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Interest Groups, NGOs or Civil Society Organisations? The Framing of Non-State Actors in the EU

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Abstract Scholars have used varying terminology for describing non-state entities seeking to influence public policy or work with the EU's institutions. This paper argues that the use of this terminology is not and should not be random, as different 'frames' come with different normative visions about the role(s) of these entities in EU democracy. A novel bibliometric analysis of 780 academic publications between 1992 and 2020 reveals that three frames stand out: The interest group frame, the NGO frame, as well as the civil society organisation frame; a number of publications also use multiple frames. This article reveals the specific democratic visions contained in these frames, including a pluralist view for interest groups; a governance view for NGOs as 'third sector' organisations, and participatory and deliberative democracy contributions for civil society organisations. The use of these frames has dynamically changed over time, with 'interest groups' on the rise. The results demonstrate the shifting focus of studies on non-state actors in the EU and consolidation within the sub-field; the original visions of European policy-makers emerging from the 2001 White Paper on governance may only partially come true.

Keywords Interest group · NGO · Civil society organisation · Lobbying · Framing · EU

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners variously describe non-state actors such as Greenpeace as 'civil society organisations' (CSO), 'interest groups', 'non-governmental organisations' (NGO), 'not-for-profit organisations', or 'third sector organisations', to name but a few of the plethora of terms that has emerged over time (see Enjolras et al. 2018, Chapter 1). Those new to the field will likely find this state of affairs confusing; practitioners may either perceive such proliferation of terminology as useless academic squabbles or—to the extent that they have tuned into the finer lines of debate—may use the terms strategically. More than ten years ago, Beyers et al. (2008) drew attention to this problem by arguing that 'it is quite remarkable how such a relatively modest field is so heavily Balkanised'. They argued that different conceptual approaches have resulted from historical use of terminology, but crucially also point to linked normative assumptions, particularly in the case of 'civil society' (Beyers et al. 2008). In the intervening decade, limited progress has been made to advance these conceptual debates, let alone track them over time. This paper addresses this gap by asking what terms have been used to describe and analyse non-state actors over time, and what normative visions are attached to them insofar as they relate to the EU's evolving democracy. Doing so is relevant not only for research endeavours on the role of non-state actors in the EU, but also for practitioners seeking to work with non-state actors.

Analytically, this paper draws on the tool of a 'frame'. Frames are 'underlying structures or organizing principles that hold together and give coherence to a diverse array of symbols, idea elements, metaphors and other cognitive elements' (Creed et al. 2002, p. 36; see also Shore and Wright 1997). They are thus 'schemata of interpretation',

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or mental structures, which order what would otherwise appear disjointed (Goffman 1974, p. 21; see also Creed et al. 2002). Framing implies organising cognitive elements such as ideas, practices, or beliefs into coherent networks (Benford and Snow 2000). Analysing frames has gained popularity in social sciences as a way of expanding our understanding of how people make meaning in networked ways, including framing endeavours by non-state actors (Boräng et al. 2014). This paper in turn argues that terminological choices in describing non-state actors matter, because each term signifies underlying ideational networks or frames about the roles and functions of these organisations in democratic systems (see Kutay 2017). While the paper adopts ‘non-state actor’ for narrative purposes—in line with the Oxford Dictionary of English (3rd ed.) understanding a non-state actor broadly as ‘an individual or organization that has significant political influence but is not allied to any particular country or state’, it seeks to disentangle the terminology used in scholarship in order to shine a spotlight on academia’s key role in framing non-state actors. While non-state actors may include armed or terrorist groups (see Clapham 2009, p. 200), the focus of this paper is on actors that are generally considered legitimate elements of EU governance.

