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Ambiguities of social Europe: Political agenda setting among trade unionists from Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe

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Ambiguities of Social Europe

Political Agenda Setting among Trade Unionists from
Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe

Martin Seeliger



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Abstract

The article analyzes the integration of Central and Eastern European (CEE) trade unions in European policy-making. With reference to transnational cooperation in two fields of European-level decision making (issues concerning freedom of services and a European minimum wage), it investigates the extent to which trade unions from the CEE countries are participating in the development of policy positions among European-level trade union organizations. On this basis, the article highlights three things: (1) the instrumental meaning of “Social Europe,” (2) the necessity of a mid-way position between optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints on East–West trade union cooperation, and (3) the meaning of social skill among European-level trade union actors.

Keywords: Social Europe, trade unionism, eastern enlargement, labor transnationalism, European integration

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel analysiert die Einbindung zentral- und osteuropäischer Gewerkschafter in die europäische Entscheidungsebene. Unter Bezug auf die transnationale Zusammenarbeit in zwei Politikfeldern (Dienstleistungsfreiheit sowie die Diskussion um den europäischen Mindestlohn) zeigt der Text, inwiefern zentral- und osteuropäische Vertreter dort auf Augenhöhe an der Entwicklung gemeinsamer Positionen beteiligt werden. Auf dieser Grundlage arbeitet der Artikel drei Aspekte heraus: den instrumentellen Charakter des Begriffs eines „sozialen Europas“, die Notwendigkeit einer zwischen Euro-Optimisten und Euro-Pessimisten vermittelnden Position sowie die Bedeutung von „social skill“ für die praktische Auseinandersetzung von Akteuren in der europäischen Gewerkschaftspolitik.

Schlagwörter: Soziales Europa, Gewerkschaften, Osterweiterung, Internationalismus, europäische Integration

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Ambiguities of Social Europe: Political Agenda Setting among Trade Unionists from Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe

1 Introduction

In the course of European integration, trade unions face two challenges. While in qualitative terms, negative integration (Scharpf 2012) has increased the pressure on unions to organize resistance within a cross-border context, the recent enlargement rounds have also increased heterogeneity among the member states (Höpner and Schäfer 2010). As a result, the development of common policy positions among European trade unions is becoming more and more difficult.

Against that backdrop, this article analyzes the development of common policy positions between Central and Eastern European (CEE) trade unions. With reference to transnational cooperation in two matters of policy in European-level rule setting, namely the issues of the freedom of services and a European minimum wage, we shall investigate the extent to which trade unions from the CEE countries are participating in the development of policy positions among European-level trade union organizations.

In this context, an important framework condition lies in vast power asymmetries between the organizations from Western (and especially Northwestern) Europe and those from the CEE countries. The former have larger memberships, which gives them both economic resources and a stronger voting position within European trade union structures. Moreover, their established position within the field of European-level trade unionism attributes more experience to them and bestows on them a higher status in setting the European trade union agenda. Analysis of the two fields shows how the frame of Social Europe is mobilized in one case to maintain Western European standards (freedom of services) and is blocked at the same time in the other case by the established organizations from the Northwest, given that it mainly serves the interests of CEE trade unions (European minimum wage). On this basis, the present article makes a threefold contribution to the social inquiry of European trade unionism: (1) the instrumental meaning of “Social Europe,” (2) the necessity of a position midway between optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints on East–West trade union cooperation, and (3) the importance of social skills among European-level trade union actors.

I would like to thank David Schick, Martin Höpner, Guglielmo Meardi, Lea Elsässer, and Neil Fligstein for their helpful comments.

In Section 2 we introduce the challenges of international trade unionism in the EU, followed in Section 3 by some theoretical elements to help us understand the challenges arising from this. Drawing on the involvement of Hungarian, Polish, and Swedish trade unionists, as well as representatives from the European level, Section 4 presents the empirical results. In the final section, we summarize and consider the prospects of international trade union cooperation under conditions of institutional heterogeneity among the EU-28.

2 International trade unionism in the EU

Research on labor relations has mainly focused on the conflict between capital and labor. While trade unions have traditionally served as the cartels of wage earners to benefit workers, European integration has had a fundamental impact on the relations between capital, labor, and the state as the classical triangle of industrial relations. Recent developments such as the EMU (Schulten and Müller 2013) and the single market (Bernaciak 2012) have increased pressure on the working class through downward competition between workers from different countries. In order to maintain their capacity to act effectively as a cartel of wage earners, trade unions from the different EU countries need to formulate common political positions on wage and employment standards. Yet, against the background of the widening spectrum of national institutional settings and a growing gap in terms of national wealth (Höpner and Schäfer 2010), common political positions among the different national working classes become more and more difficult to establish.

Within the EU, the cross-border cooperation of trade unions is the political key to establishing such common positions. Because it is the most comprehensive instance of workers' representation within the EU, this study focuses on the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Consisting of the ten European industry federations as well as 90 national trade union organizations from 39 European countries, the ETUC provides today, more than ever before, a “‘superstructure’ for European cross-national collaboration” (Turner 2005, 75). As a forum for the exchange of information and consultation, Hyman (2005, 171) assigns to the ETUC an important “coordination role” in its efforts “to transform the diverse and at times conflicting aims of its affiliates into a coherent policy agenda.” In addition to its character as a forum for internal negotiations among the member organizations, the ETUC exercises another important capacity for the European labor movement: it formulates “the general interpretive frames for collective action” (Gajewska 2009, 82).

