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**HOW DID LOBBYISTS ADJUST THEIR STRATEGIES TO THE AGE OF ZOOM?  
AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY-MAKING IN THE EUROPEAN  
UNION**

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## Introduction

*“In crisis, it is acceptable to have more questions than answers. In crisis, there is no room for ‘not-invented here’. In crisis, we should all be learners” (OECD, 2020)*

The pandemic facing the entire world since the end of 2019 has disrupted all sectors, forcing them to develop new approaches and, for some, to adapt to online life. Profound external shocks always play a central role in contributing to or determining policy change rather than reform. In this regard, critical historical moments such as the 2008 financial crisis and the current COVID-19 pandemic have a strong potential in both triggering policy change and influencing the drivers of policy change themselves. In a context underpinned by a potential surge of intense transformations, either transitory or long-lasting, the lobbying industry had to be flexible and open to the use of new methods in order to ensure the effectiveness of its strategies.

As defined in EU regulation, lobbying is 'the objective of directly or indirectly influencing the formulation or implementation of policy and the decision-making processes' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014, p.2). While direct contacts and communications with the EU institutions fall under the concept of 'direct influence', 'indirect influence' is exercised through intermediaries, ranging from events and conferences to media (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014). On the other hand, advocacy, as a more general term, 'describes a wide range of individual and collective expression or action on a cause, idea, or policy' (Reid, 2000, p.1). Aside from the differences existing between lobbying and advocacy, the general exercise of influence on policy making largely hinges on personal connections and physical relations.

Therefore, I assumed, at the start of this research, that lobbying activities were affected by the current emergency, considering its reliance upon face-to-face interaction and the required shift to online meetings. In this regard, I will refer to the 'age of Zoom' as a period that has forced all actors to interact with each other through a screen, hampering the opportunity to have official in-presence events and informal exchanges, which represent a significant component of lobbying. Thus, I assumed these transformed forms of meetings to have limited certain actors' visibility and chance to gain new contacts and partners, thereby divergently influencing lobbyists based on factors such as the nature of

actors, the size of the organizations and the issues targeted. Moreover, the interactions between lobbying actors, policy makers and politicians have been and continue to be characterized by a pervasive social distancing, dramatically reducing the opportunities for informal conversations. Hence, the aim of the present research was to investigate in a detailed manner the numerous expected implications that the current pandemic could have for the development of lobbying, in the context of the European Union.

Lobbying has expanded incredibly in the European Union (EU) throughout the last three decades, thus shaping the complex EU interest group system, characterized by a continuous evolution (Smiles, 2010). Although lobbyists have actively participated in the setting and implementation of EU policies since the beginning of the European process, advocacy has become central, especially towards the end of the 1980s, through more vital empowerment and independence of the European institutions (Smiles, 2010). While advocacy is generally understood as the broad systematic effort to achieve particular policy goals, lobbying is a way of doing advocacy, underpinned by a direct approach targeting legislators (Obar et al., 2012). Indeed, as Ezell (2001) explained, lobbying represents only one of the multiple advocacy strategies influencing specific legislation rather than issues. Today lobbying is one of the most relevant components of the decision-making and policy making process in the European Union. Differently from the national level, lobbying at the European level is not only a matter of informal, unofficial personal relations but rather included in the decision-making process, being anchored in principles such as democracy, respect of rights and freedoms, transparency, ethical rules and good governance (Nesterovych, 2015).

'The European lobbying landscape is extremely fragmented', since over 1000 EU trade associations, European representative bodies from around 500 companies, approximately 750 NGOs, several regional offices, consultants and other actors are actively engaged (European Parliament, 2003, p.5). Such a trend has always been part of the European tradition. Since the beginning of the XXI century, the EU decision-making process was characterized by around 15,000 Commission and Parliamentary officials confronted with around 20,000 lobbyists every day (Greenwood, 2003). In this regard, despite the exceptionally high involvement of the European Commission in EU lobbying since the beginning, the Parliament started to play a relevant role. Besides, the Council and the

European Council, the European Court of Justice and the European Economic and Social Committee began being more involved as well (Smiles, 2010), thus further demonstrating the complexity of such an activity at the European level.

Given lobbying's relevance in the EU, transparency regulations and measures have proved to be essential and have progressively evolved, starting from embracing the Commission framework and extending towards the Parliament. Nonetheless, the sharp increase in virtual meetings may potentially represent either a premise for more regulations or a way to lower lobbyists' accountability, thereby leading to the urgency of developing new measures and adapting to this disrupted scenario.

In this research, I chose to investigate a specific field targeted by EU lobbying. In this regard, due to the transnational nature underpinning environmental issues, lobbyists have targeted the latter faster and to a greater extent compared to other domains (European Parliament, 2003). The first environmental organization based in the EU and engaged in the policy making process was the European Environmental Bureau, founded in 1974 and representing all member states (European Parliament, 2003). However, recent years have seen the involvement of multiple actors shaping the present domain, which is now pivotal. The EU's profound interest in this field has been evident among the multiple projects in the European Green Deal, entered into force in 2019, and in the Next Generation EU, launched in July 2020. Despite the latter's focus on the COVID-19 recovery, the environmental goals constitute the overarching pillars of the mentioned projects, aiming at tackling the climate crisis with its infinite implications for the present and future generations.

In a context underpinned by the intersection and overlapping of the environmental and the COVID-19 crises, my objective was to analyze environmental lobbying actors' ability to adapt to exceptional scenarios. Thus, the main factors leading to successful and practical strategies and the issues that will negatively affect lobbyists' influence ability will be evaluated. Although a vast academic literature has been developed to assess environmental lobbying within the European framework, a focus on the impact of a peculiar multifaceted crisis on advocacy, constitutes a new approach to the theme. I therefore investigated, through qualitative interviews, the impact of online meetings on lobbyists' visibility, influence ability, access to policy making, strategies, coalitions,

priorities, belief systems, and approaches to issues. The research was conducted through a set of interviews with actors engaging in environmental lobbying activities within the European Union, such as NGOs, multinationals, advocacy groups and industries, and actors targeted by lobbying, such as civil servants working for European Institutions. Moreover, I assumed that a comparison among actors of diverse nature could be significant to anticipate potential future shifts and forecast the scenario post-age of Zoom. My research is based on qualitative analysis. Indeed, as it will be explained more deeply in the research methodology section, the data gathered through the interviews will reflect actors' perceptions of a newly emerged scenario. Hence, questions on their adaptation to the current pandemic and the likely future development of lobbying will provide both researchers and actors engaged in this domain with a deeper understanding of the current topic.

This project will attempt to answer one broad research question (RQ), which can be decomposed into three research objectives (RO):

**RQ:** To what extent is physical contact determinant in lobbying strategies?

**RO1:** Did online consultations limit environmental lobbyists' visibility in a way that hampered their ability to gain contacts and advocate effectively?

**RO2:** To what extent has COVID-19 influenced actors' access to EU environmental policy making and capacity to exercise influence through advocacy coalitions?

**RO3:** What do different actors anticipate will remain in the way they have modified their lobbying strategies and tactics once restrictions on movement and physical contact will be removed?

These questions will represent the basis for the development of the present dissertation to address the main objective. The latter is the understanding of the role played by physical contact within the lobbying framework. Hence, evaluating different actors' responses to the new forms of meetings and their ability to maintain or strengthen coalitions and partnerships and perpetuate their influence ability will be the starting point to answer the main research question. Although the general expectation is that the 'age of Zoom' has had a determinant impact on lobbying, the collection of the diverse responses from the interviewees will clarify the type of impact on various aspects related to lobbying.

Furthermore, the research may serve to the single actors to compare their newly adapted strategies and forecast the future scenario, thus promptly bracing their tactics.

The current project will be divided into three chapters, preceded by the research methodology's presentation. The latter will be described, along with the list of the actors who have participated in the project. The first chapter will set the theoretical stage for analyzing the interviews. Hence, the general theory on lobbying influence and access to policy making (Lowery, 2013; Lane, 1949) will be clarified as a starting point for addressing the three research questions. Then, a focus on lobbying in the European Union will be essential (Kluver, 2011; Chambers, 2016; Smiles, 2010; Dur, 2012) in order to diversify the different strategies of actors ranging from the private (Bouwen, 2001; Dur et al., 2016) to the public sector (Junk, 2016; Gullberg, 2008). Finally, the attention will shift towards environmental lobbying, demonstrating the centrality of such a theme since the foundation of the EU, in order to evaluate whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had the power to significantly modify the priorities, pulling Europe away from its green focus. The second chapter will clarify a few basic notions, starting from presenting some of the theories of policy change (Bennet and Howlett, 1992; Mintrom and Vergari, 1996). The latter represents the appropriate background to provide an analysis of a context underpinned by exceptional conditions and a complete shift in the salience of the problems. Specific theories of policy change, such as policy network (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992), issue network (Hecl, 1974), policy-oriented learning (1978), will be used as a lens to illustrate the interactions among multiple stakeholders within the EU lobbying framework. Indeed, policy networks have contributed, since the outbreak of the pandemic, to the significant shift of focus on policy issues, thus influencing priorities of governmental agendas. Moreover, a particular focus on the Advocacy Coalition Framework Theory (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1991) will be developed as a basis for interpreting the questioned impact of the pandemic on lobbying coalition building. Alterations of coalitions resulting in policy change are often incentivized by external shocks to societies, highlighting the urgency to develop new belief systems and to adapt the partnerships based on the outbreak of the current emergency. Thus, through the responses obtained, I will evaluate whether the current external shock has been

sufficiently robust in this domain or whether the online trend of meetings had already pervaded our society.

The third chapter will finally conclude the empirical analysis of the work, thereby being the focal part of the entire project. The focus will be on lobbyists' adjustment of strategies and the pandemic's implication for their visibility and forecasted future tactics. The analysis of the responses obtained from the interviews will illustrate the implications of online meetings, which completely replaced face-to-face consultations, thus showing the role played by visibility in the lobbying industry. Throughout the entire project, a comparison among actors of divergent nature will be provided to evaluate whether the new methods of communication have had divergent effects on different actors' ability to influence policy making, along with anticipating potential future shifts and forecasting the post-‘age of Zoom’ scenario.

## **Research Methodology**

The current research project stems from the interest in analyzing lobbyists' ability to adapt to exceptional scenarios, thereby evaluating the main variables leading to successful and effective strategies and the issues that potentially worsen their influence ability. The research has been conducted through a qualitative analysis relying on words rather than figures and complexity rather than breadth, compared to quantitative methods. Hence, a focal part of this Master Thesis is constituted by interviews with various types of actors engaging in environmental lobbying activities in the EU. The respondents' exchange has been enriching, as they all shared objective facts and their perceptions, thoughts and feelings, forecasting future scenarios. The exchange with the actors involved has been possible thanks to virtual meetings via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, demonstrating that such recently emerged platforms underpin people's new ways to create contacts and exchange information and knowledge. Furthermore, despite my interaction with single members, representatives, directors and founders of the various organizations and companies, the responses have been inserted through the Chatham House Rules to emphasize the entire organizations' views, rather than the personal thoughts of the respondents.

