

# Lithuanian trade unions: from survival skills to innovative solutions

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## Introduction

The condition of the Lithuanian economy since 2006 can be described with reference to three features. Firstly, Lithuania's gross domestic product is among the lowest in the EU. Secondly, in terms of wage share of GDP, the country similarly features at the lower end of the European scale. Finally, the volatility of economic cycles is extremely high; over the past ten years, Lithuania has experienced both the biggest downturns and the most rapid rise in GDP in the EU (Gruzevskis and Blaziene 2013).

These characteristics point to several labour market-related problems: low minimum and average wages and a correspondingly low level of consumption and living standards; low incentive to work; high rates of emigration to countries with higher living standards and a resulting scarcity of skilled labour; and the presence of the shadow economy. An unbalanced character of economic development and a disregard for social targets have negatively influenced employment and unemployment indicators. The unemployment rate was 5.9 per cent in 2008, having peaked at 15 per cent during the crisis and, in 2014, it still stood at 10.9 per cent. This indicates as low labour market recovery from the economic downturn given that GDP growth had already resumed in 2011. In addition, Lithuania is characterised by poorly-developed social dialogue and a relatively low level of collective bargaining coverage. In 2015, trade union density in Lithuania was less than 8 per cent, while employer organisation density stood around 17 per cent (Statistics Lithuania 2016). According to the ICTWSS database (Visser 2016), the collective bargaining coverage rate in 2012 was only 9 per cent.

This chapter shows that, despite their limited human and financial resources, Lithuanian trade unions have not only survived the economic downturn but have also strengthened their positions in some areas compared to the pre-crisis period. Aware of their weak positions at company and sectoral levels, unions focused mainly on national-level actions and cooperated with their counterparts from other confederations, foreign trade unions, employers, civil society and international organisations. In this capacity, they succeeded in organising a protest campaign on a previously unseen scale; had trade union representatives appointed to the Parliament and the government; concluded a tripartite National Agreement; extended the competences of the main national social dialogue institution; and fostered the establishment of regional tripartite councils. They also managed to increase awareness of trade union activities through increased media presence and extended their outreach to previously non-unionised sectors and population groups.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section one provides an overview of social dialogue and industrial relations developments in Lithuania. Special attention is paid to the company and national-level social dialogue as well as to the situation of trade unions during the recent economic crisis. Section two examines innovative union practices pursued by Lithuanian trade unions during and after the downturn. This is followed by a short summary of the initiatives and conclusions.

## **1. Social dialogue and industrial relations in Lithuania**

When Lithuania regained independence in 1991, trade unions were commonly regarded as elements of the former socialist production-management system ‘unsuitable’ for the newly established market economy. Some of these attitudes have remained unchanged until the present day: confidence in trade unions is close to 45 per cent (PN 2016), but trade union density is the lowest among EU countries. Due to the principle of tripartite cooperation and the activism of leading trade union organisations, the national-level social dialogue is relatively well-developed; but the sectoral-level social dialogue, on the contrary, remains weak. With some minor exceptions, ‘real’ collective bargaining – that is, negotiations over wages and working conditions – takes place at company level. Below, we analyse these different bargaining levels in more detail.

### **1.1 Company level social dialogue**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Lithuania’s economy underwent major structural changes. Many large and medium-sized enterprises that hosted trade union organisations went bankrupt or simply ceased their activities. The emerging new – often small – businesses, in turn, had neither the experience nor the willingness to get involved in collective bargaining. In this regard, it can be argued that the economic restructuring and business development processes of the 1990s determined the current structure and position of trade unions in Lithuania. The old ‘reformed’ trade unions tend to be based in companies that survived the restructuring process and are concentrated mainly in the education, health care, energy and transport sectors. In addition, relatively strong trade union organisations were set up in the companies and sectors which had attracted foreign capital, especially if the latter came from regions with strong social dialogue traditions, such as Scandinavia. The latter development was characteristic of the food industry as well as of some service sectors, such as security services or petrol station operations where collective agreements were subsequently concluded.