Looking back at the past two decades of trade union politics on the Continent, the most comprehensive and well-known of these frames can be found in the concept of Social Europe. The EU began to enhance its social dimension in the 1980s by starting to inte-

grate associations of capital and labor into EU-level decision-making structures. With Commission President Jacques Delors as a strong supporter of the project, an initial achievement was the Community Charter of Fundamental Rights of Workers, adopted in 1989 by eleven European countries. In order to bestow on this document a binding character, a Social Protocol was attached to the Maastricht Treaties. This strengthening of the role of what was called the “Social Partners” at the European level can be viewed as the central reference point of the concept in its early stages. Accompanied by an ongoing discussion about the limits and potentials of Euro-corporatism (Falkner 1998), the concept of Social Europe referred to the inclusion of trade unions in the EU’s policy-making system.

By becoming more and more detached from the Euro-corporatist notion (probably not least due to the very limited success of the European Social Dialogue), the use of the Social Europe framework has largely been transformed to address consequences for labor linked to the Eastern enlargement of the European Union. As the liberalization of the common market proceeds and, likewise, the diversity of national settings increases, so does the need to maintain these standards – at least for those affected negatively. By looking at the implicit conception of ‘Social Europe’ held by trade union organizations from the old and the new member states, this article shows how it is understood in very different ways according to the particular contexts.

In the evaluation of the literature on European trade unionism, the positions in the discussion of this concept and its meaning for labor in the course of EU integration can be connected to “the broad – albeit somewhat oversimplified camps of ‘Euro-optimists’ and ‘Euro-pessimists’” (Platzer 1997, 68). While the definition of the central problems (the depiction of industrial relations systems and institutional settings being “one of diversity”; European Commission 2013, 8) seems generally similar, these two camps differ greatly with regard to the potential of European trade unionism.

Pessimists identify a number of obstacles and barriers to international trade union cooperation. First of all, these are caused by the “trade unions’ embeddedness in national political and economic institutions” (Bernaciak 2010, 122). While the opportunity to develop common positions with other countries is not only costly but also risky in terms of the reliability of foreign representatives, a national orientation might appear to be the more promising option. Reluctance is intensified, secondly, through national differences in terms of wage setting or labor standards, but also ideology (Platzer 1997). Thirdly, there is a general political weakening due to falling membership among national organizations (EU Commission 2013), which leads to a loss of resources as a fourth factor. Finally, a lack of competence in terms of language and intercultural cooperation (Klemm et al. 2011) can impede coordination.

Especially against the background of Eastern enlargement, the admission of several financially weak federations from the Eastern countries has stressed the capacities of European trade union federations (ETFs) even more. Despite recent increases in membership

fees, all ETFs suffer from underfinancing (Platzer and Müller 2009, 113). The East–West gap in terms of national wealth also means that some (mostly Eastern) trade unions transfer 10 percent of their annual budgets to Brussels, while stronger trade unions manage to cover these expenses with only 1 percent of their budget (Hoffmann 2011, 152).

While the pessimists address the problems of institutional heterogeneity within the EU, optimists highlight the potential benefits of a diverse leadership (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013, 193) that represents all the backgrounds involved. Facing the limited success of the regulatory initiatives that have emerged from the camp of European-level labor representatives – not only in recent years (Turner 1996) – most optimistic arguments for the potential benefits of international trade union cooperation currently are limited (not least due to a lack of good empirical news) to a mainly conceptual character (Kowalksy et al. 2014).

Does this mean that there is no concrete hope for European labor? Do the structural weaknesses of ETFs undermine all capacities to develop common policy positions beyond national egoisms? Is European labor facing the bleak perspective of a “race to the bottom,” not only in terms of political capacity but also standards of work, employment and, ultimately, quality of life? As a point of departure for empirical research, this study takes up the argument about the heterogeneity of the EU as an economic space.

Looking at the constellation in the field of European trade unionism, it becomes apparent that cooperation within the EU’s international arena is shaped by significant power asymmetries between trade unions from the East and those from the West. To learn about the integration of CEE representatives in European-level rule setting, the research focused on the involvement of Hungarian, Polish, and Swedish national trade union federations in European-level debates. The selection of the debates on the Services Directive and the European minimum wage reflects the challenges trade unions are facing in the process of European integration because of the institutional heterogeneity among the EU-28 (Höpner and Schäfer 2012). While the choice of countries can only roughly reflect macro-regional differences within the Union, the interactions between the representatives from the respective countries in the two policy issues examined here illustrate the particular challenge exemplified by Cotton and McCormick (2012): In both cases, international representatives attempted to merge different interests among the national affiliates into a common political position.

Regarding the first issue, the negotiations on the Services Directive in the internal market (short: Services Directive) will be analyzed to show how a common political position could emerge around this topic. For the unions, the territorial validity of collective bargaining agreements was at stake, which some companies hoped to undermine by applying foreign standards through cross-border services. The fact that a joint international campaign finally led to a significant change in the Directive that preliminarily dismantled its destructive potential leads Bernaciak (2011, 33) to suggest that “there exists consensus among European labor over the desired shape of social Europe.”

As for the second issue, the discussion about a European minimum wage has recently brought about a compromise, with a demand for a common bottom limit to wages at 50 percent (and later 60 percent) of the national median wage. While the CEE representatives have been among the proponents of this idea, the resistance of the Nordic trade unions has made the implementation of this compromise rather difficult.

It must be noted that the discussion on a European minimum wage is not simply a controversy between Eastern and Western trade unions. With statutory minimum wages in place in most European countries, the majority of trade unions are – at least to some extent – in favor of such a regulation. The fact that this paper does not focus on other major political forces within the ETUC, such as the German DGB or the Italian confederations, does not imply that these actors were not involved in the respective processes.