As the project focuses on the impact of the 'age of Zoom' on environmental lobbying in the EU, the range of actors interviewed are especially lobbyists active in environmental matters and generally targeting the European Commission and Parliament. The total number of participants is 17, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), not-for-profit organizations, advocacy groups, organization networks, hybrid organizations composed of state members and NGOs, foundations, associations, industries and multinational companies and representatives of the European Parliament. The criteria used to choose the actors have not been selective, due to the interest in evaluating responses of lobbyists of various nature, ranging from the public to the private sector, to understand whether significant differences could be found between public and corporate advocacy. However, what brings them all together is that the European Green Deal was among their most lobbied-on topics. The list comprises:

- Conscience Consulting
- Corporate Europe Observatory
- Enel Green Power S.p.a.
- Eurogas
- European Climate Foundation
- European Environmental Bureau (EEB)
- European Parliament (two parliamentary assistants)
- European Renewable Ethanol Industry (ePure)
- European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT)
- International Union for Conservation of Nature European Regional Office
- Italian Climate Network
- Lobby Control Germany
- Swiss Philanthropy Foundation
- The Good Lobby
- Transparency International EU
- WWF European Policy Office

I aimed to investigate the general impact of the pandemic along with the shift to online consultations and meetings on the actors interviewed, especially related to their visibility, ability to continue influencing policy making in the EU and to maintain a certain level of transparency. Subsequently, I investigated lobbyists' response to the current transformations, in terms of the new or different strategies developed and the issues lobbied, along with the institutions targeted and their choices in terms of coalitions. Finally, I evaluated lobbyists' perceptions on the future development of their activity. Therefore, the main guidelines have been the following:

- How do you feel that the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted your lobbying?
- Has there been an impact on your visibility, and thus, on your ability to influence policy making?
- Has there been any implication on the level of transparency of your organization?
- How have you adjusted your strategies? Have they been effective?
- Did you choose another/ other institutions to target?

- How have your advocacy coalitions been affected/ modified?
- Has the salience of the issues changed, in a way that your focus has shifted from environmental matters and the European Green Deal to crisis-related themes?
- How do you think your lobbying strategies will evolve? Would you say that the present crisis has represented an opportunity for your future lobbying activities?

The task of interpreting qualitative data begins with a data collection analysis set of interviews (Ezzy, 2013). The interviews with the multiple actors either engaging in lobbying or targeted by the latter have been conducted through the lens of the critical concepts clarified and deepened throughout the project. The theories underpinning the most relevant questions are the lobby theory of influence, the theory of access, and the Advocacy Coalition Framework. Nonetheless, aside from the theories, the concepts of visibility, transparency and networks have been prominent.

The responses have been collected and critically analyzed, to evaluate whether the newly emerged online life has led to rethinking and redefining lobbying in the European Union. Although the objective was to provide a comparison among actors of diverse nature, only a few questions have generated the opportunity to derive significant trends. Therefore, the focus has not been on the comparison among them, as initially thought. Conversely, the aim has become that to evaluate the role played by the diverse components of lobbying, to understand which are concretely relevant for the success of the activity. Hence, the importance of aspects such as physical contact, visibility and informal events has been rethought in light on the responses obtained. However, the absence of general trends and the impossibility of extending the responses to entire categories of lobbyists, as in any qualitative analysis, must be pointed out.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Lobbying the EU during COVID-19. Have environmental lobbyists adapted their priorities?**

‘The desire to bring about a change in a human life or in the lives of a community is most often the driving force for creating an organization in the first place’ (McConnel, 2004, p. 25).

Although advocacy and lobbying consist of the mobilization of resources towards the achievement of specific goals, not all advocacy is lobbying (McConnel, 2004). The latter is often defined as ‘the objective of directly or indirectly influencing the formulation or implementation of policy and the decision-making processes’ (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014, p.2). The American Association of Government Relations Professionals defines lobbying in broader terms, including the analysis of legislative proposals as well as the education of government officials by interest groups (Chambers, 2016). However, lobbying has significantly evolved throughout the decades, playing disparate roles in society. The last change to which such an activity has been exposed is the current pandemic, which led to a disruptive shift to online consultations. Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis will start with an introduction of the notion of lobbying and the theory of influence, presenting various categorizations and distinctions. Subsequently the focus will be on lobbying in the EU, through an explanation of its role, evolution, and functioning, along with a clarification of the institutions involved. Finally, before presenting a part of the results of the empirical analysis, the role of environmental policy and lobbying in the EU will be illustrated. Hence, the aim will be that of understanding whether the EU Green Deal, as the core of environmental policy, has maintained its prominent role since the outbreak of the pandemic.

#### **1.1 Lobbying and the theory of influence**

The use of the term ‘lobby’ within the political framework began in the 1810s in the United States, as to indicate either members who were opposed to the elected ones or

people employed to advocate and exercise political pressure with the aim of influencing petitions (Art, 2015).

Lobbying represents the centerpiece of the American democracy since the foundation of the State. Indeed, the governmental system thought by the American constitutional fathers was one underpinned by a pivotal role of interest groups. Lobbying was considered a right, leading the Congress to vote only laws passing through the influence of the organized interests, citizens, and the press (Hrebemar, 2009). Lobbying has increasingly become pivotal in the governmental decision making and policy making process, thus being of central interest to political scientists (Milbrath, 1960).

Notwithstanding the multiple and divergent lobbying theories, organized interests are generally thought to lobby either to influence public policy or because advocating towards specific goals is the only reason underpinning their existence (Lowery, 2007). Aside from this general distinction, the paradox of lobbying has characterized the literature since the beginning of the Post-War era (Lowery, 2007). On one hand, lobbying is explained as the means to support and strengthen democracy through the overcoming of policy disruption, thus providing technical information (Dahl, 1967). On the other hand, the economic perspective, especially based on Olson's 'Logic of Collective Action', relies on transactions between organized interests and public officials (1965). The collective action issue has underpinned the concept of interest representation as the unequal distribution of resources and the free riding problem tend to lead to a biased influence on the policy making process, favoring smaller groups with considerable stakes in measures (Lowery and Gray, 2004). Such an idea based on the nonrepresentative interests has been overcome by the 'neopluralist perspective', as denominated by Lowery and Gray (2004). Such an approach, despite partly reflecting the pluralist model, considers different kinds of organizations, all aiming at influencing the policy process (Lowery and Gray, 2004).

Lobbying has always been a multifaceted activity, combining policy, communication, law, economy, and diplomacy, as highlighted by Bernard Le Grelle (1987). Furthermore, lobbying is often described through the metaphor of the 'political market'. As the equilibrium price corresponds to the intersection between the demand and supply of goods, the equilibrium level of influence is determined by the demand and supply of

information exchanged between the lobbyists and the officials (European Parliament, 2003).

The nature and modalities characterizing lobbying have consistently changed throughout the decades, demonstrating that the increasing complexity of international affairs requires more than simple personal and informal contacts. Lobbying activities can be divided into three general categories, from an instrumental point of view, namely techniques based on different forms of communication between lobbyists and officials; methods underpinned by the central role of lobby constituents; the alternation of the public opinion or the involvement in the election process (European Parliament, 2003). Another distinction, pointed out by Guéguen (2002), defines negative strategies as the use of opposition or counter proposals to the legislators; reactive strategies, based on the cultivation of prudent networks; pro-active strategies underpinned by the cultivation of solid partnerships between lobbyists and public officials. Coen (2002), on the other hand, focuses on lobbyists' abilities rather than strategies, highlighting the identification of the policy goals and the creation of solid and reliable relations and alliances.

However, the factors that determine lobby effectiveness can be defined as external and internal. The main external ones are the direction and intensity of the competition, the supporting role of citizens and mass media and the likeliness that the institutions targeted will be influenced by the lobby groups (Jaatinen, 1998). The internal ones are, on the other hand, the quality and quantity of information, expertise and resources, the managing and planning and the uniformity of support among constituent publics (Jaatinen, 1998).

Aside from the numerous possible categorizations and distinctions, strategies and tactics vary across countries, based on divergent regulations, depending on the actors, ranging from the public to the private sector and engaged in various domains. Furthermore, the strategic abilities must be updated as the access points to policy making, the institutional setting of the political bodies, communication forms, and networking between actors have been disrupted by COVID-19. Of course, a complete shift towards digital meetings would have been more impactful in the past, when lobbying was based on personal relations between politicians and interest groups through social and political events. However, the digital nature of the modern society had undoubtedly already generated a transformation of the lobbying tactics, underpinned by hybrid solutions, and based on a substantial role

of social media platforms. The latter considerably contribute to rising issues and awareness around them, thus mobilizing increasing numbers of actors, and enhancing a balanced combination of digital lobbying and physical lobbying. Nonetheless, the forced shift to virtual contacts with no strategy planning has undoubtedly led to the rethinking and transformation of the traditional notion of lobbying. Thus, long-term or definitive implications for the future of such an activity will be implied.

## **1.2. EU Lobbying: Evolution and Functioning**

### **1.2.1 Lobbying as the Core of the Decision-Making**

Public and private interests are at the heart of the policy process, especially in the Western world, demonstrating that lobbying is an integral component of today's national and international politics (Richardson, 2006). Brussels is reported to have the second-highest concentration of lobbyists worldwide after Washington DC' (Chambers, 2016, p.5). The EU's institutional setting is underpinned by a decision-making process relying on several links between all the bodies (European Parliament, 2003). Thus, although the unlimited access points to policy and decision-making have more advantages than drawbacks, the multitude of influence channels and actors along with the complexity of the EU decision-making hamper specific lobbying tactics (European Parliament, 2003).

As argued by Mette Grollman, the general manager of Fleishman Hillard's Brussels office, Brussels is the center of networking. Indeed, lobbying at the European level is not a matter of informal relations, but rather 'the objective of directly or indirectly influencing the formulation or implementation of policy and the decision-making processes' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014, p.2).