Developing a better understanding of the framing of non-state actors by researchers matters for two reasons: first, it contributes to the conceptual clarity of the field, which is undermined if terminology is used uncritically or randomly, and especially if underlying normative implications remain unclear (Beyers et al. 2008). Clear concepts are also a precondition for fruitful empirical explorations (see Baroni et al. 2014; Sartori 1970). Second, this paper argues that more than mere conceptual and definitional issues are at stake, because each frame captures a normative vision about the role of non-state actors in the delivery of social values and public goods such as democracy, environmental protection, citizen engagement, and others. Frames may influence other academics, policy-makers, and citizens regarding (1) what we can expect from non-state actors and (2) the normative role that non-state actors should play in the European polity. Scholars have already noted the power of framing that non-state actors conduct themselves (Boräng et al. 2014; Boräng and Naurin 2015; Klüver and Mahoney 2015). It is thus high time to consider how scholars frame non-state actors in their own work and with what (explicit or implicit) normative connotations.

Empirically, this paper contributes a fresh bibliometric analysis of a novel literature database containing 780 academic publications on non-state actors in the European Union (EU) that have appeared between 1992 and 2020. The EU has been identified as a particularly dynamic site of non-state actor interest and involvement—often described as various forms of lobbying. The growth of these activities

has attracted the attention of an international community of scholars (Bunea and Baumgartner 2014). Prominent existing studies have addressed the number of EU non-state actors (Berkhout et al. 2015; Wonka et al. 2010), their funding and regulation (see Greenwood 2017), their access to the European institutions (e.g. Albareda and Braun 2019; Arras and Beyers 2020; Coen and Katsaitis 2019), their influence (Dür, 2007; Klüver 2013), their strategies as well as their professionalisation (Klüver and Saurugger 2013; Maloney et al. 2018). A second reason why the EU is a particularly useful site of empirical study for the current paper is that has always been an evolving political system with vibrant debates on its democratic nature and quality (e.g. Warleigh 2003), which has stimulated research on the role of non-state actors’ contribution to democratic governance (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2013; Saurugger 2008).

The paper proceeds as follows: It starts with an overview of framing approaches and then describes the empirical methods, namely combining bibliometric and keyword analyses with a literature review in order to expose the prevalence and emergence of prevalent frames of non-state actor research in the EU. The fourth section disentangles prominent conceptual frames and demonstrates how they contain democratic ideals of the EU polity. The paper concludes by highlighting the growing importance of academic framing in EU non-state actor politics.

Framing Approaches

Framing approaches have been especially popular among social movement scholars, who ask how social movement leaders frame strategically to mobilise people (Snow et al. 1986). For instance, ‘collective action frames’ combine events and information that may otherwise seem disconnected, in order to define problems and, after linking them to solutions, provide rationales for action (Benford and Snow 2000; Rein and Schön 1991). In political terms, frames can be powerful—for example, ‘old’ issues can be turned into ‘new’ ones by reframing them (Chong and Druckman 2007) and one can bridge, connect, and extend, but also manipulate frames and use them strategically (Mazey and Richardson 1997). In Lakoff’s (2004) terms,

In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing *is* social change. (p. XV; emphasis in original).

For example, Ruzza (2004, p. 58) explains how governments and non-state actors reframed ‘environmentalism’ as ‘sustainable development’ and how this new frame

enabled business actors to collaborate on environmental issues. This paper argues that social scientists create and manipulate frames by describing and researching social or political phenomena, including non-state actors. Precisely because terms such as CSO or NGO remain diffuse and variable, their use implies constant re-framing and linking with normative ideas about the their (political) context (here the European polity), even if this happens in an academic environment.

Not all frames are equally effective. Benford and Snow (2000) identify a few ‘master frames’ that have been used to rally large constituencies behind certain causes, such as the ‘environmental justice frame’. Some frames resonate more than others, depending on their fit with social movements, the wider life-world and whether people articulating them are perceived as credible (Benford and Snow 2000). Frame efficacy also depends on institutional environments (Ruzza 2004). Those studying framing should therefore identify whether certain master frames exist and consider their interactions with outside factors.