While the issue at stake in both policy fields seems at first glance to be the wage level, a closer look reveals that conflicts arise in both cases over the more fundamental dynamics of the national collective bargaining systems, namely the mode according to which wages are set between the reference frames at the national and EU levels. In the following section we introduce the theoretical framework of the study.

3 Theoretical framework

International trade union cooperation is best interpreted as a reaction to (and thus a part of) European integration as a process of political mobilization. Since agency – understood as (individual or collective) actors' capacity to act purposefully (although with possible unintended consequences) – is at the core of processes, this study takes an action-theoretical starting point (Emirbayr and Mische 1998). The formation of political interests among European-level trade union organizations takes place within a multilevel system with a national and an international dimension.

By looking at the way in which representatives of national organizations interact with each other and with their counterparts at the international level, this article investigates how they develop their political ambitions. Despite institutional heterogeneity among the EU member states, interactions within the international framework can contribute to the establishment of a common policy line. In order to understand the emergence of concrete policy positions, we focus on the interplay between representatives from the national and European levels. To better grasp the impact of interactive routines on their position making, we first borrow a concept from the literature on international socialization. We narrow the focus on the interaction between the representatives by applying a second theoretical element that takes into account how socially skilled actors negotiate the general interpretative frames to be established when formulating joint political positions (see "Framing interest representation through the use of 'social skill'" below).

Goal setting within ETFs between institutional nationalism and international socialization

ETFs are constituted by national member organizations, each representing workers from the different EU member states. For this reason, the formulation of common organizational goals stands out because of its genuinely contested character and because it involves continual negotiation among the members. As international delegates represent the interests of their national reference group, these negotiations bear the risk that representatives will only take these interests into account. Such “institutional nationalism” (Streeck 1995, 120) can impede or even prevent the pursuit of common goals.

Since membership in national trade unions is voluntary, European federations cannot bindingly impose or enforce rules onto the national ones. Therefore, internal goal setting often functions according to a mode termed “persuasion” by Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 121). According to them, “[p]ersuasion does not threaten the autonomy of the persuaded party because it has not been forced to comply, but has decided for itself to embrace new values and norms.” While the voting mechanism depends on a fixed set of rules, the federations comprise a broad range of committees, working groups, and informal settings. It is in these micro-contexts that the exchange and negotiations between single members are usually translated into processes of concrete agenda setting.

At the same time, meta-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008) such as the ETUC or the ETFs often follow a logic of collective identity formation. For Risse (2010, 88), this very formation of collective identities serves in the long run as a necessary precondition for the stable formulation of common political interests. For the multilevel system of the EU, such socialization dynamics are of central significance. Accordingly, Haas (1958, 16) understands political integration as

the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states.

According to Checkel (2005, 804), such a shift in loyalties towards a common reference frame beyond national particularities stems from a routine in everyday cooperation, in the course of which these positions are continuously being negotiated and revised. However, it has to be noted that, despite their influence on the national delegates, the ETFs lack the formal capacity to influence the strategies of their national member organizations (Meardi 2012b).

Framing interest representation through the use of “social skill”

From the perspective taken in this study, interaction is not limited to the microcosm of a certain group but takes place within a broader symbolic framework. Drawing on the example of the general strike as a tool of trade union action in late nineteenth-century France, Ansell (1997, 360) points out how, beyond micro-level interactions, such processes of joint position making require “a shared interpretative framework that facilitates coordination, exchange, and ultimately commitment.” The concept of “social skill” developed by Fligstein (2001) aims to understand how appropriately “skilled actors ... empathetically relate to the situations of other people and, in doing so, are able to provide those people with reasons to cooperate” (Fligstein 2001, 112). A particular advantage in strategic negotiations derives from their ability to draw up an interpretative framework:

The basic problem for skilled social actors is to frame “stories” that help induce cooperation from people by appealing to their identity, belief, and interests, while at the same time using those same stories to frame actions against various opponents.
(Fligstein and McAdam 2001, 50f.)

A particularly effective moment to apply such frames is the initial agenda setting of a debate: “If a skilled actor can get others to accept what the terms of discussion are, the negotiation is half won” (Fligstein 2001, 114).

As Hyman (2013, 175) states, trade union democracy requires an “internal social dialogue” at eye level. In his work on “deliberative democracy” Habermas (1992) shows how democratic decision making requires equal access to information, absence of external and internal constraints (material and non-material) and the inclusion of the highest possible number of concerned actors (also see Erne 2008). At the same time, discussions within the ETFs are by no means guaranteed to take place on such an equal footing. Here, different representatives of the member organizations try to influence the outcome of the goal-setting processes not only through immediate bargaining but also through the setting of particular agendas. In doing so, they can draw on different statuses as well as different sets of material (money) and ideal (knowledge) resources.

Summary of the theoretical framework

Since ETFs have little power to oblige their members, the establishment of common policy positions needs to be achieved and maintained mainly through consensus. Such consensus can be achieved in the interplay of daily cooperative routines and explicit bargaining. Because of the consensual tendency in decision making, goals are often achieved through the implementation of particular interpretative frames that indicate why certain policy goals are desirable. The most common frame in relation to questions

about European-level rule setting is the concept of Social Europe. Connected to this frame is also a common identity, which stems first from the fact that all the national working classes participate in the European labor market.

The concept of “social skill” enables us to understand how the terms of discussion are set by members who can convincingly establish certain symbolic frames. As long as the capacity to implement such frames differs among individuals and groups within the federations, the deliberative character of internal debates is genuinely called into question by the risk that actors will impose their interpretation (and perhaps their will) on others – in other words, not by discussion but by persuasion or force. After introducing the methodology of the study in the following section, we describe how this works in practice.