Lobbying has expanded incredibly in the European Union (EU) throughout the last three decades, thus shaping the complex and rapidly evolving EU interest group system (Smiles, 2010). Indeed, in the first years of the XXI century, the European public policy process has been characterized by around 15,000 Commission and European Parliamentary officials facing approximately 20,000 lobbyists daily (Greenwood, 2003). The explosion of interest group activity within the EU can be dated back to the beginning of the 1990s, as significant competencies have been gradually transferred to the European

Institutions. 'EU interest groups were able to exert influence along the European policy process from initiation and ratification of policy at the Council of Ministers, agenda-setting and formulation at European Commission led forums, reformulation of policy at the European Parliament committees, to the final interpretation, harmonization and implementation of regulation in the nation state' (Coen, 2007, p.3). Although interest groups influence the EU public policy process in a constructive and enriching way, the 'competitive elite pluralist environment' requires a high level of transparency (Coen, 2007). The central role of lobbying and corporate lobbying in the EU seems to hinder the European governance's transparency, leading to corruption discourses (Chambers, 2016). In this regard, the estimated corruption cost, amounting to 120 billion euros per year, would be equivalent to one per cent of the EU's GDP (Chambers, 2016). Hence, given the high degree of the European dependence upon interest groups to achieve its goals, transparency mechanisms and checks and balances constitute the necessary basis for the complex interest group system (Greenwood et al., 2013). The self-regulatory measures guiding lobbyists in the EU emerged in 1994, evolving towards the establishment by the European Commission and the European Parliament, in 2011, of a new joint regulatory instrument, namely the Transparency Register (TR) (Greenwood et al., 2013). The TR bolsters the registration of all actors that directly or indirectly exert influence on decision-making processes of the EU, counting approximately 75% of business companies engaged in EU lobbying and around 60% of NGOs active in the present field (Greenwood et al., 2013). Despite the continuous evolution of transparency, COVID-19 has undoubtedly had and continues to have relevant consequences in such a domain, as the channels and means to exercise influence have been transformed. A technical approach to digital lobbying would imply that simple and informal messages or emails are not considered as lobbying, thus, not complying with the minimum transparency standards set by the EU Transparency Register (Transparency International EU, 2021).

Nonetheless, if these tools are and will be the main lobbying channels, it will be hard not to require the respect of certain norms, seen as the premise to prevent any form of unjust pressure and corruption. In this regard, despite the relevant drop in the number of meetings at the Commission since March 2020, as shown by EU Integrity Watch, "lobbyists are still hard at work – taking to Zoom, Skype, and old-fashioned phone calls as they put their case to politicians" (Pearson, 2020). The combination of the decline in

meetings with lobbyists' perceived high engagement via virtual tools shows that lobbying transparency has decreased, albeit not being satisfactory even before the pandemic, especially at the Parliament (Transparency International EU, 2021). Hence, it will be crucial that new transparency and anti-corruption measures are introduced in the EU framework, as lobbying will likely switch to a hybrid reality (Transparency International EU, 2021). As "the offices are going to be less active, the Commission will be proactive to organize in-person meetings only with a large number of stakeholders, while trying to maintain the virtual format for the least crucial consultations" (Transparency International, 2021). A similar perception has been shared by Lobby Control Germany (2021), which has emphasized that "as this kind of new meeting formats is proving to have several advantages, it will probably be prioritized in the future, notably for simple meetings, due to the facility to reach more actors and organize several events in shorter time. On the other hand, a sort of normality will come back, posing the question of whether it will result in better or worse outcomes."

### **1.2.2. The Role of the European Institutions: Which is the Most Lobbied?**

The European institutions are commonly considered as more accessible than national administrations and governments, notwithstanding their lower level of publicity with actors such as citizens, academia, and associations (Lehmann, 2002). However, the European Commission plays a protagonist role in the legislative process, as stated by article 211 TEC, presenting the legislative proposals and being, thus, the main target of lobbying (Bouwen, 2002). As the Commission largely relies on information shared by external sources, lobbying activities are not unidirectional but rather an enriching exchange both at the institutional and private interest level. (Bouwen, 2002). The European Commission aims to shape the EU interest representation system through financial resources, rule-making power, and governance style to obtain expert knowledge and legitimacy. (Bouwen, 2002). The Commission's role as the only agenda-setter has been, throughout recent years, hindered by the increasing number of formal and informal meetings organized by the European Council (Bouwen, 2002). Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic may represent a facilitator for a higher number of meetings and events organized by the Commission, as explained by EU Transparency International (2021).

Nonetheless, the role of the European Parliament in the lobbying framework has increased in the last decades since the alteration of its institutional position. Nevertheless, the interest groups' goal is to lobby the Commission and the Council through 'advocacy coalitions' with the Parliament, often bringing to light the competition between these two institutions for legitimacy (Lehmann, 2002). At the same time, lobbyists constitute a fundamental source of information for MEPs and an integral part of the democratic process (Craig, 2008). As lobbying in the European Parliament is underpinned by individual prestige and energy and political maneuvering between groups, the pandemic-driven shift towards online consultations has required a significant adaptation to influence activities.

The Council and the European Council are also targeted by lobbying, despite being less or at least differently accessible than the Commission and the Parliament (Hayes-Renshaw, 2006). The main factors leading interest groups to select these two institutions as their lobbying target, rather than the Council, are the lack of transparency, the temporary nature of the personnel, the fragmented and layered structure of the institution, the underpinning of the decision-making process by intensely formal norms and the different kind of information required by the Council to achieve its goals (Hayes-Renshaw, 2006). Furthermore, the divergent and less frequent meetings at the Council require the participation of members of the Commission and the Parliament, considered as more accessible. (Hayes-Renshaw, 2006).

### **1.3 Environmental Lobbying in the EU**

#### **1.3.1 Environmental Policy Dominates the EU Agenda**

Notwithstanding the EU's origins as those of an economic union, Brussels became, after the European Council's declaration of 1972, one of the key actors ensuring the prominence of environmental matters in the international arena (Mathis, 2020). Despite the formal foundation of EU environmental policy in October 1972 through a declaration of the European Council, the development of the EU policy making process in such a domain has been profoundly rapid, primarily due to the relevant differences among the member states (Andersen et al., 1997). The so-called 'leader-laggard' dynamic has indeed been a facilitator, leading countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark,

defined as the 'pioneers' to act as the motor of the EU environmental policy making (Lieberink, 1998). Environmental policy was formally recognized in the European treaties in 1986, revolving around sustainable development. The consequence was a solid legislative agenda, accompanied by establishing structures of information that provided the EU with a new form of legitimation (Mathis, 2020). Subsequently, the 'green troika' guided by Berlin, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen, was strengthened, since 1995, after the enlargement towards Finland, Sweden, and Austria, which already relied on solid and ambitious domestic green policies and regulations (Lieberink, 1998). Until the early 1990s, this first phase was underpinned by substantial regulatory measures and an increasing role played by the EU in general and broad environmental matters. The second phase, on the other hand, provided the shift from norm-setting to global strategy, thereby reinforcing the policies and broadening the scope to incorporate new domains, such as waste management, air and water quality, pesticide reduction, the regulation of GMOs, sustainable urban planning, and climate change (Mathis, 2020). Despite the relevance of environment-related topics, especially since the last two decades, the EU policies and proposals did not always reflect these priorities, leading several organizations to establish their offices in Brussels. They hoped to raise awareness in pivotal issues of their interest, thereby influencing the Commission on crucial proposals of the Parliament (Biliouri, 1999). Although multiple NGOs generally present their views after the Commission drafts a new proposal, organizations may cooperate and reinforce each other to counter positions previously complied with (Biliouri, 1999). Nonetheless, this can occur only if the interest groups are coordinated and share the same perspectives.

Notwithstanding the relevant role of environmental lobby groups at the end of the 1980s, their heterogeneous positions and the rare ties with political parties often resulted in low effectiveness (Biliouri, 1999). However, most of them have established their offices in Brussels to cultivate a strong network with the EU institutions. They provide expertise and information while cooperating among them within the European Environmental Bureau or other umbrella groups (Biliouri, 1999). Environmental NGOs have an excellent reputation nowadays, thus being increasingly invited by the Commission to actively engage in the EU governance, enhancing a participatory democracy and reducing the frequently debated democratic deficit (Junk, 2015). The involvement of environmental NGOs can be based either on inside lobbying, targeting the institutions, especially at the

Commission and Parliament level, or on outside lobbying, addressing the public (Junk, 2016). While the first category of lobbying relies on the so-called 'logic of influence', aiming to have an impact on policy outcomes, the second type is based on the 'logic of reputation' intended to build a robust, credible, and coherent image with the public (Junk, 2016). These two forms of lobbying can be explained based on organizational factors, such as the type of resources, the planning and managing, and the complexity and salience of the policy issue (Junk, 2016). In this regard, as for the organizational factors, although NGOs relying on considerable financial resources seem to have more access to European Institutions, the results are not statistically significant (Klüver, 2010). On the other hand, as for the policy issue-related factors, the complexity of the lobbied-on issues is positively correlated to outside lobbying, as policy makers will be more willing to receive expertise, knowledge, and information from NGOs (Klüver 2012). In contrast, the public salience of the issue is negatively related to outside lobbying (Junk, 2016).

A crucial pillar on environmental NGO's (ENGO) lobbying is the Aarhus convention, the first internationally legally binding convention enhancing democratic participation and adopted in 1998 (Vavtar, 2014). The latter ensures public access to and judicial protection of environmental data and cooperation in the adaptation process of environmental acts (Garçon, 2013). Nonetheless, one of the factors hampering the effectiveness of environmental lobbying is the inconsistent view about its aim (Vavtar, 2014). Indeed, although successful lobbying activities should improve environmental quality, the complex political processes, the diverse policy preferences, and the lack of lobbying regulations often result in the difficulty of implementing optimal policies (Vavtar, 2014). Furthermore, when analyzing environmental lobbying, it is crucial to distinguish between non-governmental and corporate lobbying. While NGOs intend to defend a public concern, the business approach to environmental protection is based on specific economic interests, thereby not being monolith and united in purpose and reactions (Thomas, 1999). Corporate environmental lobbying often has opposite goals than interest groups of different nature, underpinned by economic and profit related objectives. In this regard, Corporate Europe Observatory (2020) has referred to a grey deal to define the European Green Deal as lobbied by the fossil fuel industry. Such companies support carbon removal, avoiding emphasizing the importance of cutting emissions (Corporate Europe

Observatory, 2020). An example related to this is represented by companies such as Repsol, Total, BP, Eni and Shell, which have all embraced 'net zero emissions, while increasing their gas and oil production, demonstrating their tendency to provide for fake and rhetorical climate promises (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020).

Moreover, the current pandemic has proven to be the perfect moment to be exploited by corporate lobbyists from a significant number of industries, ranging from the pharmaceutical and the fossil fuel industry to big-tech firms, car-maker associations, and airlines (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). Aside from the fiscal, safety and labor regulations, the environmental ones have been targeted by multiple companies as considered to hamper their ability to drive the pandemic recovery. Therefore, the effectiveness of environmental lobbying largely depends on the influence ability of interest groups of various nature due to the variety of goals pursued within the EU framework.

### **1.3.2 The European Green Deal versus COVID-19: Which is the Most Lobbied Topic?**

The legislative proposals and prospects for EU environmental policy are established, since 1973, in the Environmental Action Programmes (EAPs) (Kurrer, 2020). The latter, released by the European Commission, is "a combination of medium-term programmes linked through a strategic approach, consisting of a vertical and sectoral approach to ecological problems" (Halmaghi, 2016, p.87). The 8th and last programme, setting the policies for the decade 2020-2030, revolves especially around the European Green Deal, proposed by the Commission in December 2019 and providing the EU with the opportunity to reiterate its commitment to the 7th EAP's 2050 vision (European Commission, 2021).