Finally, framing is a dynamic process because people intentionally or unintentionally change, adjust and sometimes manipulate frames (Chong and Druckman 2007; see also Benford and Snow 2000; Tarrow 1992). Callon (1998) argues that frames are inherently dynamic because the elements they comprise remain connected with the world by virtue of their origin. This creates constant frame ‘overflow’, meaning that frame contents contribute to ongoing frame emergence and re-framing (Callon 1998). In light of these properties, there is to date very limited knowledge on the origin of frames, how they move through political space, and how long they remain more or less stable (Chong and Druckman 2007; but see Entman 2009; Gamson 2005).

This paper focuses on the framing of non-state actors by academia in the EU, while fully recognising that other actors such as politicians and bureaucrats may also contribute to this process (see Smismans 2003). It also remains cognizant of frame dynamism, which includes horizontal interactions, levels of frame overlap, and frame differentiation. Importantly, framing processes are often highly political because their outcomes may have implications for access to reputational, monetary, and other resources. For example, certain CSOs receive financial support from the EU institutions (Bouwen 2009). The following section describes the methods used in order to identify prevalent frames and their dynamic emergence in research on non-state actors over time.

Methods

This section describes the methods applied to create the new database and to analyse it with bibliometric tools.

Assembling the New Database

The first step involved searching the prevalent academic databases Scopus,[®] Web of Knowledge,SM and Proquest International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) for relevant academic publications. These databases provide a broad, multidisciplinary coverage of multiple academic fields including political science, sociology, and geography. The approach applied in this research is thus more comprehensive than earlier efforts, which had exclusively focused on political science and public policy studies (Bunea and Baumgartner 2014). The sample from these databases thus provides a good estimation of the nature of publications on non-state actors (Andrés 2009). The search was based on an extensive collection of terms or keywords¹ drawn from the literature review by Beyers and colleagues (2008) and turned into search text with Boolean indicators. The raw data were imported into the reference management software program Citavi and duplicates removed. The search includes all journal articles, book chapters, and other relevant publications, while books on the subject were excluded.² In addition, all articles whose titles and/or abstracts did not clearly indicate that they were about non-state actors in the EU were removed.

Bibliometric Analysis

The second step involved analysing the full database with bibliometric approaches (Andrés 2009; Donohue 1973) in order to evaluate the prevalence of frames in literatures on non-state actors in the EU. First, the publication year was recorded for each item in the qualitative analysis software NVIVO. Second, depending on the emergence of keywords in the titles and abstracts, publications were coded into corresponding categories signifying descriptive frames³; four frame signifiers emerged as strongest, namely interest group; NGO; civil society organisation; and multiple

¹ The search for relevant documents used the following keywords (linguistic variations were included and in relevant cases captured with ‘wild cards’ and combinations defined with Boolean operators): European Union, interest group, political interest, political interest group, interest association, interest organisation, organised interest, pressure group, specific interest, special interest group, citizen group, public interest group, nongovernmental, nongovernmental organisation, social movement organisation, civil society organisation, third sector, lobby, lobbying, charity, and nonprofit.

² Books were excluded because they could not be retrieved and analysed in their entirety.

³ The analysis started with the existing frames retrieved from extant literatures, but also added more terms inductively throughout the process in order to enable the categorisation of the vast majority of publications. Nineteen publications (or 2.4% of the database) could not be categorised and were thus marked as ‘unassigned’.

frames. Keywords that did not feature in at least 10 articles in any one year between 1992 and 2020⁴ are not reported.⁵ Third, each publication was subjected to a keyword query using NVIVO. To this end, each publication was stripped of its bibliography and the software then identified the most commonly used keywords in all publications that had been assigned to one of the four main frame signifiers. Only words with three or more characters were included in the analysis, and word clouds were generated in order to support interpretation. In parallel, a literature review was conducted in order to identify linkages between the terms identified, drawing on the author's knowledge of the field, as well as on the contents of the database.