4 Methodology

The findings presented here stem from a research project on international trade union cooperation in the EU. A total of 88 interviews were conducted with representatives from nine European countries, as well as the ETUC and the ETFs. A four-month stay at the European Trade Union Institute, moreover, enabled the author to join several meetings of ETUC committees and conduct participatory observations. The selection of interview partners covers the most important federations from three countries – Sweden: LO, TCO, and SACO; Poland: OPZZ, Solidarnosc, and Forum; and Hungary: LIGA and MSZOSZ. The empirical part of this article will therefore focus on the 22 interviews with representatives from the respective countries and with 16 representatives from the ETFs and the ETUC. The interview partners representing the national trade unions were from the international secretariats and collective bargaining departments.

In order to obtain an understanding of the political dynamics between the different trade union organizations, passages from the complete transcriptions were marked with particular key terms. On this basis, it was possible to identify a plot in the two policy fields as well as the respective national representatives’ role within them.

Although the three countries’ institutional settings differ greatly with regard to how they shape the two policy fields under study, their selection does not intentionally reflect any particular typology from the field of comparative political economy. Instead, they were chosen to represent different parties in conflicts within these policy fields found in the literature (Gajewska 2009; Furaker and Selden 2011) and in the course of the fieldwork.

5 Empirical findings

National backgrounds with regard to policy fields

On the basis of its close cooperation with the national Social Democratic Party, Sweden's large export surpluses, and a welfare system that has favored union density, the Swedish labor union movement is "uniquely powerful compared [to] its counterparts elsewhere in the world" (Peterson et al. 2011, 624). Despite recent trends in the decentralization of collective bargaining and attacks on the right to engage in industrial action (Svensson 2013), the Swedish model can be considered perhaps the most robust in the EU. Against this background, Götz and Haggrén (2009, 15) recognize a Eurosceptic tendency among Scandinavian labor, which manifests itself in "a belief in the superiority of the Nordic industrial relations regime." From this point of view, the transfer of competencies to the European level appears to be a threat to the national sovereignty necessary to maintain work and employment standards.

At the same time, in Poland, Gardawski et al. (2012, 11) identify its "chronic fragmentation combined with 'competitive pluralism' and inter-union rivalry" as a central historical feature of the Polish trade union movement. While nowadays the Polish economy is among the fastest growing in the EU, its persistent weakness in the post-communist era has prevented the national labor force from successfully claiming its share of the new wealth (Polakowski 2013). Due to disputes over assets, it was only in 2006 that national federations managed to join forces in the field of European politics.

A similarly fragmented system can also be found in Hungary (Neumann 2012). However, despite a number of attempts (Nemeth 2014), no reconciliation has yet been achieved. Even more strikingly than in Poland, informalization in the labor market and in trade union structures weaken the foundations of national labor union power. This is also reflected organizationally: only 10 to 20 percent of membership fees reach the federations. These limited national capacities among the Eastern European trade unions make the European level look like a promising regulatory arena. Summing up socio-economic developments in the CEE countries over the first decade of the post-enlargement era, Kohl (2015) recognizes persisting inequalities between the regions. At the same time, from the viewpoint of the Eastern European labor representatives, "the enlarged Union is not only a marketplace but is based on a promise to be a Social Europe with specific prospects of improved living and working opportunities for all" (ibid., 306). As the agenda of a Social Europe programmatically implies the gradual improvement of wage and employment standards in the process of European integration, CEE unions have, over the years, come to identify with the concept in a way that shapes their perspective on the European policy arena. Hence, Greskovits (2015, 281) notes that these organizations tend to "frame their demands in European labor rights terms and use such regulations to externalize domestic conflicts." This adaptation process will be introduced in more detail below.

With regard to the freedom of services, key differences hinder the development of a shared policy position among the selected countries (Meardi 2002, 2012a). In the early 2000s (the timeframe during which the discussions took place), the East–West divide was illustrated by CEE per capita GDP, which was only 45 percent of the EU average (Bernaciak 2010, 21). Moreover, vast differences in terms of national labor and employment regulations and wage levels caused significant potential for conflict over the issue on the European level. Similarly, with regard to the European minimum wage, differences between national bargaining systems impeded the development of a common policy position. Table 1 summarizes the features of the countries under examination.

Table 1 Bargaining systems in the countries under examination in 2010

	Bargaining coverage (%)	Organized workers (%)	Statutory minimum wage
Sweden	88	70	–
Poland	25	12	2.21 euros
Hungary	33	12	1.95 euros

Source: <http://de.worker-participation.eu/Nationale-Arbeitsbeziehungen/Quer-durch-Europa/Gewerkschaften>.

In the following two sections we illustrate how the common positions of the national trade unions in these two areas have emerged in the course of European representative work.

Discussion on the European services directive

The first proposal for the European Services Directive was made by the Internal Market and Services Directorate General and submitted to the European Commission in January 2004 as part of the Lisbon Strategy. The study prognosticated the creation of 2.3 million new jobs and a 30 percent increase in turnover in cross-border services. Article 16 of the Directive, however, led to major resistance from European trade unionists. This is the clause on the country-of-origin principle (Menz 2010, 977) with which the authors of the Directive hoped to establish the employment conditions of the sending country as the standard employment framework for cross-border allocation of services within the EU. Under such conditions, businesses would be able to hire foreign employees to work on the receiving country's territory under contractual conditions of the sending country. Against the backdrop of growing wage differentials in the course of Eastern enlargement, the structural advantage for workers from CEE countries would therefore endanger Western European wage and employment standards.