No studies on the activities of company-level unions have so far been conducted in the Lithuanian context. Relying on our earlier research on Lithuanian industrial relations, however, we can say that, in view of the relative absence of strikes in Lithuania,<sup>1</sup> trade unions have traditionally relied on social dialogue and negotiated more favourable working conditions in a peaceful manner. The personal qualities of the union leaders, as well as unions’ ability to maintain teams of economists and lawyers who could intervene

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1. The education sector is an exception in this regard.

and defend the interests of their members in courts in cases where no amicable settlement could be reached, were of crucial importance. Appreciable levels of employee interest representation have existed in education, the food industry, and security; at the same time, labour organisations have failed to anchor in many large sectors, such as wholesale and retail trade, hospitality and construction. As a consequence, the development of Lithuania's company-level industrial relations has been very uneven: alongside strong trade unions and well-functioning social dialogue in some companies and market segments, other sectors have been virtually union-free and average union density and the collective bargaining coverage rate have remained very low.

## 1.2 Sectoral and national level social dialogue

After 1991, the trade union movement in Lithuania split into several confederations. It soon became evident, however, that trade unions could not be effective when acting separately and thus they started collaborating with each other. At present, three trade union confederations – Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation, Lithuanian Labour Federation and Lithuanian Trade Union 'Solidarumas' – and two national employer organisations – Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists and Lithuanian Business Employers' Confederation – operate in the country.

An important step towards enhanced inter-union collaboration was the establishment of the Tripartite Council of the Republic of Lithuania (TCRL) – a national-level social dialogue institution that brought together top-ranking ministerial officials and the leaders of the largest national trade unions and employer organisations. Since its creation in 1995, no social and labour-market related legislation has been adopted without prior consultation with this body. TCRL holds regular sittings to address and tackle issues relevant for the social partners, which are usually related to employee welfare, and to discuss draft legislation and/or amendments to existing socioeconomic acts (TCRL 2016). National-level tripartite negotiations have also been strongly influenced by the informal relationships between the leaders of the social partner organisations and public authorities, and their participation in joint projects and events.

Social dialogue has been well established at the national level, but it is virtually non-existent in the majority of sectors. In result, the Lithuanian situation may seem paradoxical: the structure of all leading national trade unions and employer organisations is sector-based (i.e. all such social partner organisations have sectoral affiliates), but these are not engaged in any form of dialogue at the sectoral level. This is due to three reasons. First, in the public sector, the state has taken the position of 'third party': it has not got involved in social dialogue despite its role as an employer. Second, in the private sector, there has been in congruence between the respective structures of sectoral trade unions and sectoral employer organisations that has prevented the parties from engaging in social dialogue. For example, trade unions in the transport sector cover mainly passenger transport drivers whereas the employer associations unite freight transport undertakings. Last, but not least, employer organisations have been reluctant to take up the role of sectoral social partners and/or sign collective agreements, claiming the absence of a mandate from their members to do so.

### 1.3 Trade unions and the crisis

Because of the weakness of the sectoral social dialogue, when the global crisis hit Lithuania in 2008-2009 the country's trade unions were able to act on two levels, the company level and the national level. It is therefore useful to make a distinction between these two arenas when analysing the effects of the crisis and trade union responses to the downturn.

Looking at the enterprise level, trade unions had little room for manoeuvre given that companies facing financial difficulties could either go bankrupt (or at least dismiss a substantial proportion of their employees) or try to survive by embarking on cost-cutting programmes. Company-level trade unions would consequently accept the austerity measures proposed by a company's management, including shorter working time, unpaid leave or even wage cuts. They accordingly tried to make sure that the worsening of the company's financial situation would have as few negative effects on workers as possible. At the same time, they defended the interests of workers who faced redundancies, representing them in front of employers, labour dispute commissions and courts. Unions' involvement in the latter activities led to a situation in which non-unionised workers facing a threat of pay cuts or redundancies sought union membership in order to receive similar assistance and protection. In 2009, Lithuania witnessed the unusual phenomenon of a significant, instantaneous increase in trade union membership: the total number of salaried employees dropped by 8 per cent year-on-year, whereas the number of trade union members increased by 3 per cent (Statistics Lithuania 2016). Still, this quantitative increase did not result in a rise in collective bargaining coverage and, in 2011, the pre-crisis downward trend in union density resumed.