Results

Bibliometric Analysis

The initial combined database search returned more than 3000 hits (see Table 1).⁶ The search involved all publications that the author was able to retrieve from as early as possible (1992) until June 2020.

After the initial data screening (see above), including removing duplicates and sifting through the studies that resulted from this process, 780 publications remained. In total, the publications from the three major frames and those using multiple frames sum up to 669 publications or 85.9% of the database. The analysis demonstrates that nearly half of the publications fell into the 'interest group' frame, followed by 'NGOs', 'multiple frames', and 'civil society organisation'. See Fig. 1. Figure 2 reveals the remarkable general growth of publications on non-state actors, beginning in the early 2000s. Furthermore, this figure reveals the rise of 'civil society' as a keyword in article titles from the early 2000s onwards, remaining roughly on par with 'NGO'. The 'interest group' frame began dominating in the early 2000s; note that the numbers for 2020 only include the first half of the year.

A second step involved tracing the emergence of the four major frames in academic publications over time (see Fig. 2).

Prevalent Frames in Research on Non-state Actors in the EU

This section unpacks the contents of each main frame in greater detail, drawing on the keyword-based insights as well as on a corresponding literature review.

The 'Interest Group' Frame

The 'interest group' frame has by and large been the most popular in the study of non-state actors in the EU. But it is also a contentious concept in political science. As Jordan et al. (2004) explain, interest groups were originally constituted and sustained by individual members (see also Dalziel 2010). As such, they have an 'underlying rationale' that is based on the attitudes or interests of their members (Eising and Leiringer 2013). In practice, scholars often deviate from this membership-based idea by categorising all groups that seek to influence political processes as 'interest groups' (Jordan et al. 2004). As a response, some have sought to clarify the concept by refocusing it on the original membership-inspired idea while engaging with functional approaches: Jordan and colleagues (2004) suggest labelling all entities which seek to influence public policy as 'pressure participants', but distinguishing between 'policy participants', which would be individual companies, and interest/pressure groups, which are typically groups of individuals or other organisations/companies that seek to influence the policy process. However, some staff-based groups may also be classified as interest groups (Jordan et al. 2004).

Others, such as Beyers and colleagues (2008) seek to define an interest group based on the key organisational features of 'organisation', 'political interests', and 'informality'. The 'organisation' component distinguishes the interest groups from other influences on public policy, such as social movements or public opinion. 'Political interest' means that these groups seek to influence public policy, and 'informality' refers to the fact that these groups do not seek formal political positions (Beyers et al. 2008). Beyers and colleagues (2008) highlight that this fairly broad definition encompasses a diverse spectrum of actors.

The aforementioned attempts to clarify the concept are mostly done by researchers seeking to operationalise the concept for data collection. There are, however, normative notions included in the 'interest group' frame. The basic idea is that there are multiple groups in a polity pushing for the interests that they represent—and therefore the frame implies pluralist notions of democratic governance (Truman 1951). This idea assumes that interest groups have more or less fixed preferences which are brought to the fore and worked through the relevant institutional context, such as the EU (Mansbridge 1992). Policy-makers appear to

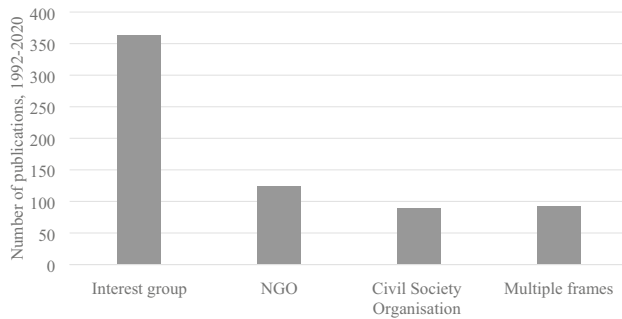
⁴ The time span used in this analysis was based on available data from the searches; 1992 was the earliest contribution recorded in this dataset.