While the previous Commission prioritized security policy, Ursula von der Leyen declared environmental and climate policies as the EU pillar, contributing to the shift towards sustainability in the medium and long term, respectively fixed in 2030 and 2050 (European Commission, 2019). The fact that the European Green Deal has been thought of as the top priority of the present Commission is demonstrated by it being the number one most lobbied-on topic in Brussels (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). Since the

launch of the plan on 11 December 2019, members of the European Commission participated in 151 lobby meetings with various business interest representatives, resulting in approximately 11 meetings per week (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). Despite the disproportionate business lobbying compared with public interest representatives, the relevant fact is that the European Green Deal has constituted around one-fifth of the total high-level lobby meetings with Commissioners, Directors-General, and Cabinet members (Kergueno, 2020). Nonetheless, the outbreak of COVID-19 led to a new priority in the lobbying agenda since March 2020. One hundred thirteen meetings have been organized on the virus and nearly 40 on the internal market portfolio and the related concerns about the pandemic's impact on certain industries (Pearson, 2020). In this regard, nonetheless, the salience of the issues has not been significantly impacted by the pandemic in all actors' lobbying strategies, as evidenced by the Corporate Europe Observatory, a non-profit organization aiming at challenging and exposing the privileged access to EU policy making. The green priorities set by the present Commission and revolving around the Green Deal have been lobbied in the same way, if not to a greater extent, albeit a quick shift at the beginning of the pandemic (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021).

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB), the largest network of environmental citizens' organizations in Europe, did not change its agenda regarding its 2021 Work Programme (EEB, 2021). Moreover, the Italian Climate Network, a national environmental non-profit organization registered, since 2014, as an observer at the UNFCCC, has similarly emphasized the importance of maintaining the same priorities even in hard times. Although they have partly readapted their narrative, the achievement of net-zero by 2050 and the realization of the 2030 Agenda have remained the pillars of the organization. Despite their profound commitment to maintain and create jobs within the organization, their lobbied-on topics have remained environment-related, especially in a period characterized by strong ties connecting green policies with the economy, the labor world, and the pandemic. Hence, the advocacy and lobbying activities they participate in are especially in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme and Effort Sharing Regulation framework, namely the two main EU climate policy instruments (Italian Climate Network, 2021). Enel, one of the most active multinational companies in the energy sector, operating in the European and Latin American gas markets and the global

electricity framework, has demonstrated a similar approach. The present actor has maintained the same focus throughout the crisis since they considered the environmental matters as the pillar of the COVID-19 recovery. Albeit being forced to restructure its lobbying strategies, Enel has maintained its focus in terms of lobbying on the European Green Deal, the Climate Law, the 'Clean, competitive and connected mobility for all-Europe on the move package', the ETS reform and Climate change and Environmental Policies', Sustainable Finance and Green Hydrogen (Enel, 2021). Similarly, WWF European Policy Program, part of the global largest conservation organization, did not change its priorities, using environmental policies as the long-term response to the present crisis. In contrast, the sanitary policies represent the short-term resolution. Thus, among their priorities to lobby, the main ones are the Green Deal, the Climate Law, the Renewable Energy Directive, the Energy Efficiency Directive, and the Just Transition Fund (WWF, 2021). The same trend has underpinned the lobbying activities of Eurogas, an association comprising 56 companies and associations from 24 different countries which represents the European gas wholesale, distribution, and retail sectors in the EU. The issues discussed have remained the measures to preserve the security of gas supply, the commitment to enhance cost-effective emission reductions and low-carbon investment, and strategies for liquified natural gas and gas storage (Eurogas, 2021). In the same way, the European Ethanol Renewable Industry (ePURE) declared that its agenda has remained unaffected, aiming at promoting a sustainable and competitive industry (ePURE, 2021). On the other hand, although other actors have felt the impact of the pandemic on the issues lobbied, they tried to link the crisis with their priorities. One of them is the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), an advocacy group reuniting nearly 50 European Industrial leaders working at the national and EU level. Although this group has not shifted its interests, it has connected the green transition to the pandemic, designing the Next Generation EU and the Recovery Fund as the new priority (ERT, 2021). Conscience Consulting, a founding partner of a global network of independent sustainability consultancies, is on the same wave. In fact, despite increased cooperation with the World Health Organization since the outbreak of the pandemic, the focus has remained on the European Green Deal, sometimes in a slightly different optic (Conscience Consulting, 2021).

Therefore, although generalized conclusions drawn from qualitative analysis are inadequate, there seems to be a trend indicating the cardinal position of the EU Green Deal, albeit an initial shift. Therefore, the urgency of the environmental crisis is showing that an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic does not necessarily result in bypassing certain priorities.

The present chapter has highlighted the central role of lobbying in the policy making process, highlighting the power of interest groups since the XVIII century, especially since the foundation of the American State. Similarly, since the creation of the European Union, the high level of networking has represented a typical feature, leading Brussels to have the second-highest concentration of lobbyists globally. However, EU lobbying has developed especially throughout the last three decades, also involving the other institutions.

Despite the EU being born as an economic union, its focus on environmental policy has progressively increased since the European Council's declaration of 1972, leading environmental lobbying to play a pivotal role. The European Green Deal, the pillar of the last European Commission's agenda, constitutes the culmination of the EU' commitment towards sustainability, being the most lobbied topic until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter has undoubtedly demonstrated to constitute a caesura in terms of its impact on lobbying strategies. Indeed, if lobbyists' tactics and the relationship between the public officials and the pressure groups have been adjusted, relevant implications will also stem from the present crisis.

Nonetheless, albeit a partial and initial alteration of the salience of the issues in the EU, the lobbied-on topics by actors engaged in environmental matters seems not to have been notably altered, as a highlight by relevant groups such as Corporate Europe Observatory, Italian Climate Network, Enel, the EEB, WWF, Eurogas, ePURE and ERT. However, various implications concern factors such as strategies, visibility, and the adaptation of future lobbying tactics. These concepts will be analyzed in the third and final chapter by evaluating the empirical analysis, accompanied by the related theoretical notions. On the other hand, coalition-building will be the central focus in the following chapter, analyzed

through the 'Advocacy Coalition Framework' theory (Sabatier, 1988), one of the multiple theories of policy change.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Policy Change in Times of Crisis: Advocacy Coalitions in the EU**

“Change is a major part of our lives. [...] But we still know little about when and how change occurs. Rahm Emanuel, former White House chief of staff, once said you never want a serious crisis to go to waste. Since 2008 policy-makers in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have faced a serious economic crisis – but it remains to be seen whether this was an opportunity taken advantage of or missed completely. Do we need a major shock to the system to initiate change? Or can there be incremental change?” (Cerna, 2013, p.3).

The year 2020 will be narrated in history books, films and to future generations as one of the biggest breakages in history. A year in which the whole world, no continent excluded, found itself facing a new and multifaceted crisis, affecting the sanitary, economic, social, and psychological fields. The death toll in the United States has exceeded that of the military who lost their lives in all conflicts since the Korean War of 1950-53; the global GDP contraction confirms that these are Great Depression figures; the psychological impact generated by the lockdown was strong and accompanied by uncertainty and fear. All these factors have denoted a complete disruption of our society, leading governments on a local, national, regional, and international scale to respond by developing new or altered policies. Hence, the general question that spontaneously arises is whether the current pandemic has resulted in policy change, as an external shock. The second question concerns the potentially decisive impact of the present emergency on environmental policy change, as the salience of the issues has shifted towards crisis-related matters. Indeed, several prominent international meetings and talks on environmental concerns had led 2020 to be billed as a "Super Year for Nature." Nonetheless, a conspicuous number of environmental agreements has been postponed due to the pandemic's uncertainty and restrictions. What remains to be seen is whether the potential surge of policy change will be transitory or long-lasting. Moreover, the policy change which

would result from COVID-19 could also contribute to an alteration of the lobbied-on topics. Therefore, a question focusing on the salience of the issues will be raised to the lobbyists interviewed to analyze the initial implications of this historical caesura. On the other hand, lobbying activities could be another facilitator of policy change, demonstrating that exogenous factors such as a pandemic, and endogenous factors such as influence exercised on the institutions potentially play a central role.

The present chapter will present the most relevant theories of policy change, specifically focusing on the 'Advocacy Coalition Framework', starting point for the empirical analysis. Subsequently, theories on coalition building in the EU will be evaluated. The final analysis will focus on the implications of virtual meetings for the creation of networks among lobbyists and between advocacy groups and EU institutions, through the lens of the interviews.

## **2.1 Theories of Policy Change**

Why and how do policies change? How can one unfold the extraordinarily complex and multidimensional process which eventually results in policy change? "Political demographers point to the role of changing social and economic conditions, e.g., population migrations, the emergence of new social movements, critical elections, macro-economic changes in inflation and unemployment" (Sabatier, 1988, p.130).

Nonetheless, Heclo (1974) considered that, while these macro factors certainly play a relevant role in contributing to policy change, the concept of learning, linked to the interaction of specialists within policy areas, needed to be emphasized (Sabatier, 1988). Indeed, in the past, it was widely assumed that public policies were influenced by societal factors, presupposing a largely passive government driven by societal forces and conflicts (Cerna, 2013). Indeed, the power of experiences in shaping past and present actions is significant, as states can learn from previous mistakes (Bennet et al., 1992). Learning, in this regard, can be considered as assisting governments in achieving their objectives or as an intentional endeavor to alter policy objectives or approaches considering the consequences of past policies and new knowledge or expertise (Hall, 1988).

On the other hand, Heclo (1974) refers to learning as a long-lasting transformation in behaviors and approaches, stemming from past experiences and significant stimuli.

Another theory, elaborated by Sabatier (1978) and referred to as 'policy-oriented learning', focuses on policy changes that occur because of experiences which modify one's belief system principles. Finally, Rose (1988) has emphasized the process through which programs and policies created in one country tend to be replicated and spread worldwide, leading policy makers to learn from others' positive and negative actions. Nonetheless, despite the differences underpinning the perspectives mentioned above, policy learning is only one of the theories of policy change.

Another distinct theory is 'policy diffusion', which, similarly to policy learning, is the process through which policy innovations are diffused among governments and administrations through four different mechanisms (Shipan and Volden 2008). Learning is the process through which policy makers benefit from other governments' experiences; economic competition refers, on the other hand, to policies that can serve either as a model to imitate or to avoid; 'imitation' or 'emulation' is the act of reproducing governmental activities, focusing on the actor rather than the action, as in the case of learning; coercion, eventually, is the act of particular administrations to impose sanctions or betray other governments to influence specific policies. (Shipan and Volden 2008). Another significant theory, which is also relevant for the current project, is 'policy network'. The latter is defined as a cluster or complex of organizations connected by resource dependencies and distinguished from other clusters or complexes by breaks in resource dependencies' structure (Rhodes and Marsh 1992, p. 182). Social movements are examples of policy networks, as they constitute the framework within which organizations interact, potentially leading to policy change (Phillips, 1991).