Highlighting how the negotiations on the Directive were “clearly an issue dividing along national lines,” Gajewska (2009, 55) points to a major cleavage between Eastern and Western European countries on the issue. As a former ETUC representative claims, the formation of policy positions among European trade unions was accompanied from

the beginning by a constant “fear of the hordes from Eastern Europe.”¹ Fueled by the shorthand announcement of the Directive, the discussion of the country-of-origin principle threatened to divide European trade unions.

Adherence to the European Social Model among CEE unions has not only been motivated by a general cross-border solidarity. With a particular focus on Polish trade unions, Bernaciak (2007, 35) points out three factors that brought their representatives to underline “the necessity of preserving the European Social Model in the West,” not only from an internationalist viewpoint, but also from a perspective focused on domestic aspects. According to her, these are “the prospects for upward convergence of working conditions across the enlarged EU,” the protection of national wage and working norms for the case that countries with lower standards joined the EU, and a “legal chaos, that would emerge after the adoption of the country of origin principle.” Her conclusion, according to which “positions of Polish and Western European unionists were congruent from the very outset during the anti-Directive campaign” (ibid.: 39), is not fully supported by the findings of the present research.

A former representative of the European Federation of Building and Wood Workers (EFBWW) described the liberal position of the Eastern European representatives:

It was difficult because of the Polish colleagues. They were the biggest group among the Eastern Europeans and were thus representing the strongest interest. And they said it is important that our people find work. And if they can find work in Holland, Germany, Belgium, we are satisfied. Of course, they will not get the same wages as the workers from the Western European countries.

As another EFBWW representative recalled, a high-ranking ETUC official from Eastern Europe repeatedly expressed the position that the freedom of services should not be limited by national regulations and that this would allow for a “level playing field” of international competition. The same statement was made by several (Western European) representatives of ETFs engaged in the discussion at the time. According to them, Eastern European trade unions were pursuing a low-wage strategy in order to create a comparative advantage. A debate was therefore needed.

The starting point of finding a common position between East and West was highlighted by a trade unionist from the Swedish confederation TCO. The starting point was:

very early in the process, when the directive came. I think it came in January or something. And I read it before Christmas. And then we had a lot of work during the winter and spring. Because we saw that if some Eastern unions would say that this is a very good idea, we would be very weak. It was extremely important that ETUC could say we have all our 60 members and even the members from the Eastern Europe standing together.

1 Similarly, Meardi (2002) refers to the integration of Polish workers into the EU labor market as a “Trojan Horse” for Western European labor.

A representative from the Swedish LO confirms that at this stage “there were some tensions between East and West,” related mainly to the objection of protectionism. On one side, the Eastern Europeans ascribed to their Western European colleagues the tendency to block national labor markets for foreigners. Among the latter, in turn, the threat of cheap labor led to a perception that “the Eastern unions ... are ready to sign agreements, as long as their members get a job,” as a representative from the European Transport Federation put it.

In the course of the next few months, several meetings at both the European and the bilateral levels were held to establish a position on a joint lobbying strategy for the ETUC and its national members. As the interviewees from both CEE countries state, the turn towards the Western European position only followed a long debate among the domestic trade union confederations, at the end of which CEE unions agreed to oppose the country-of-origin principle in the directive. A key role in these negotiations is generally assigned to the international representatives, who contributed to the implementation of the idea of equal standards for everyone.

A representative from Hungary’s MSZOSZ explains how this discussion resonated in the headquarters of his national federation:

We were having conflicts among ourselves in this very room, where I was attacked by some of our trade unionists. “It is better if our people make less, because they get a job. It’s better than if they stay home!”

Finally, a common position was reached to demand the exclusion of the country-of-origin principle from the Directive. Central to this was that the Eastern European representatives accepted an argument according to which Western standards in terms of pay and employment could eventually be established only if these standards were not undermined by intra-European competition.

We told them that it’s important to be solidaristic on the issue with the Directive. But not in a moral tone, but to prevent our drifting apart. And so we sat down to talk it over. And when it’s about important stuff, about collective bargaining, there is unity. The closer we get to the core business, the more it is possible to get everyone into one boat. (ETUC representative)

The first sentence here already hints at who called the shots in this discussion. As another trade unionist from Solidarnosc confirms, the Polish representatives could not take a very active role in this discussion: “Maybe we were not asked, but we were aware of all that.” This impression is also underlined by a representative from OPZZ, who highlights a protectionist tendency in these discussions. The political line of the Western trade unionists, according to him, thus implies the maintenance of social standards at the cost of excluding foreign workers: “Of course the Germans want to protect their markets from our workers. That’s natural, but initially, it was not the idea. So we had to come up with something.”

Explicitly referring to the concept of Social Europe as it was applied by the representatives from the West to justify the modification of the Directive, a trade unionist from Hungary's MSZOSZ problematizes a lack of involvement by his national colleagues:

I think that the so-called Social Europe was a model of the Western European countries and the Eastern Europeans were not participating. And they saw this model endangered through Eastern enlargement.

Similarly, a Polish representative of the ETUC claims that the concept of Social Europe is “pretty much a Western idea.” “In fact,” he goes on, “the whole integration process was like that. You have never had this kind of negotiation on an equal footing. It was a matter of joining the block with some rules.” According to the CEE unionists, the entire agenda setting in the question of the Services Directive was established by the Western representatives from the European level and the respective countries. This lack of representation is also confirmed by the Hungarian colleague, who explains that they “joined in later. It’s normal. It’s like a family and you’re coming from outside. And the question is, if the family can still function as a family.” For the CEE representatives, developing a joint position on the freedom of services was – at least from this perspective – a matter of adhering to the Western idea of a Social Europe. Acceptance of the consequences was, according to the interviewees, not reached through deliberate discussion at eye level but in a rather persuasive way.