⁵ These include: advocacy organisation, corporate lobbying, lobbying coalition, lobby organisation, non-profit organisation, non-state actors, organised interest, pressure group, social movement organisation, and voluntary organisation.

⁶ This research began in 2013 and was updated and finalised in 2020.

Table 1 Identifying frames in research on non-state actors in the EU

Source	Number of publications
SCOPUS	1812
Web of Knowledge	886
Proquest International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)	571
Total	3269
Total after removing duplicates	2508
Final sample (relevant & retrievable publications)	780

**Fig. 1** Key frames in academic publications on non-state actors in the EU

have had different perceptions—Doliwa-Klepacka (2011) argues that the European Commission introduced the frame, because it felt that it was politically anodyne, especially compared to the term lobbyist/lobbying, which was thought to contain negative connotations. The fact that the keyword ‘lobby’ ranks in the top ten words used in publications with ‘interest group’ in the abstract/title shows that this is one of the key contents of the ‘interest group’ frame. However, the word ‘member’ also emerges in 12th

place, indicating that some elements remain from its original formulation (see Fig. 3). In this line of thinking, the ‘interest group’ label insinuates a ‘Europe of interests’. The latter argument sits well with liberal democratic ideas about political processes (Held 2006). These normative notions are easily forgotten when the term interest group is used.

The ‘Non-Governmental Organisation’ (NGO) Frame

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) frame, which the United Nations (UN) created in 1945 in order to formalise how non-state actors participate in UN processes, has become increasingly prevalent in politics and academia, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s when neoliberal agendas sought to push back the state and allocate tasks to markets and other actors, including NGOs (Lewis 2010). However, ‘while the term “NGO” is widely used, there are also many other overlapping terms such as “non-profit”, “voluntary”, and “civil society organisations”’ (Lewis 2010, p. 1057), which may be related to historical path dependencies in term usage in different parts of the world,

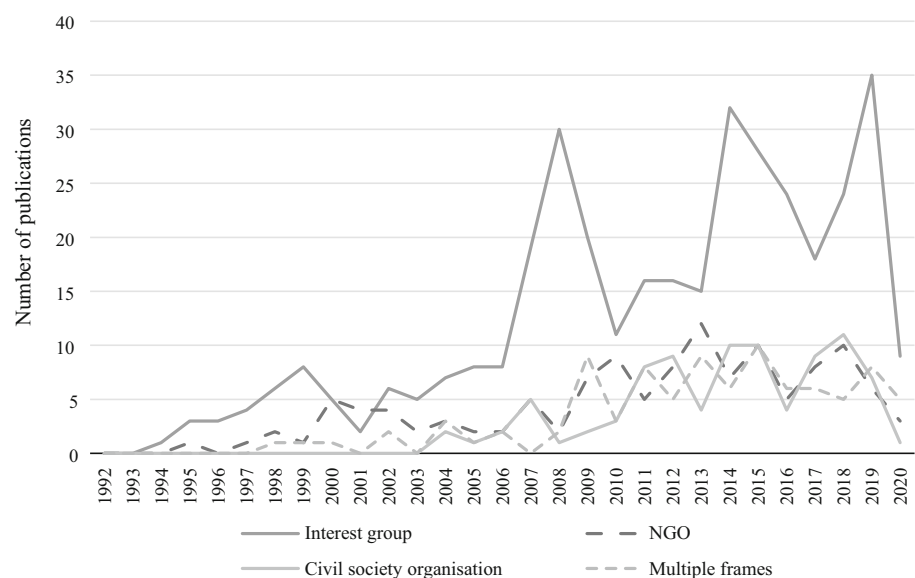
Fig. 2 Frame usage of academic publications on non-state actors in the EU

Table 2 Key frames in publications on non-state actors in the EU

Concept/terminology	Key contents of the underlying frame
Interest group	‘Influence’. Focus on organisation, aggregation of interests, and political advocacy; perceived neutrality in academic circles; often in pluralist/liberal democratic frameworks (‘Europe of interests’). Keyword ‘members’ less significant.
NGO	‘Environmental’; ‘social’. An organisation separate from the state/government and the market; often positive connotation; often used for environmental organisations; often used in conceptual frameworks of ‘governance’.
Civil society organisation	‘Democracy’; ‘participation’; ‘accountability’; ‘legitimacy’; ‘member’; ‘citizen’. Focus on citizens and the connection between citizens and governmental institutions; working ‘with the state’; often in participatory and deliberative democratic frameworks; generally positive connotation in public/academic debates.