Aside from the examples mentioned above, the theories of policy change are multiple. Each theory has its own set of strengths and shortcomings, and their relevance varies depending on the policy issue and the magnitude of change (Cerna, 2013).

Applying the theory of policy change to the current emergency means understanding what and how governments are learning from past experiences and mistakes, as well as from each other, guiding alterations in belief systems, approaches and policies. However, the focus of the present research is not the impact of the pandemic on policies, but rather the impact of the lack of physical contact on lobbying. Therefore, the theory of policy change which is most linked to the lobbying framework is the 'Advocacy Coalition Framework'

(ACF) (Sabatier, 1988). Indeed, it can be assumed that the advent of virtual meetings and absence of physical interactions resulted in a new way of building and maintaining coalitions, thus leading to policy change. Therefore, the ACF will be explained and developed in the following section, being also the foundation for the analysis of the interviews concerning advocacy coalitions during COVID-19.

## **2.2 Lobbying Coalitions in the EU Through the Lens of the ACF**

### **2.2.1. The Advocacy Coalition Framework**

The 'Advocacy Coalition Framework' (ACF), developed by Sabatier (1988) and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1991), has become one of the overarching pillars to understand policy processes and change. Such a theory indicates that coalitions are created as disparate interests linked to causation and value concepts (Bennet et al., 1992). Indeed, 'change comes from the ability of these ideas to adapt, ranging around a whole series of operational questions and what works in any one time or place', as John (2003, p.490) explained. Policy change thus happens due to the interplay between significant exogenous changes or shocks to the political system and the success of ideas in coalitions, which may force advocacy coalition players to alter alliances (Cerna, 2013). An *advocacy coalition* refers to "people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, and researchers) who share a particular belief system - for example, a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions - and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time." (Sabatier, 1988, p. 139).

The ACF's idea of "policy-oriented learning" addresses the questions of how and why policy actors modify their ideas over time as possible members of advocacy coalitions (Weible, 2008). Hence, the concept of learning, central in most policy change theories, is broadened by the ACF to reflect how coalitions generate, exchange, and use knowledge and skills while aiming to turn their views into the policy (Weible, 2008).

Coalitions are formed on a solid basis and aim at converting their common beliefs into public policies or programs, thereby shaping the policy process (Mintrom and Vergari, 2005). The formation of coalitions and the transformation of the shared belief systems into policies occur at the policy subsystem level, namely a network of individuals active

in disparate public and private organizations who aim to maintain and evolve policy in a specific area (Sabatier, 1988). Besides, Mintrom and Vergari (2005) explain that *policy subsystems* are not defined as simple interest groups, administrative agencies, and legislative committees at a single level of government. However, instead, they can include "journalists, analysts, researchers, and others who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas as well as actors at other levels of government who play important roles in policy formulation and implementation" (Sabatier, 1988, p. 138). Thus, although the formation of coalitions is at the policy subsystem level, the events shaping policy change are generally transformations of socioeconomic conditions, alternations of governmental coalitions and policy change in different subsystems, aside from the less significant impact of policy learning within that subsystem (Mintrom and Vergari, 2005). Of course, not all external events and actions of policy learning result in policy change. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 crisis and the complete absence of in-presence contacts may have had considerable implications for the advocacy coalitions, hence contributing to a potential surge of policy change. However, before illustrating the empirical analysis, the concrete importance of lobbying coalitions in general and at the EU level must be clarified.

### **2.2.2 Coalition Building in the EU**

'Political structures no longer permit even the most resourceful of organized interests to press a policy issue single handily' (Schlozman and Tierney, 1986, p. 306). However, although coalition lobbying is one of the most effective influence strategies, the literature on lobbying does not emphasize such a concept (Junk, 2020).

Coalitions are costly arrangements especially due to the need of adjusting to the new partner (Sorurbakhsh, 2016). Nevertheless, lobbying strategies tend to benefit from coalitions, demonstrating that the advantages are likely to outweigh the drawbacks. In this regard, lobbying coalitions are among the most efficacious means for gathering information, media attention, expertise, and political support, which is crucial to policy making (Junk, 2020). Indeed, exchanging expertise and knowledge on a policy topic with like-minded partners is likely to increase the amount and boost the quality of technical and policy knowledge accessible to the advocate, improving the actor's exchange position

with policy makers (Tallberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, the alignment of lobbying tactics and activities is a good premise for the effective use of resources for a common cause and serves to jointly approach policy makers, thus having higher probabilities of being successful (Junk, 2019). Of course, aside from the negative implications which may stem from advocacy coalitions and impact the success of a single actor, distributional effects are also likely to occur. As in every collaborative action, issues such as free riding are not excludable. Certain actors may be more committed to gathering and sharing information and tactics, gaining relevant contacts, and investing resources, while other lobbyists may be more passive (Junk, 2020). Nonetheless, despite the potential disadvantages of lobbying coalitions, the latter remain a prominent strategy in the policy making process.

Advocacy coalitions play a significant role in the EU, despite the difficulty to prove that lobbying in coalitions concretely results in more efficient outcomes than lobbying autonomously. Indeed, due to methodological problems in measuring influence, only a few academics have experimented with interest group impact, making empirical testing of these theories limited (Kluver, 2011).

The relevance of lobbying coalitions in the EU has been studied as related to the policy formulation stage, during which the Commission prepares its legislative proposals to be examined by the Council and the Parliament (Kluver, 2011). As the Commission is the only institution able to take initiatives at the beginning of the process, lobbying can quickly bring changes to the policies (Thomson and Hosli, 2006). The interaction between the Commission and the lobbying coalitions is supposed to be mutually beneficial. The former requires expertise, public support, and market power, while the latter aims to influence policy proposals (Kluver, 2011).

It would be wrong to imagine single interest groups trying to make their voices heard autonomously. Contrarily, interest groups lobby altogether, as "lobbying is not an individual endeavor but a complex collective process of multiple interest groups simultaneously trying to shift the policy outcome towards their ideal point" (Kluver, 2011, p.12). Furthermore, the theoretical exchange model, which has been developed by Kluver (2011), demonstrates that information supply, citizen support, and lobbying coalitions promoting the same policy objective are among the strongest determinants of policy influence in the EU. Besides, despite the absence of a systematic explanation of

the link between powerful interest groups and lobbying effectiveness, it has been shown that coalitions formed by a few influential actors and free riders seem not to be successful (Kluver, 2011).

Before analyzing whether the pandemic has impacted lobbyists' coalitions, it is appropriate to understand coalition formation within the EU, which stems primarily from the two objectives of influencing policy outcomes and maintaining organization (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2017).

Despite the existence of homogeneous and heterogeneous coalitions and the considerable distinctions between NGOs and business groups, all interest groups define a precise advocacy strategy to seek political influence. Among the multiple strategies, group pressuring is recurrent as "a coalition with a diverse set of organized interests potentially relies on a wide range of constituencies and therefore mobilizes a varied set of political resources and expert knowledge that enable it to address a broader set of policy makers" (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2017, p.961). On the other hand, the benefits for organization and goal maintenance are less direct because the group's reputation, identity, and internal coordination may be altered (Dür and Mateo, 2013). Hence, a balance of potential advantages and drawbacks is acknowledged by interest groups, along with the general context of policy issues such as media, public and organizational salience. Policies that particularly garner media attention and are underpinned by conflicting concerns at stake encourage unexpected bedfellows to form coalitions (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2017). Moreover, coalition formation also depends on lobbyists' intrinsic features. Indeed, organized interests relying on membership support need to preserve periodic contacts with their supporters and members, being less likely to risk their reputation and thus less inclined to form coalitions (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2017). The results of the investigation operated by Beyers and De Bruycker demonstrate that coalition formation at the EU level is more related to the policy issues prioritized by the organized interests, the typology of the group and the policy context.

The limited research in this domain does not linger on the opportunities arising from informal meetings, unofficial occasions, and organized events in Brussels. However, the latter undoubtedly represent the premise for increasing lobbyists' network, leading me to assume a profound impact of virtual connections on advocacy coalitions.

Therefore, I decided to investigate whether and how coalition building has been affected by the 'age of Zoom', leading to potential alterations in the ACF and to subsequent policy change. In this regard, one of the questions asked to the people interviewed concerned the evolution of their approach to potential or previous partners, during the pandemic. The responses to this question will be described and analyzed in the following section.

### **2.2.3 Has Coalition-Building been Affected by COVID-19?**

Differently from the initial expectation, most of the lobbyists interviewed emphasized the positive implications of online meetings, in terms of coalition building. Corporate Europe Observatory (2021), indeed, providing an external perspective, confirmed the increased coordination among interest groups, both at the NGO and business level.

Considering the non-governmental sector, EEB (2021) stressed the opportunity to strengthen their previous partnerships due to the increased number of meetings organized and the possibility of being more frequently updated, highlighting, however, the lack of new coalitions. Similarly, the Italian Climate Network (2021) pointed out that, as CAN Europe is a network of over 170 member organizations in around 38 European countries, it has always been difficult for smaller organizations such as ICN to contact the other members. Nevertheless, since the pandemic outbreak, they confirmed that it was much easier for small organizations to take the floor in virtual meetings, thus becoming more vocal. Furthermore, as 'Zoom is a comfort zone for smaller actors', coalition building and interactions among lobbyists and between lobbyists and policy makers have been fostered (ICN, 2021). The same feeling has been shared by Eurogas (2021), which has launched multiple initiatives, including a new alliance for net-zero and for the decarbonization of the energy system with other 27 organizations, while maintaining their previous coalitions active in a more straightforward and less committed manner. Besides, they stressed the importance of reaching senior people, such as company directors, this representing a better premise for constructing new networks. The European Climate Foundation (2021) shared the same position, affirming that they matured new coalitions and strengthened the previous ones, despite the impossibility to reproduce the emotional and social connections online. Similarly, ENEL (2021) claimed that none of their partnerships had a negative impact. Contrarily, they have improved their hydrogen

alliances and strengthened their preexisting contacts and cooperation with the president of the environmental Commission within the European Parliament, aside from having been able to contact new actors, especially in the private sector and at the national level. A perception that is on the same wave has been shared by the European Renewable Ethanol Industry and the European Roundtable of Industrialists, which noticed an increase in coalitions and better management of the preexisting ones. Indeed, both highlighted coalition formation as an opportunity boosted, if not created, by the pandemic. Similarly, Transparency International EU (2021) claimed that lobbyists have created some new coalitions and enhanced some others because the easiness to schedule meetings has partly compensated for the emergence of the Zoom fatigue to gain contacts virtually.

On the other hand, WWF European Policy Office (2021) considered that not much has changed, except that they have been less involved in policy proposals, depending on their agreement or disagreement concerning specific issues. In this regard, as confirmed by Transparency International EU (2021), the civil society sector has been profoundly affected in funding, this leading to a generally negative attitude linked to Zoom fatigue. Hence, although some new coalitions have emerged and others have been enhanced, the initial 'Zoom hype' has partially been lost. Conscience Consulting (2021) and Lobby Control Germany (2021) confirmed this perception.