Debate on the European minimum wage

The original idea of a European minimum wage was brought into the political discussion by a handful of trade unionists in 2004 (Schulten 2014). From the very beginning, the Swedish representatives spearheaded the opposing coalition, which, in addition to the Scandinavian countries, consisted of the organizations from Austria and Italy. While Dufresne (2015) points out that German, British, and French trade unions have been a driving force behind the project of a European minimum wage, findings from this research point to a leading role of CEE trade unions as well as representatives from the ETFs (mainly the ETUC, EPSU, ETF, and EFFAT). Subsequent to the ETUC congress of 2007, the first ambitions in this direction were carefully taken up in the Seville Manifesto. This declaration, published by the ETUC executive committee, announces the aspiration to “explore continually the scope for united campaigns at European level, led by the ETUC, for common standards on minimum pay and income and for collective bargaining strategies.”

After four years of discussion within the framework of the ETUC, especially against the backdrop of the Troika’s intervention in national bargaining systems, the Athens Congress of 2011 specified the strategy on the topic, although without explicitly committing to particular measures. In general it would work “in pursuit of fair wages for

all European workers, including supporting union campaigns for effective minimum wages in those countries where the unions consider them necessary.”²

In a preparatory statement for the ETUC Winter School³ of 2012, this idea was further specified. According to the proposal, the new aim was that “wherever it exists, the effective national minimum wage should be at least equal to 50% of the average wage or 60% of the median wage.”⁴

The current nominal position on the European minimum wage was finally adopted at the ETUC Winter School held in Copenhagen in February 2012. Here, the following wording describes the ETUC’s aim in this regard:

The ETUC recommends that where it exists the effective national minimum wage should be at least equal to 50% of the average wage or 60% of the median wage. ETUC actively supports its affiliates in their actions to gradually reach this goal, in accordance with their national circumstances. Countries which have already achieved this goal should aim for a more ambitious target. (ETUC 2012, 8)

Compared to the older version, one significant change can be found in the text. While the former proposal referred to the demand for a European minimum wage as a fixed and compulsory goal, the new version reduces this goal to a recommendation. Here, the wording “in accordance with national circumstances” maintains the leeway necessary to establish individual national solutions (Furaker and Selden 2013, 517). It is only against the backdrop of this mitigation that the participants agreed to make this position a demand in a public campaign directed at national governments to be launched by the ETUC with the support of national and European federations. While we find a statement advocating that “statutory minimum wages, where trade unions want them, should be set with the involvement of social partners” (ETUC 2015) in the publication documenting the ETUC’s 2015 congress in Paris, after several years of discussion, no such campaign has yet been launched.

The failure of such a campaign to materialize, despite the compromise achieved in the Winter School, seems remarkable. The fact that, despite the fierce opposition of the Nordic countries, the participants could formulate a common position on the European minimum wage is ascribed by a colleague from the ETUC to its proponents’ argumentative strategy:

I think in the dynamics of the meeting, yes, it amounted to a technique, because there was first a more radical proposal that was discussed in the official text. And then representatives were resisting this. And then it was thrown into the discussion, okay, let’s have a compromise. Let’s

2 https://www.etuc.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Congres_2011_DE_DEF.pdf (25.10.2015)

3 The Winter School is an organ that serves as forum for debates, on the basis of which the General Secretary is obliged to draft recommendations to the ETUC’s Executive Committee.

4 <https://www.etuc.org/sites/www.etuc.org/files/07-EN-Preparation-of-the-Winter-School.pdf> (25.10.2015)

have the standard of the Council of Europe. Of course, no one in the audience was exactly aware what these standards were. So they subscribed to the compromise and let it pass. But it is still the language, where those affiliates agree to it.

As the Scandinavian representatives were not aware of the implications of this proposal, they unconsciously agreed to a decision that in reality they could not support. Viewed in this light, it does not seem surprising that no campaign has yet been launched. In fact, as one Polish colleague explains, the incident was followed by heated discussions:

We had a kind of informal meeting in London, and the president of all the Nordics, of the FTF white collar workers, she was really defending this. And our president and her, there was a clash. The language was hostile. Both stepped forward on both sides.

Similar incidents of passionate, at times aggressive, discussion have been described by representatives of OPZZ and MSZOSZ, as well. While the Swedish trade unions (like all organizations from Scandinavian countries) have fiercely rejected the idea of a mandatory bottom limit, statutory minimum wages have traditionally been on the agenda of Eastern European trade unions (Deppe and Tatur 2002).

Swedish representatives express a twofold concern about the European minimum wage: a loss of influence in the field of collective bargaining and a relocation of political capacity from the national to the European level as a threat to national autonomy. The particular political salience perceived by the Swedish trade unions can be seen in the following statement by the LO representative:

The moment someone in [their] capacity as an ETUC official has [to] say that the ETUC supports the European minimum wage, we will do our best to sack that person. Because that person will work directly against our interest. We do not want intervention in our wage issues.