In view of the crisis-related difficulties and falling membership levels, innovative practices within company-level labour organisations have been relatively rare. This contrasts with the situation at national level. We have already mentioned that Lithuania has had relatively strong traditions of national-level social dialogue, especially within the TCRL. In addition, in 2006-2007 trade unions negotiated and received EUR 2.5 million from the state within the framework of the Programme for Strengthening the Social Dialogue in Lithuania in 2007-2011, which enabled them to get more actively engaged in crisis management. Against this background, innovative trade union practices initiated just before, during or after the crisis encompassed the following initiatives (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015):

- heightened mobilisation and increased frequency of industrial action;
- unions' increased role in social dialogue and the policy-making process;
- initiatives for legislative amendments;
- organising and servicing;
- national and cross-border cooperation;
- campaigns and media-oriented instruments.

Many of the above practices would not be considered innovative in western European countries characterised by long-standing social dialogue traditions. In the Lithuanian

context, however, they are novel both in regard to their scale and their objectives. We elaborate on them in greater detail in the next section.

## **2. Innovative union practices in Lithuania**

### **2.1 Heightened mobilisation and increased frequency of industrial action**

At the end of 2008, the government drafted a so-called ‘anti-crisis action plan’ without prior consultation with the social partners. The plan’s main objective was to balance the budget, which implied large-scale savings, tax increases, business restrictions and social benefit reductions. In response to the draft, in January 2009, three union confederations called for national protest action in front of the Parliament and government buildings. According to Jackevicius *et al.* (2009) and Daskeviciute (2013), the number of protesters was close to 7 000 people. Even though trade unions advised the participants to remain calm and peaceful, the protest action resulted in riots and civil unrest. It was probably the first time in the country’s post-1991 history that protests initiated by labour organisations had gained such scale.

In addition to the January action, trade unions organised several other protest campaigns in the course of 2009, including a hunger strike in the July. The result of the latter was that it was agreed the government would cancel its earlier decision to lower the basic monthly salary for public sector employees and that the burden related to public sector salary cuts would be borne primarily by the highest-paid officials.

After these grand-scale actions, the parties in power had no other choice but to treat trade unions as a serious bargaining partner in the future decision-making process. This triggered extensive consultation between the social partners and the government which resulted in the conclusion of the National Agreement and the appointment of trade union representatives to state institutions, as described in section 2.2.

### **2.2 Unions’ increased role in social dialogue and the policy-making process**

At the outset of the economic crisis, the social partner organisations represented in the national social dialogue institution TCRL approached the country’s President and the Speaker of the Parliament requesting a meeting to discuss opportunities for closer cooperation and an increased role for the tripartite dialogue. Moreover, following the January 2009 demonstrations and the other protest actions presented in the previous subsection, repeated discussions took place between trade unions and the national authorities. The main topic of these talks was the government’s failure to consult the social partners before adopting new legislation and taking decisions that had important consequences for the national economy. With a view to improve collaboration between the government and the social partners, trade unions had succeeded by the end of 2009 in having trade union representatives appointed to Parliament and the government. The establishment of the two posts gave trade unions the opportunity to receive information concerning draft legislation and policy proposals, and secured access for them to the minutes of the meetings of the cabinet and relevant parliamentary committees. This,

in turn, helped them to exert indirect influence on the policy process and to react more promptly to the possible negative social consequences of upcoming policy changes (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Another important and unprecedented social partner initiative was the conclusion of the National Agreement in October 2009. The crisis-related increase in the unemployment rate and the reduction of wages and social guarantees had resulted in growing societal dissatisfaction. In order to stabilise the employment situation and prevent civil unrest, the government and the social partners signed an accord in which the social partner organisations agreed to abstain from organising protest campaigns while the government committed to apply socially painful, unpopular measures only for a limited period of time and subject to consultation with union and employer representatives. The Agreement was of significant importance for all parties. For the government, it guaranteed social peace while opening up new opportunities for trade unions and employer organisations to participate in the policy-making process. It remained valid until the end of 2010 and prevented civil unrest during the most acute phase of the economic downturn.