Therefore, lobbying coalition-building in the EU seems to be rooted in more structural factors and variables than simple, informal meetings and physical contacts, showing that the shift towards virtual consultations potentially represents a tool to foster networking and partnerships. Differently from the initial expectation, most lobbyists emphasized the positive implications of online meetings compared to physical events. Although the present qualitative analysis cannot lead to generalized conclusions, the trend is a positive or sometimes scarcely relevant impact of the pandemic on advocacy coalitions, anticipating possible future scenarios regarding lobbying. Nonetheless, the components of advocacy are multiple, ranging from visibility and access to strategic planning. Such factors will be thus analyzed in the following chapter, through the lens of the interviews conducted.

## **Chapter 3**

### **An Empirical Analysis: How is and will the 'Age of Zoom' be Altering EU Lobbying?**

As in the famous saying by Winston Churchill, 'never let a crisis go to waste', lobbyists in Brussels have been required to adapt their strategies to the Corona crisis, losing some components while taking advantage of other aspects. My goal was to understand which components of lobbying benefitted from the pandemic and which have worsened, leading me to ask targeted questions to the people interviewed.

This chapter will be divided into three sections, each focusing on one specific question. The first concerns the adjustment of lobbyists' strategies to the current virtual life; the second focuses on the impact of the pandemic on organizations' visibility towards the public and policy makers; the third and final one addresses lobbyists' perception of the evolution of their tactics in the future.

#### **3.1 EU Environmental Lobbying: How have Strategies been Adjusted?**

Although lobbying coalitions may have increased or at least not been hampered in most cases, the pandemic has undoubtedly been impactful, always requiring strategies and tactics adjustment. According to Corporate Europe Observatory (2021), the abrupt alteration quickly led to the organization of digital conferences and online videos, which sometimes required sophisticated software, resulting in an imbalance of access, which depended on the eventual pre-existent contacts with the EU Institutions (Transparency International EU, 2021). Nonetheless, while a significant drop in the meetings at the European Commission has occurred during the first two months, this trend may have derived from the initial perception that online meetings were not considered 'lobbying' to the same extent as face-to-face consultations (Transparency International EU, 2021). Indeed, after the first two months of the crisis, the number of online meetings went up due to the progressive adjustment of all lobbyists' tactics. However, a relevant issue

experienced has been the overcrowding of the news, especially related to the pandemic, despite high attention devoted to environmental matters and the Green Deal.

Another issue deals with the lower effectiveness of the virtual meetings, compared to the physical events organized in Brussels, despite the opportunity to reach bigger audiences. Hence, these factors brought lobbyists to rethink their strategies, drawing on the quantity rather than the quality of networking (Transparency International EU, 2021). Nonetheless, the perception of having increased the audience and the number of meetings is not widespread, as stated by Lobby Control Germany, a watchdog located in Berlin and Cologne, mainly dealing with lobbying transparency. The impact of the pandemic has been strong, affecting their contacts and the number of lobbying meetings at the Commission. Indeed, it has sometimes been hard for smaller companies to create their networks in a time where informal contacts have disappeared. At the same time, digital meetings have contributed to helping less influential and known lobbyists who do not have physical offices in Brussels, creating a scenario that is equal for everyone (Lobby Control Germany, 2021).

The impact of the pandemic has undoubtedly been felt differently depending on the nature and type of lobbying. In this regard, the not-for-profit sector has been generally affected to a greater extent than the corporate one. The European Climate Foundation's response to the question of adjusting their strategies to the disrupted scenario has shown this. Indeed, they emphasized the feeling of distance between them and the policy makers, despite the Commission's intention to maintain the connections alive. The whole spectrum of informal conversations has disappeared, as the opportunity to exchange ideas and contacts at a bar can be better generated during a break between in-person meetings. Although this may seem not to have a key role, several lobbyists interviewed have emphasized the importance of informal moments and spontaneous exchanges of ideas and proposals. However, as they thought that the pandemic was reaching its end, they did not feel the urgency and necessity to explore new strategies and plans (European Climate Foundation, 2021). WWF's response to this question was similar. As their primary focus is on biodiversity, among all the environmental matters, a relevant implication of the pandemic has been the readaptation of their strategies and the general message, resulting in postponing certain priorities. Although the linkages between the pandemic and the

environment have become predominant during the first months of the crisis, the most lobbied-on topic by WWF, namely the biodiversity section of the Green Deal, needed to be sidelined. Furthermore, since the advent of Zoom, the new strategies have been based on strengthening internal coordination and consultations among the network members due to the tremendous decline in corridor discussions in Brussels (WWF, 2021).

Similarly, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUNC) European Regional Office (2021) stated that, despite their opportunity to have direct access to EU policy making efficiently, efficacy has often lacked. However, although personal connections have started to diminish since the beginning, the readjustment of strategies has not concretely occurred due to the initial impression that a temporary emergency did not require a long-term strategy. The same perception has been noticed by the Italian Climate Network (ICN), which stressed the loss of highly effective informal meetings. There has been a general opposition or difficulty in organizing informal events on Skype. "Sending to a politician a screenshot of 100 people on Zoom is not the same as bringing 100 people in a room" (ICN, 2021).

The responses obtained from the corporate sector, on the other hand, showed a more positive effect of the pandemic on the adjustment of lobbying strategies. For instance, ENEL Green Power (2021) managed to organize many online events with European commissioners, chaired by their CEO Francesco Starace, aiming not to neglect the major themes underpinning the Green Deal. Their perception was that the pandemic created increasing opportunities for relaunching green policies, despite the need to readapt their strategies, due to the lack of informal lobbying. Hence, the implications have been generally positive, as in the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT, 2021), highlighting the extremely facilitated and less time-consuming access to decision-makers in the Commission. In fact, ensuring the participation of several organizations, policy makers and commissioners at all the events scheduled in Brussels is highly difficult, especially given the number of activities in which these actors are involved. On the other hand, organizing Zoom calls for people who had to stay at home doing smart-working has proven to be easier and faster, as the in-person events inevitably last for more hours. Hence, aside from the negative implications for serendipity, even outreach-wise and media-wise, the perception has been extremely positive, contributing to boosting, among

other things, their visibility (ERT, 2021). In this regard, the fact that all actors have been forced to work only online has given them the opportunity to be all on the same boat, contributing to enhancing smaller organizations' visibility and connections, through social media and virtual events, where everybody had the same time at their disposal. Moreover, the actors interviewed generally agreed, especially in the corporate sector, that the organization of online events has been easier and easier, representing the premise for scheduling more meetings, even among the members of a single group, to increase their coordination and effectiveness. In this regard, Eurogas (2021) confirmed that the organization's internal level has proven to be smoother, even due to their pre-existent familiarity with online lobbying. At the external level, despite some technical issues, the possibility to reach policy makers both at the Commission and Industry level was enhanced. The sole difference in lobbying actions has been the decline in personal and informal contacts at the Commission and the Parliament. Besides, they did not reinvent their tactics, assuming it would not be a long-lasting situation, except for the willingness to increase the number of webinars and virtual workshops.

The liberty to be everywhere at the same time has become dangerous because policy makers do not pay attention to all the issues that are raised and because the high number of meetings hinders lobbyists' ability to be as focused, prepared, and effective as before (Eurogas, 2021). The same perception has been shared by the European Renewable Ethanol Industry (ePURE, 2021), which noticed a COVID period divided into three different phases. Indeed, during the first wave, lobbyists were invaded by panic, required to shift their work completely and to adjust their priorities, moving from climate-related matters to crisis-related issues. In this regard, while ePURE started to secure access to hand sanitizer to serve hospitals, schools, and other infrastructure, they had to approach interlocutors who were not as equipped as they were, this leading to an initial decline of contacts. Nonetheless, during the second phase, "the Zoom passion pervaded lobbying, leading everyone to want to catch up on every interaction". However, as some previously mentioned actors highlighted, this resulted in the absence of meaningful connections, which did not contribute to exploring real solutions or remaining visible to their membership and policy makers (ePURE, 2021). What has increased was, of course, their ability to hold consultations online, as well as the effectiveness of their Twitter and

LinkedIn websites, which are becoming central in their new way of lobbying (ePURE, 2021).

Aside from the effects of the pandemic, the need to be active in the public conversations on EU policy through social media was growing and complementing face-to-face contact. Social media creates the opportunity to enhance visibility and raise engagement and awareness, shape the public debate and lobbyists and policy makers' reputation, obtain instantaneous feedback, build quick relationships, learn from experts, and mobilize a larger number of people. In this regard, Conscience Consulting (2021) interestingly noticed that Zoom has made the system more accessible and more efficient, showing the easiness to take part in meetings, the effectiveness to deliver information and to gather many people in one advocacy meeting and boosting democracy. Its strategies are also more holistic, as meetings have generally shifted from bilateral to multilateral, based on gathering the highest possible number of stakeholders. Group and open discussions are underpinned by a strategic approach, which relies on sharing information more transparently and better preparing both lobbyists and policy makers. Nonetheless, it seems like in-person communication can shape interests more effectively, as also emphasized by Fiona Dubernet (2021), an EU parliamentary assistant, who reported a huge increase in communication issues at the Parliament. All the events and consultations and simple calls or exchange of emails have become unnatural, despite the number of networks being the same, if not higher. Nevertheless, network-wise, lobbying activities' success depends on the initial basis, skills, and access to policy makers.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the people targeted by lobbyists, "it has been possible to reach more representatives of industries, companies and NGOs and have them committed to doing things they would not do in normal times". Furthermore, what has been noticed is that the EU institutions over-organized events, especially at the beginning of the crisis, in order not to completely lose the typical atmosphere of the Brussels bubble (Dubernet, 2021). In fact, after a few months, the number of conferences had gradually decreased and been complemented by more concentrated and bilateral meetings, especially after the emergence of new coalitions among various actors (Dubernet, 2021). Therefore, although the perceptions of the various respondents are divergent, especially based on the distinction between the non-profit and the corporate sector, some general features are shared. Among the latter, the lower effectiveness of the meetings, the

difficulty to create new contacts for smaller organizations, the possibility to reach bigger audiences through virtual meetings and the opportunity to organize more meetings saving economic resources and time, have been often mentioned. The initial expectation was that actors' visibility would have been highly jeopardized by the absence of physical contact, thereby leading to serious implications for influencing policy making. Nonetheless, as such a factor has not been generally remarked, a specific question has addressed the concept of visibility, presented in the following paragraph.