Besides this preference for the national arena, the fear of a gradual development has led to a refusal to engage in a campaign on the European minimum wage. Interviewees ascribe the reason for this to the Swedish industrial relations system and the country's strong social policy. Doubts about the idea of introducing a statutory minimum wage stem from the fear of employer-employee bargaining becoming superfluous through a mandatory bottom limit. In order to maintain their influence as collective-bargaining actors, Swedish confederations therefore oppose the introduction of such a bottom limit. Moreover, in the current tendency to strive for European-level regulations, the representative perceived an exaggerated, overhasty integrationism, which might endanger this mode of national regulation: "I think the problem with the European project is the impatience. And I cannot say that the patience is there" (LO Sweden).

Among the Eastern European organizations, a different perspective prevails. In view of the low degree of organization and the correspondingly low bargaining coverage in these countries, the decision to raise their lower wage floors would not only protect the low-paid segments, but within the framework of the recent austerity measures, it could be an argument in favor of EU intervention.

Discussions on this matter within the ETUC usually take place in either the executive committee or the collective bargaining committee, where attempts to adhere to a common position have been blocked repeatedly by Swedish and Italian representatives. Yet from the viewpoint of the Swedes, the current position describes a suitable compromise:

The compromise right now is that ETUC supports the introduction of minimum wages or erga omnes clauses at [the] national level. And ETUC will help any affiliate to achieve that. But ETUC cannot advocate European competence as to minimum wages.

Since it should be apparent that the other national affiliates are not satisfied with the current state of affairs, this quote points to a possible strategy of intentionally deferring the project. When we consider the few references found in the public relations material of the ETFs, it does seem to be the case that a more substantial campaign could theoretically be aspired to but is not being put into practice.

On the topic of their role in the conception and practice of Social Europe, the interviews show that CEE representatives do not see their political aims reflected in the ETUC's agenda. While Polish members (possibly due to their relative strength in members and resources in relation to the other CEE countries) are apparently not so pessimistic about international cooperation, the representative of Hungary's MSZOSZ again highlights the persisting marginality of the Eastern Europeans:

It's not well balanced, we're newbies. Although you shouldn't be a newbie if you've been in for 20 years. But we're weak and do not have the resources to offensively engage in all discussions. ... The powerful trade unions can work on the topics and set the priorities. And we're totally lacking that. We can just react.

As in the discussion about the freedom of services, the debate on the European minimum wage thus indicates the strong power imbalance between East and West at the European level. The concluding section summarizes the empirical results and relates them to the theoretical framework.

Summary

While a common policy position could be established in both cases, the two policy fields under inquiry differ in two regards. First, in the debate on the Services Directive, a joint position was arrived at in a process of successful lobbying, while the compromise in the discussion on the European minimum wage has so far remained strictly rhetorical. Second, the way in which the common policy position was formulated varies. In the first case representatives from the CEE countries were persuaded to adhere to the proposal of Western representatives, but in the second case, trade unionists from Poland and Hungary have taken a much more active role in the debate on the European minimum wage.

Whereas the implementation and maintenance of minimum standards constitute the object of regulations in both issues, attempts have been made by various actors to frame each issue differently, thus resulting in an increasingly evident emergence of a particular perspective on each issue. The superior political position of the Western federations derives from a combination of their greater numbers and resources, combined with their longer experience in mutual cooperation. In light of this, it is especially Western representatives who attempt to plausibly represent an idea of Social Europe that reflects their particular interests.

In the debate on the Services Directive this strategy works very well, but the case of the European minimum wage is less clear-cut. Here, the active commitment of the federations from the CEE countries to a campaign on the issue led to fierce resistance from Scandinavian representatives. They reject the idea of EU influence on wage setting, not only because they perceive it as a threat to their established role in the national collective-bargaining arena, but also because the idea of any EU interference in their national system is viewed as endangering national autonomy. At the same time, unions from the CEE countries are highly motivated to take their claim to the European level because of their comparatively weak national bargaining systems.

A comparative perspective on the two policy fields now reveals how the idea of Social Europe is put into practice in the process of European-level policy making. While the European level does seem to be the appropriate locus of regulation when it serves the interests of Western trade unions, the same logic does not apply when it is to their disadvantage. As a consequence, the question arises as to how well European trade unionism can achieve an egalitarian mode of decision making that transcends mere lip service or blockades between diverging positions.

6 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the institutional heterogeneity of the EU-28, we examined in this article the extent to which trade unions from the CEE countries participate in the development of policy positions among ETFs as meta-organizations. By taking into account the multilevel character of their organizations, we showed how trade unionists set goals in their daily cooperative routine by negotiating interpretative frames. As the political agenda of such organizations is often set by a smaller subset of countries located in regional proximity to each other, particular attention was directed at the integration of CEE representatives into the European arena. While the consideration of Swedish, Polish, Hungarian, and ETF representatives does not cover the entire constellation of European trade unionists, the focus serves to illustrate the difficulty of joint goal setting.

While the matter at stake in both policy fields seems at first to be wage levels, a closer look reveals that in both cases conflicts arise about the more fundamental dynamics of the national collective bargaining systems, namely the mode in which wages are set between the reference frames at the national and EU levels. Here it becomes apparent that different perceptions of the European arena motivate the national representatives to take different and partly incompatible political approaches. Especially in the case of the European minimum wage, the defensive position taken by the Nordic affiliates can be captured with Streeck's (1995, 120) concept of "institutional nationalism": the allocation of competences at the European level is accepted to the degree that does not hinder the pursuit of primary national interests. While the CEE representatives view the European arena as an appropriate locus of rule setting and policy making, the Nordic representatives seem to be strongly dissatisfied with such a prospect. The programmatic character of this discussion makes the European minimum wage a touchstone of trade union positions towards European integration. Moreover, it may not be surprising that there is a clear tendency among the ETUC representatives to support the idea of a European minimum wage, because it gradually helps strengthen the European arena of collective bargaining. This tendency is reflected in the efforts of ETUC representatives to convince the Swedes to agree to the proposal for a bottom limit at the meeting in Copenhagen. The fact that they did not manage to persuade the Nordics illustrates the predominant impact of national institutionalism over transnational deliberation.