From the trade union point of view, several elements determined the innovative nature of the Agreement. Firstly, the negotiations preceding its conclusion made it possible for labour organisations to make public authorities and political parties aware of their demands. Secondly, by concluding the Agreement the national-level trade unions sent a clear message to their existing and potential members showing that the trade union voice was being heard and that they played an important role in the adoption of fundamental political and economic decisions. Thirdly, the Agreement gave unions an opportunity to demonstrate to the Lithuanian public that they did not only serve narrow employee interests but were ready temporarily to withhold their demands if such action catered to wider societal interests.

Despite the promising start, however, the effectiveness of the National Agreement initiative was rather limited. The accord stated that employee-unfriendly austerity policies such as wage reductions would cease to be applied once the economic situation had improved. When the economy started growing, however, both employers and the public authorities proved reluctant to lift the restrictions and bring the reduced wages and social guarantees back to their pre-crisis levels.

In this regard, it could be said that trade unions' consent to the Agreement was used in an instrumental manner and served solely as a tool to ease public discontent in the period of crisis (see Bernaciak 2013 for similar experiences in Poland and Bulgaria). That is why, if similar measures were to be implemented in the future, the obligations assumed by the relevant signatory parties should be laid out in much greater detail and supplemented with sanctions for non-compliance. In guaranteeing the social peace in the country for a certain period of time, trade unions should take a firmer stance and insist that other signatory parties fulfil their commitments. Moreover, the conclusion of

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2. Trade unions also planned to establish a representation office in Brussels, but the idea was later abandoned on financial considerations.

any similar deal should be preceded by separate agreements between trade unions and political parties/public authorities/employer organisations that would serve as a basis for the final pact.

Notwithstanding the negative experiences with the National Agreement, the social partners, and trade unions in particular, have sought to extend the competences of Lithuania's tripartite council. In 2010, alongside 11 new committees set up under the auspices of the TCRL in the areas of youth and regional development (MSSL 2016), regional tripartite councils (RTCs) were established comprising representatives of trade unions, employers, municipal administration and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).<sup>3</sup> According to union representatives, the creation of the RTCs greatly increased the importance of regional social dialogue, helped raise awareness in local communities of the idea of social partnership and encouraged municipal administrations to consult social partner representatives in the process of local decision-making (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015). The main topics discussed within the RTCs have included company restructuring and its consequences; issues to do with young people; the reduction of poverty and social exclusion; and issues related to local economic development.

The initiative to establish RTCs came from trade unions, while the resources for their creation came mainly from a project financed by the European Social Fund. Such external support for employee and citizen involvement was justified given that, in the case of Lithuania, the extent and the quality of regional social dialogue was highly dependent on the level of the economic development of a given municipality. As a rule, municipalities with a predominantly rural population structure, which comprised more than 50 per cent of municipalities in Lithuania, had weak economic potential. There, decision-making power on work-related issues was concentrated almost entirely within narrow groups of large employers, with employees being afraid to speak up and defend their rights in fear of losing their jobs due to the dire labour market situation. The situation was better in municipalities with a predominantly urban population structure and in bigger cities but, even there, social dialogue would take place only at company level.

The establishment of RTCs has considerably altered this picture. Targeted campaigns, announcements in the local media and meetings with local residents have raised local populations' awareness of trade union activities. This, in turn, has boosted the activism of local employees and led to the establishment of several company-level trade unions. Parallel to company-level initiatives, RTCs have promoted civil dialogue and contributed to the elaboration of more efficient and forward-looking regional development policies. The role of the Councils has been further strengthened by the increased attention paid to them by the national tripartite body. As regional tripartite councils started growing

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3. Lithuania does not have well-established social dialogue traditions, especially at sectoral level, so trade unions have sought to develop their relationships with NGOs. Both types of organisations pursue similar goals insofar as they combat poverty and discrimination, and fight for better safety regulations at work. In addition, trade unions consider NGOs as partners in the pursuit of political lobbying and as a channel to reach groups with whom they themselves do not have direct contact such as young people, the elderly, child-raising mothers or ex-prisoners. Finally, NGOs help trade unions attract new members and volunteers to their ranks.

in number, the TCRL has regularly invited their representatives to attend its meetings, and analysed and discussed key regional problems at the national level.