### **3.2 Is Lobbyists' Visibility Enhanced or Worsened through Virtual Contacts?**

When we picture lobbying, we tend to refer to 'invisible lobbying', namely "lobbying of government officials for policy change that occurs 'off the public record', through closed-door meetings (Yakee, 2015, p.323). In this regard, informal lobbying is an "insider" practice. Only interest groups who have information about whom, when and how to contact are likely to use invisible techniques to pressure public decision-makers (Cooper et al., 2003). As Lowery and Marchetti (2012) highlight, the different lobbying tasks are not equally observable, and 'classic internal lobbying', which includes unseen strategies such as face-to-face meetings between elected officials and interest groups, is not readily identified and tracked. However, such tactics based on informal contacts are often used to lobby EU institutions, as they provide the chance to create closer and more personal relationships. Hence, is lobbyists' visibility towards policy makers and the public necessary to influence the European agenda?

Although a specific relationship between actors' visibility and their ability to lobby has not been widely assessed, I expected that the complete absence of in-person events and meetings hindered lobbyists' visibility, especially for those organizations and companies which are not particularly known, generating implications for their influence ability. Indeed, although NGOs base their advocacy on diverse strategies, they directly lobby policy makers by providing information and arguments or by indirectly influencing them through public opinion mobilization. (Delmuth et al., 2017). Thus, their visibility certainly plays a relevant role (Delmuth et al., 2017). Outsiders generally 'go public' by launching campaigns to mobilize larger audiences and use the news media, social media, and public events like protests (Dür, 2013).

On the other hand, meetings with decision-makers, the provision of policy expertise to policy makers and informing the latter about the views and needs of the constituencies that lobbyists represent are all common inside tactics (Delmuth et al., 2017). Therefore, *outside tactics* have been entirely hampered by the pandemic outbreak, leading to lower contact with the audiences. Conversely, *inside tactics* have either been strengthened by virtual meetings and contacts or hindered, as significant events and conferences have been cancelled. Hence, as the opportunities for lobbyists to remain visible have potentially decreased, I deemed it crucial to explore this aspect through the interviews. Nonetheless, the impact of the pandemic has seemed to be positive in this regard, especially given the pivotal role played by social media in our increasingly digitalized world.

WWF (2021) emphasized their pre-existent image, positioning and history, which contributed to attributing to the present organization the protagonist role of solution provider within the environmental framework. Furthermore, they had the chance to broaden their scope further and work more with the Parliament. (WWF, 2021). The interesting and paradoxical phenomenon is that, as noticed by the European Climate Foundation (2021), it is easier to reach bigger audiences because all lobbyists and policy makers that register on Zoom meetings participate, differently from what used to occur in the pre-Zoom age. In the same way, a positive impact on organizations' visibility has been shown by the European Environmental Bureau, Inc European Regional Office, the Italian Climate Network, Lobby Control Germany, Transparency International EU, and Corporate Europe Observatory. The latter has indeed also established the 'Corona Lobby Watch' project to ensure that civil society organizations were able to monitor lobbyists' activities throughout the pandemic, during a period in which old demands are being opportunistically repackaged through the exploitation of the sanitary crisis (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021). Therefore, if the loss of personal and physical contact did not hamper NGO's visibility, it can be deduced that companies, business associations and multinationals have been impacted even less due to their lower focus on publicity. Indeed, Enel and Eurogas have noticed increased visibility due to their more frequent use of social media and the number of projects they have worked on during the pandemic. An extremely positive impact has been recorded also by the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT, 2021), who reached up to 500 people in online events. In contrast, the maximum number of people reached in the audience in the pre-covid period was 220.

Besides, their visibility has increased through saving money which could be redirected towards other purposes. (ERT, 2021).

On the other hand, a representative of European Renewable Ethanol Industry (ePURE, 2021) considered that, although they are now more visible online than in the past, the difficulty to reach policy makers has increased significantly. Indeed, despite the bigger audiences, what matters is the people connected online and the quality of the interactions, which consent to the effectiveness of lobbying (ePURE, 2021).

Therefore, although it is impossible to draw general conclusions from qualitative analysis, the perception stemming from the interviews shows lobbyists' ability to manage their social media websites and organize online events, in a way that maintained or increased their visibility both towards policy makers and the public. Moreover, while the impact of the 'age of Zoom' on other aspects of lobbying such as coalition building, strategies and effectiveness has been perceived in different ways by the people interviewed, the latter have generally shared positive effects on the current emergency for their visibility.

After having investigated the implications of virtual advocacy for multiple factors, the conclusive question asked to the respondents has concerned their perception of the evolution of environmental lobbying in the near and long-term future. This question, addressing the third and final research objective of the current project, will be investigated in the following section.

### **3.3 The Future of EU Environmental Lobbying: Towards Hybrid Strategies**

#### **3.3.1 Is Virtual Communication Effective?**

Throughout the current project, the feelings and perceptions of several lobbyists of various nature have been explored, presented, and evaluated to have a general idea of how COVID-19 has impacted lobbying since its outbreak in March 2020. What has been noticed is that, despite the occurrence of multiple changes in terms of strategies, networking, methods to create contacts and to gain access to policy making and the ways to structure lobbyists' visibility, the nature of lobbying itself has changed. Indeed, digitalization and COVID have not transformed the core of advocacy, which remains a

structured, systematic, well-organized, and data-driven campaign, either in virtual or physical contexts (Lox, 2021). However, despite the potential of virtual contacts to replace in-person relations, digital lobbying revolving around posting tweets, sending emails and scheduling Zoom calls will undoubtedly leave a mark in the future concept of lobbying.

Virtual may become the new reality, completely superseding the traditional contacts, thereby altering the nature of advocacy itself. Indeed, lobbying is a communication process, highly based on the way lobbyists convey their expertise and information and their ability to make their targets receptive (Milbrath, 1960). Hence, the question is whether digital communication has the potential to be as effective as face-to-face communication. One general belief is that 'direct personal communication is more effective than written communication in gaining access and is more likely to reach the decision-maker when he is in a receptive frame of mind' (Milbrath, 1960, pp.36-37). Nonetheless, digitalization is becoming the pillar of our modern society. Thus, virtual communication may be considered a direct and personal form of contact, despite the absence of spontaneity and informality, which are certainly two relevant components. Lobbyists feel that making a personal presentation of their argument to the officeholder is the most successful strategy, assuming they can get in to meet him or get him on the phone (Milbrath, 1960). If the idea of reaching policy makers on the phone was already diffused some decades ago, it is easy to imagine that the 'age of Zoom' will not radically transform lobbying. Of course, some difficulties may arise in building advocacy coalitions and alliances and coordinating advocacy work, as the alignment of the coalition partners may stem from the possibility to meet, find compromises, and adjust the workflows (Lox, 2021).

Nonetheless, new opportunities may arise, given the possibility to organize more meetings through more economical resources, along with the likelihood to reach more public officials and bigger audiences. Furthermore, as it has been noticed that lobbyists' visibility may increase due to the more frequent use and better management of social media, the publicity of NGOs or businesses may be facilitated through this partial shift to digital lobbying. Therefore, as both advantages and drawbacks are linked to 'Zoom lobbying', my expectation before conducting the interviews was that environmental lobbying would not be shifted entirely towards the old normality. Every crisis brings

something positive and sometimes unexpected. Hence, the last question asked to all the respondents concerned their lobbying plans once the vaccination campaign will allow in-presence meetings.

### **3.3.2 Lobbying the EU After 2020: An Empirical Analysis**

'Lobbying was already becoming more and more digital, aiming to micro-target policy making and people in the Brussels Bubble. However, if before covid there was still much skepticism, now, there is no one lobbyist not used to online conferences and tactics to reach policy makers.' (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2021). In this regard, some organizations stated that they would not change anything unless required. Indeed, 'visibility and partnerships have noticeably increased, lobbying strategies functioned effectively, and the number of events and people reached has significantly augmented' (EEB, 2021). European Roundtable of Industrialists, in the same way, will keep every contact online unless different forms of consultations are required or unless some flaws start arising (ERT, 2021). Similarly, Lobby Control Germany (2021) considered that they will prioritize this kind of new meeting formats for simple meetings, especially given the facility to reach more actors and organize quicker and more events. In the same way, Conscience Consulting (2021) and the Good Lobby (2021) consider that most meetings will be held virtually, both due to efficiency considerations and to the high level of flexibility provided by these new forms of consultation. On the other hand, a sort of normality will come back for the organization of bigger events. However, the several advantages stemming from digital lobbying may be motivated by the short-term perspective. Hence, a big question remains whether such strategies will bring better or worse outcomes in the long-term future. Moreover, questions about transparency will have to be addressed and new regulations introduced within the EU framework (Lobby Control Germany, 2021). The IUNC European Regional Office has shown a similar perspective, which, nonetheless, emphasizes that environmental lobbyists should develop a different approach, as the organization of physical events is certainly more damaging to the environment. Hence, 'despite the absence of informal connections having some negative implications for influencing decision-makers, environmental organizations should be the leaders in advocating virtual meetings, except for certain situations' (IUNC

European Regional Office, 2021). Similarly, WWF European Policy Office (2021) will try to organize virtual events, which have proven to allow for more meetings, connections and time saved, while scheduling conferences and unformal and unofficial dinners because "network building needs presence, being the premise for lobbying".

Nonetheless, the respondents often shared contrasting feelings on their planned future advocacy tactics. The European Renewable Ethanol Industry, for instance, plans to go back to traditional lobbying as soon as it is feasible since they have been less effective over the last two months. Although they will take advantage of the stakeholder alliances and their activity on social media, they aim to return to the old normality. Indeed, they cannot find compromises, explore different avenues, and develop innovative solutions while cultivating stronger relations' (ePURE, 2021). The same feeling has been shared by Eurogas (2021), which emphasized their profound desire to completely return to in-person consultations, as online meetings seem to have always been organized with the same people. Nevertheless, after an initial phase of traditional lobbying, the idea is to create a hybrid strategy to organize the most important events in Brussels while maintaining the simple consultations online, thereby saving time and money. Another practical aspect that Eurogas has pointed out is that, as the cost of travelling has sharply increased, in-person meetings will certainly no longer be scheduled once every week as they used to be before the pandemic. Hence, by combining convenience, practicality and efficiency evaluations, a good balance will need to be found (Eurogas, 2021). A similar perspective has been shared by the European Climate Foundation (2021). They claimed, in fact, that middle-ground strategies will likely prevail, as distance has always resulted in the lack of social and emotional connections (European Climate Foundation, 2021). Furthermore, some practical issues have been raised in multiple cases. Italian Climate Network (2021), for instance, highlighted that, despite the higher quality of physical interactions, smaller organizations like them would likely play a less relevant role in the framework of EU environmental lobbying. Indeed, all the investments related to face-to-face meetings and events will be made only if there is a high probability of lobbying effectiveness (Italian Climate Network, 2021). Thus, they claimed that their strategies would remain based on virtual lobbying, albeit in a lighter form, stressing the

disproportionate effect of the present crisis on organizations of different sizes, nature, and durability. (Italian Climate Network, 2021).

