in table 3: only one association is comparable to other leading diffuse interest association (for example, WWF Italy which has over 300,000 members) and only three others have over 100,000 members. All together, the 17 consumer associations represent 1,1 million Italian citizens/consumers, less than 2% of the population. This is not per se quite different from other diffuse interest organization (for example, equal opportunities associations) but, if combined with the above mentioned weakness with respect to lobbying strategies and overall institutionalization, it is quite telling. Finally, only three consumer associations have offices in Brussels, whereas all the others have only a national reach and, eventually, are involved in EU decision making only when asked to by the Italian Ministry⁶. This figure shows how far Italian consumer association still are from European Union.

The Italian consumer interest groups can still today be defined as characterized by poorly developed lobbying strategy, weak institutionalization and limited territorial organization. Therefore Italian associations still are very marginal in the EU decision making system although EU institutions and policies did not have a strong impact on their lobbying strategy, institutionalization and territorial organization. In other terms, the first hypotheses is confirmed by evidence on the Italian case whereas, hypotheses 2 is not (for further details on the hypotheses, see page 5). How can these findings be framed in a broader picture which goes beyond the Italian case and relates to more general interest groups politics in Europe? The concluding section tries to answer to this question

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked into consumer interest representation and its evolution in Italy in connection with the European consumer strategy which was launched in the early nineties and reinforced in more recent years. As we have shown in the previous sections, consumer interests are still very marginal in the European Union political activity whereas at the national level (Italy) the past ten years have been particularly favourable to the (partial) institutionalization of consumer associations. With respect to our hypotheses, although more research needs to be done, we can conclude that hypothesis 1 has been confirmed: since prior to the launch of the European consumer strategy the Italian consumer associations were weak (i.e. no overall lobbying strategy, very poor institutionalization also at the national level, limited territorial organization), they played virtually no role in the setting of the European consumer agenda. The second hypothesis, however, can only partially be confirmed since the European strategy has played a limited role in making Italian consumer associations more structured: as discussed previously, there a process of institutionalization has been started also thanks to (indirect) European pressures, but the overall structure of consumer association has

⁶ And it is not by chance that the only two associations who have European offices thanks to their participation in European networks have had a leadership of non-lawyers and trade-union members who have been involved in the green movement in the eighties (ACU) or have a more 'federalist' and academic cultural background (CITTADINANZATTIVA).

not been changed in a significant way. Therefore, we can conclude that even in those cases where there is a European strategy and virtually no strategy at the national level (misfit hypothesis; Borzel and Risse, 2003) not necessarily will we have strong EU influence on the national level. In fact, if we look at the Europeanization literature (Radaelli, 2003; Graziano and Vink, 2006), we learn that we can expect high pressures in those cases where we witness a well developed policy or strategy at the EU level, but this was not the case in the consumer policy field. In other terms, even if the EU has further legitimized EU consumer interest claims, interest associations have not yet been capable of developing into well structured and representative political actors. And what are the reasons for this? We need to look at the national political systems and their interaction with the EU in order to answer this question.

The first factor deals with the domestic party system. Consumer interest are still fairly 'young' in the Italian political system and this is particularly problematic in those political systems (such as the Italian, but also other European ones) where parties have originally structured their power by being hegemonic with respect to the civil society (Morlino, 1991). Furthermore, in the nineties, when due to the lack of legitimization of parties new political opportunity spaces were opened for civil society organizations, the trade unions – particularly relevant in the Italian case during the nineties (Mania e Sateriale, 2002; Ferrera and Gualmini, 2004) – and other rising interest groups such as environmental associations were capable of playing an hegemonic role also in the field of consumer interest by creating *ad hoc* associations, leaving very limited room for manoeuvre to autonomous consumer associations. Secondly, the European consumer strategy has been until now very weak if not ineffective. This led to limited pressures for change at the national levels since the incentives to 'conform' to a rising European model for consumer interest representation were very limited. To be sure, EU funds did facilitate the reinforcement of some consumer associations but this was not the case with respect to many Italian associations which still today are not very present at the EU level. Unlike other policy areas (such as, for example, employment policy and cohesion policy where the EU policy was much more structured; see Graziano, 2004; Gualini, 2004), the most relevant resources can come from the national government via antitrust sanctions and therefore there was no need to become 'more European' in order to keep the associations alive. Third, the persistent weakness of consumer associations is also linked to the fragmentation of Italian civil society (Ginsborg, 2003) characterized by numerous, small associations which are too often managed in a personalistic way. This is particularly true for interest associations since, in those limited cases where no hegemony is searched and reached by more relevant civil society organizations (such as trade unions), the founders rarely provide enough opportunities for the associations to become fully institutionalized and autonomous from the founders themselves – who often are lawyers receiving extra legal work thanks to their consumer association activity. This may not be an Italian peculiarity (as said, more comparative research is needed in the field) but it is quite striking to see how many consumer associations are very litigious mainly on two issues: reimbursements to 'fraud-victim' consumers and project financing (i.e. asking for funds aimed at consumer information campaigns). This may recall the evolution of the green movement in Italy which has gone "from radicalism to moderation" (Diani, 1990), although consumer associations were never a movement nor particularly radical. To us, it is a further sign of how also for civil society the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' (Michels, 1966) is valid and, in the case of consumer associations, it may limit the political maturation of groups dealing with extremely diffused interests.

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