All in all, the foundation of RTCs could be regarded as a positive development in the Lithuanian context, but additional work is needed to strengthen the country's regulatory framework in this area. It would also be worthwhile to conduct a monitoring of RTC activity and make their performance results publicly available, as well as improve coordination between individual councils so that good practice is shared. Finally, there is room for even closer collaboration between trade unions and local NGOs working on socioeconomic issues.

### 2.3 Initiating legislative amendments

Initiating amendments to existing and new legal acts is a traditional area of trade union activity. During the crisis and in the post-crisis period, however, Lithuanian unions were instrumental in pushing through innovative legal provisions. In July 2009, for example, a number of temporary (i.e. valid only during the crisis) amendments were adopted to Lithuania's Labour Code that aimed at fostering social dialogue. The amendments sought to help companies survive the downturn and provided for the possibility of negotiating collective agreements whose provisions were less favourable to employees than those stipulated by the Labour Code. Another legislative initiative of trade unions was implemented in the area of individual labour disputes. In cooperation with Lithuania's State Labour Inspectorate (SLI), unions published proposals for the reorganisation of the Labour Disputes Institute that resulted in a shifting of the resolution of individual labour disputes from the courts to Tripartite Labour Disputes Commissions (TLDCs) attached to the SLI.

During the downturn, the unemployment rate in Lithuania increased considerably and more than 100 000 employees became jobless on top of the 94 000 pre-crisis pool of the unemployed. In view of the inefficient and often unfair settlement practices accompanying employee dismissals, more active cooperation between trade unions and the State Labour Inspectorate, as well as the establishment of a new institution for labour disputes, had been deemed necessary. Before the establishment of a separate institution for the resolution of individual labour disputes, conflicts between employers and employees had usually been settled in courts of general practice. These procedures were protracted and expensive, and thus failed to serve employee interests: in individual cases, it was often six months or more before the court issued a verdict. To remedy the situation, trade unions drafted legislation outlining the TLDC model between 2010 and 2012, and liaised with the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and with Parliament during the subsequent legislative process; they also collaborated closely with the SIL.

TLDCs became operational only in 2013, but evidence suggests that they have accelerated the process of individual labour dispute resolution. Between 2013 and 2015, they became involved in 15 000 proceedings, out of which 90 per cent concerned unpaid wages or other irregularities in the remuneration system. 21 per cent of the disputes were settled prior to TLDC sessions and 12 per cent ended in peaceful settlements. 50

per cent of the claims brought in front of the Commissions were satisfied fully or in part, and involved an order to pay due remuneration (VDI 2016).

Last but not least, amendments to the Law on Trade Unions adopted in 2013 stipulated, for the first time in the history of independent Lithuanian trade unions, that not only salaried employees but also those not working on the basis of employment contracts should have access to trade union membership. Prior to the changes, trade unions had not been able to represent employees following their dismissal, which went against the logic of international labour conventions and European practice.

The interests of the unemployed would frequently be disregarded by successive Lithuanian governments. For example, measures to overcome the crisis included a reduction of one-half in the maximum unemployment benefit and tightening the conditions for receiving assistance. These policies were smoothly implemented since no reaction followed from the general public. From this perspective, the right to retain trade union membership after dismissal provided the unemployed with organised representation of their interests. Moreover, the initiative seems beneficial on a 'micro' scale: evidence suggests that jobless trade union members actively engage in the activities of trade unions and take part in training and voluntary activities which, arguably, reduces the stress associated with job loss.

In the future, the initiative is supposed to provide unemployed trade union members with additional training possibilities within trade union structures. It would be also worthwhile to develop special employment initiatives, such as an internet website that could keep the unemployed informed about the labour market situation, job opportunities and trade union activities. Initiatives of this kind are important because support for unemployed trade union members could be an additional driver attracting potential union members and it may also help stabilise trade union membership in 'hard times'.