Therefore, it is evident that lobbyists are thinking of divergent plans and that the new tactics can be motivated either by exogenous factors or by endogenous preferences. Nonetheless, after having heard the feelings shared by lobbyists of various nature, it has been interesting to analyze the opposite side' perspective, namely two civil servants working at the European Parliament. The latter agreed that, while in terms of the salience of the issues, there will not be significant changes, as the European Green Deal will remain the prioritized topic, the strategies will certainly evolve. According to their perception, "it has been particularly hard for NGOs since they rely on sponsorship from companies that have modified their priorities as they lost significant economic resources." Conversely, as private companies are struggling much less in lobbying activities, they may increase their expenditure and devolve it to the organization of big events' (European Parliament, 2021). Thus, the result may be paradoxical as NGOs are highly reliable on publicity, compared to private organizations. However, given the economic obstacles, they may have to maintain a significant portion of their lobbying online. On the other hand, private companies that managed to save considerable resources during the pandemic, may use the latter to organize more in-presence events using new and innovative methods.

Nonetheless, the responses of the interviews have shown that the nature of the organization is not a critical factor determining the likely future lobbying strategies. However, instead, the feelings are divergent due to the different experiences and features of the single actors. Notwithstanding the impossibility to derive a general trend from the limited number of lobbyists participating in the research, the current pandemic will undoubtedly generate significant implications for future EU lobbying. The sole scheduling of virtual consultations and conferences will represent a feasible, simple, and accessible option for everyone in terms of time, practicality, and economic resources. Although certain activities were born and designed to be based on physical interactions, digitalization invades every sphere of today's society. Thus, COVID-19 may only have anticipated a trend that had already begun or that was starting to be increasingly

widespread. The hope is that the prioritization of virtual meetings will result in significant advantages for disparate sectors. These will range from the environment and transparency to inclusion of actors, coalition building and access to EU policy making, further demonstrating that crises have a strong potential for improvement.

## Conclusion

"A historical caesura would be that which, within history, interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, or else closes off all possibility of history." (Philippe Lacour-Labarthe).

The current research project has been developed during exceptional times, underpinned by special measures, uncommon restrictions, uncertainty and precariousness. On January 20, 2020, in the wake of the declaration of a public-health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO), the entire world had gradually and through disparate interventions, shut down, leading all sectors to be confronted with a completely novel context. Although all sectors have been strongly impacted, the implications have been disparate, ranging from sanitary issues and negative economic consequences to increased disparities among and within countries and socio-psychological problems. However, jobs and activities characterized by continuous physical contact have been forced to adapt to a completely new scenario, living through cloud-based communications technologies. One of the principal activities founded on communication strategies and contact opportunities through physical meetings and events is lobbying, which combines diplomacy, economy, policy, law and communication.

The advent of COVID-19 is not the first disruptive change leading to a forced transformation of lobbying, as the latter has constituted a crucial pillar of the democratic State in the United States since its foundation, demonstrating the necessity for lobbyists to adapt to multiple phases and contexts. However, political pressure on governmental decision-making has always been underpinned by the relations built between public officials and interest groups through in-presence formal or unofficial occasions. Therefore, the complete shift from face-to-face consultations to online meetings led to the development of a new lens that defined lobbying, which could potentially become "online lobbying". Of course, what has been defined in the present thesis as the 'age of Zoom' would have originated more perturbing transformations in an undigitized society, completely based on physical relations. Therefore, such a virtual alteration would have probably occurred in a few years and in a more gradual way by introducing appropriate tools and platforms. However, the fact that the public and private sectors have been compelled to entirely rely upon Zoom meetings from one day to the next, without having

anticipated nor planned anything, has surely resulted in rethinking the traditional notion of lobbying. Whether the implications will be transitory or long-lasting is an open question, which will be addressed once the pandemic will end, creating the opportunity for a potential return to the old normality. Aside from the duration of the COVID impact on advocacy, considerable implications certainly concern strategiesA, visibility both towards policy makers and the public, transparency, coalition building and access to decision making.

Hence, this research has stemmed from the interest to analyze lobbyists' ability to adapt to an exceptional context, transforming negative circumstances into abundant opportunities. The focus has been on the EU, the second-highest concentration of lobbyists worldwide, after Washington. The European decision-making is extremely complex and multidimensional, engaging a significant number of institutions and revolving around actors such as NGOs, foundations, associations, and the corporate sector through either direct or indirect lobbying. In this regard, the plurality of influence channels and actors, added to the sophisticated decision-making process, makes lobbying in the EU singular and particularly interesting. Since the 1990s, organized interests have often succeeded in influencing the European policy process, building connections with the Council of Ministers, the European Commission led forums and the Parliament, and the EU representatives of their national governments. However, while the Commission has always represented the undiscussed main target of lobbying, the latter has considerably evolved, leading all the other institutions to be actively involved in the process. Being the sole agenda-setter, the Commission shapes the system of EU interest representation, relying upon information shared by external sources and thereby demonstrating that lobbying is a mutually beneficial activity. Nevertheless, the role of the European Parliament has become more substantial over the last twenty years, contributing, on the one hand, to the integration of advocacy in the democratic process, and on the other, to the creation of lobbying coalitions to exert pressure on the Commission and the Council. The latter, along with the European Council, despite being less accessible to lobbyists, are progressively becoming targeted by lobby interests. Aside from the divergent level and type of involvement of the EU Institutions, lobbying has significantly increased over the last years, especially concerning certain crucial matters.

One of the most prominent domains which have recently dominated the scene is the environmental one, which has made the EU one of the main advocates of green policy. Nonetheless, despite environmental measures and regulations representing the formal priority in the EU agenda-setting, the proposals did not always reflect these priorities, leading several organizations to establish their offices in Brussels.

The scenario has gradually evolved, showing the creation of strong networks between environmental organizations and the EU institutions. Furthermore, environmental interests involve, along with environmental organizations and activists, a wide range of actors, from business to foundations, from industries to multinationals, as demonstrated by the European Green Deal being the most lobbied topic since its launch on December 11, 2019. However, the multifaceted crisis dominating the global scene has also become the new lobby priority.

The first word that brings climate change and the current pandemic together is *emergency*, linked to the urgency of implementing rapid and drastic measures both on the national and global scale. Climate change and COVID-19 are undoubtedly among the most disruptive emergencies facing humanity across the globe, with no continent nor region excluded. Furthermore, the global nature and the profound and long-lasting implications of these two phenomena contributed to fostering the interest in the present research. The latter was also motivated by the curiosity to acknowledge whether a relevant shift in the salience of the issues has occurred in lobbyists' agenda. Therefore, the interviews have been conducted with NGOs, industries, foundations, advocacy groups, multinationals, and non-for-profit organizations, all linked by their environmental lobbying activities, especially related to the Green Deal. The questions served to collect facts, opinions, perceptions and likely future programs subsequent to the impact of the 'age of Zoom' on EU green lobbying, through the lens of the three research objectives presented in the introduction.

One of the project's expectations was that online consultations would have considerably limited lobbyists' visibility towards policy makers and the public, this resulting in a lower ability to influence the EU agenda. Aside from the distinct strategies underpinning advocacy and the distinction between visible and invisible lobbying, the total absence of events and meetings involving thousands of people in Brussels could have potentially

hindered organizations' prominence or notoriety and thus their influence ability. Nonetheless, differently from the initial expectations, the predominant perception gleaned from the interviews is an irrelevant impact of virtual lobbying in negative terms. Indeed, the exchanges with the lobbyists have generally demonstrated their ability to manage their social media websites and virtual meetings in a way that maintained or increased their visibility.

Another expectation was that advocacy coalitions would have been subjected to significant alterations, given the impossibility to take part in face-to-face consultations. However, coalition-building in the EU seems to be rooted in structural factors related to the ability to exercise a more potent influence, along with organization and goal maintenance. Of course, coalition formation is also strongly related to the intrinsic features of the lobbyists, as also confirmed by the responses of the people interviewed. The limited research in this domain tends to neglect the opportunities created by informal meetings, unofficial occasions, and organized events in Brussels, which may boost lobbyists' networking strategies. However, this does not seem to be precisely the case, as most lobbyists emphasized the positive impact of digital meetings on coalition-building. More time, an increased number of consultations and a higher number of organized interest and policy makers often constituted a substantial premise for strengthening the pre-existent coalitions and creating new ones, demonstrating the potential of our digitalized society.

Nonetheless, although lobbyists' visibility and ability to build coalitions seem to have been generally either enhanced or unmodified, the actors have certainly reinvented new strategies and adapted their tactics, resulting in divergent outcomes. In this regard, all lobbyists have agreed that scheduling consultations has been easier and quicker and that the ability to reach larger audiences through virtual meetings and to schedule more meetings while saving money and time have been boosted. On the other hand, the reduced efficacy of meetings and the difficulties for smaller companies to create new contacts have been emphasized, along with the frequent lack of efficiency and effectiveness due to the increased number of meetings, the scarce attention at virtual events, and the impossibility to have informal exchanges. Furthermore, issues related to the imbalance of access to policy making and the lack of transparency during virtual meetings and lobbying via email have been recurrent.

Despite the necessity of developing a quantitative analysis to obtain a general trend, the responses to the final question asked demonstrated that the current pandemic will undoubtedly generate long-lasting implications for future EU lobbying. Although certain activities were born and designed to be based on physical interactions, digitalization has become the protagonist of our society to the extent that a complete shift to an online life can potentially benefit people's work. COVID-19 may only have anticipated a trend that would have probably invaded the lobbying world soon, albeit more gradually and in a less totalizing manner. Of course, new measures and regulations in terms of transparency will need to be implemented, along with designing more appropriate and specific tools and platforms and the commitment to prevent a disproportionate effect of Zoom meetings on organizations of different sizes and with divergent abilities. Furthermore, as noticed by some of the people interviewed, environmental lobbyists should be the ones particularly pushing for online events, when possible, thereby creating a model and contributing to raising awareness on crucial issues. However, as the EU was born to connect countries and people, this foundation cannot be lost and cancelled by a crisis.

Although the present research has shown interesting results, the sample on which it has relied has proven not to be sufficient to derive and describe significant trends, in terms of type of actor and or impact of the pandemic on lobbying strategies. Hence, the same analysis should be repeated at a later point in time and possibly with a higher number of lobbyists involved, creating the opportunity to make statements based on a longer sample period and a larger and more varied sample of actors. Responses given by a considerable number of lobbyists, at least divided in the corporate and non-profit sector would have been useful to analyze the diverse or similar repercussions of the 'age of Zoom' on lobbyists' ability to guide environmental policy making in the EU during and after a crisis. Furthermore, given the fact that the entire world is still confronted by the COVID-19 emergency, the forecast on the future lobbying scenario relied, in this research, only on lobbyists' perceptions and thoughts. Therefore, it is still hard to assess the long-term effect of the online life for lobbying strategies.

The present thesis has been realized in a moment that does not yet create the opportunity to derive substantial conclusions. However, the hope is that it has contributed to research

on EU lobbying in exceptional times, demonstrating that, although everything is subjected to profound change, human beings have singular adaptation abilities and turn tragic moments into opportunities, hopefully creating a model for future generations.

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