In relation to currently established research, the findings therefore reflect an ambiguous picture. While there were joint policy positions, they are either not effective (policy field 2) or were established in a nondeliberative manner (policy field 1). Thus, some doubt must be expressed with regard to the idea put forth by Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013, 193) that a diverse leadership among European trade unions could lead to a broader repertoire of political action. If, on the one hand, we regard the participation of the CEE delegates as leadership, then no new political opportunities are opening up. If, on the other hand, we take their marginal status as an indicator of a power disequilibrium among national representatives, the idea of democratic leadership as such is called into question. By drawing on the concept of European-level socialization, the findings presented here support the counter-thesis of a persistent "importance of domestic politics" (Zürn and Checkels 2005, 1068). The strong impact of the Western affiliates within the ETUC enables them to influence the discussion in both policy fields in a way that sets their particular interests as the legitimate goal.

At the same time, an integrative moment among national trade unions can be found by referring to the idealist framework of Social Europe. Despite disagreements, especially on the matter of the European minimum wage, the concept's meaning remains quite clear: in a nutshell, it is about maintaining the economic standards achieved by the Western European working class, not just as a goal in itself but as a reference point for class struggle in Central and Eastern Europe.

Studies on this topic have highlighted the fruitful cooperation between trade unions from the Western European and the CEE countries (for example, Gajewska 2009). Compliance with the traditional (i.e., Western European) concept of Social Europe by the representatives from new member states is derived from their anticipation of the influence that market integration will have on their national labor markets (such as the evolution of equal labor and employment standards). The motives for compliance have therefore been framed as the interplay of self-interest and solidaristic orientation (Bernaciak 2012, 14).

Without contradicting these conclusions, the findings of this article can help us understand the cooperation process between CEE and Western trade union representatives. By describing the origins of the concept of Social Europe as “pretty much a Western idea,” the Polish ETUC representative points to the ambiguities among the different interpretations. Thus, we can conclude that the concept was neither externally imposed in an explicit way nor deliberately embraced by the representatives from the CEE countries. Unlike the account proposed by Bernaciak and Gajewska, our findings show how the integration of the CEE representatives into the campaign against the Services Directive and also on the European minimum wage was based on influence exercised by the trade unionists from the ETFs and national organizations (in this text exemplified by the Swedes).

With reference to Fligstein’s (2001) concept of social skill, this reluctance to integrate other viewpoints can, in the case of the European minimum wage, possibly be traced back to a misunderstanding over the proposal discussed at the ETUC Winter School. Here, their superior knowledge enabled the ETUC representatives to include the Nordics in the compromise. It could, moreover, be shown how representatives from Western European as well as European-level trade union organizations managed to establish the frame of Social Europe as an appropriate pattern for interpreting the situation in the case of the freedom of services. The presentation of a future scenario in which all European countries adapt to Western employment standards convinced Eastern European representatives to accept the idea of refraining from a strategy of offensive wage-competition.

It seems remarkable that it is first and foremost the Swedish representatives who can mobilize the frame in accordance with their pre-interpretation of an issue. If, to put it bluntly, a political measure serves their interests, it is included in the conception of Social Europe. If, however, they perceive the measure as a threat, they will frame it as a loss of national autonomy. In the case of the Services Directive, this frame setting is accompanied by the compliance of the Eastern European representatives. While there were objections to the alleged “protectionism” of Western representatives, especially among the domestic representatives, discourse inside the ETUC excluded such viewpoints as illegitimate.⁵ At the same time, the case of the debate on the European minimum wage

5 A similar finding is made by Lis (2014, 461), who identifies a subordinate role of the Polish representatives in the programmatic formulation of the ETUC’s agenda on climate policy.

shows how the role of the CEE representatives has changed over time. While they were unable to voice a firm position on the issue of the Services Directive, their strong demand for a campaign on a European wage floor shapes the debate in a way that makes Social Europe a contested framework. As actors mobilize the frame in order to pursue their own political goals, we can clearly detect an instrumental dimension within the concept of Social Europe.

Despite this development, the empirical material shows how the criteria necessary for a deliberative discussion (Habermas 1992) serving as a foundation of “internal social dialogue” (Hyman 2013, 175) were neglected in practice. While the European-level federations principally seem to represent their national members, their internal dynamics follow a logic of internal power imbalances and persuasion. Since these preconditions were not given, the deliberative character of the discussion does not seem to be confirmed after all. As the interviews show, the participants themselves also perceive this deficit in the debate. At the same time, the way in which the Nordic representatives were led to compromise on the proposal about a European minimum wage shows how such ethical standards are being neglected in the practice of policy discussion. A more integrative model of policy making will require the empowerment of CEE representatives, even at the cost of Western privileges in agenda setting.

In order to enable a more egalitarian mode of goal setting and decision making, IG-Metall board member Hans-Jürgen Urban (2009, 313) states that the European trade unions require a democratic discursive space. As long as major discrepancies in terms of resources and degree of numerical representation exist between the countries, no such development seems very probable. One possible solution, as suggested by Evans (2010, 365), would be to increase financial support for European-level organizations through strong organizations from the core countries. However, this would require the willingness of the Western representatives to engage in real debates on an equal footing with their colleagues from the East.

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