Source: Own keyword analysis and literature review

The findings from this paper may help practitioners to use the concepts in a way that furthers their aims, while remaining cognizant of the alternatives. It is therefore important to pay attention to the frames that EU policy-makers evoke, because ‘policy language [...] is itself a form and source of policy power’ (Apthorpe 1997, p. 42). This analysis shows that in corresponding academic work, the interest group frame has gained force at the expense of civil society organisations and the other frames over the last two decades.

Dynamic framing of non-state actors in the EU furthermore has the potential to reveal developments in EU governance, which has been described as a polity-in-the-making. As new states join the EU (e.g. Croatia in 2013) and others leave (UK in 2020) and the policy-making activities of the EU change, the role of non-state actors is constantly being evaluated and contested. This is particularly relevant in light of continuous efforts to adjust non-state actor regulation in the EU (Greenwood and Dreger 2013). In addition, potential roles of non-state actors matter for addressing the EU’s perceived democratic deficit. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger (2007, p. 11) write:

The political discourse supporting institutional reforms in the EU is quite evidently inspired by the mainstream debate in academia that the present institutions of liberal democracy are not operating satisfactorily, that a key problem is the lack of civic engagement and, therefore, a main concern how to promote effective citizenship.

Given that academics can become involved in EU policy-making in multiple ways (e.g. Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008), developing a clearer understanding of their framing of non-state actors may open up possibilities to understand how academic and policy-maker frames interact and how academia influences the development of the European polity. But this also means that academic framing may influence the success of responses to issues such as the

European democratic deficit (see Peters and Hoornbeek 2005).

Academic framing may be a slower process than in the world of public policy-making, and it tends to be less action-oriented than in social movements/among policy-makers. However, similar general principles apply—academic leaders frame or re-frame phenomena, frames interact with political and social realities and serve to attract followers, who could be other academics, students, or policy-makers. Future research should shed more light on the role of academics in political framing processes. If the EU institutions are receptive to academic voices, then their lobbying regulation and funding schemes for non-state actors may change in response to the way in which these groups are understood. Research on non-state actors as such—and the dominant frames developed and used within that field—may have a collective impact that works over time to shape important aspects of the European polity.

One may argue that academic conceptual development on non-state actors should be separated from political framing processes. It is questionable whether such a separation is possible in principle or practice. Attempting to do so certainly risks creating an increasing distance between political realities and corresponding academic study, thereby overlooking academia’s role in political framing processes and vice versa. In practical terms, the ongoing, networked cross-fertilisation between academia and EU politics makes strict separation all but impossible. A better approach is to study how dynamic framing processes unfold in different arenas, how they overlap and interact, and what political and conceptual consequences emerge from related developments. Of course, not all scholars who use a certain set of terminology may consciously argue for a particular democratic vision for Europe, or necessarily make a conscious choice to this effect. There may still be a significant degree of randomness in academic use.

Finally, if we accept Callon’s (1998)’s rationale that frames are intrinsically dynamic, attempts to provide ‘clear

definitions' of terms (e.g. Jordan et al. 2004) may fail as the result of a continual process of re-framing and frame interaction. The current contribution may be understood as an analysis of a particular time, spanning nearly three decades. However, important insights could emerge from future studies seeking to shed light on why certain frames emerge in particular times, how academic and political frames interact, and how this relates to EU polity building.

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Compliance with Ethical Standard

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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