## 2.4 Organising and servicing

We mentioned in section 1.3 that, during the initial phase of the downturn, an increase in interest in trade unions could be observed within the Lithuanian population. Labour organisations sought to capitalise on this situation and extended their activities to previously low-unionised sectors such as IT, mobile communications, major retail chains and theatres (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015). The main factors that motivated employees in these sectors to join a union and/or establish union representation in their enterprises were restructuring, salary cuts and deteriorating working conditions (cf. Trif and Stoiciu, this volume, for the SITT initiative). According to representatives of the Lithuanian Service Workers Trade Union who supported this bottom-up organising drive (group interview 1 2015), following the creation of company-level union structures fewer employees were fired during subsequent restructuring processes; the number of overtime hours was reduced; salaries were increased or, at least, not reduced; and several company-level collective agreements were concluded.

In their organising activities, Lithuanian unions deployed a scheme for anonymous union membership, similar to that used by their Czech counterparts (see Martišková and Sedláková, this volume). As a rule, Lithuanian employers had been very negative about trade unions and there had been instances of union busting as well as of the persecution of trade union leaders. In effect, many Lithuanians not only shunned taking up leading union positions, but they also tried to hide their union membership from their employers and colleagues. Already in place before the crisis, the anonymous membership scheme expanded considerably in 2008-2010 when companies faced economic difficulties and staged mass redundancies. The scheme gave unions an opportunity to protect existing trade union members from persecution; and it also helped them attract new members at a time when a growing number of employees were seeking unions' assistance and/or legal advice but were unwilling to declare their union membership publicly. According to Lithuanian trade unions (group interview 1 2015), the anonymous members scheme accounted for about 20 per cent of the total number of union members in the country between 2009 and 2011.

In addition to the extension of anonymous membership, there were cases when unions appointed persons not employed in a given company to chair enterprise-level employee organisations. Such 'outsiders' were arguably less familiar with the internal problems of particular companies and their employees; on the other hand, they were independent of particular employers and thus capable of countering their desire to interfere with trade union activities. Thanks to the training provided by sectoral and national-level union organisations, external union chairs were equipped with additional skills and competences enabling them effectively to manage plant-level union organisations, protect employee rights and cooperate with employers. In the future, it would be worthwhile to establish how many chairs of this type have so far been appointed, forge links between them and further develop their professional competences.

With regard to recruitment, unions' work with young people deserves particular mention. In a way, trade unions in Lithuania had always paid attention to young people: all major trade union organisations had youth committees in their structures, appointed special youth chairmen/women and carried out projects targeting this particular group. However, only when the economic situation deteriorated and discussions on the introduction of new, more flexible labour market instruments intensified did trade unions realise that they would have no future unless they encouraged young, mobile people to join their ranks. The consequence has been that they have fundamentally reshaped their attitude towards young people since the outset of the crisis, defining them as one of their main target groups and embarking on measures aimed at attracting them to labour organisations. They accordingly focused on the organisation of workshops, seminars and conferences during which they provided young people with practical information on relevant contemporary issues, such as the principles of setting-up one's own business, labour law, skill enhancement, communications and coaching, and information regarding the functioning of the trade union movement (cf. Samaluk, this volume, for the Young Plus initiative). Major trade union organisations have also provided quotas for youth participation in their events and tried to recruit young people to work in their administrative structures.

The amendments to the Law on Trade Unions discussed in section 2.3 could also be regarded as pro-organising measures insofar as they gave access to trade union membership to people who did not have employment contracts but who paid membership fees. The changes had been advocated by trade unions for several years and were finally enacted in 2013. So far, however, they have not translated into union membership increases, even though they might have prevented an even more abrupt decline in density figures.

## 2.5 Coalition-building at home and abroad

Lithuanian trade unions have, since the outbreak of the recent crisis, become increasingly involved in cooperative initiatives at both national and international levels. Collaboration between the major union confederations, as well as the intensification of union efforts to attract the attention of the international community to labour law breaches in Lithuania, have been of particular importance in this regard.

In the initial period following the restoration of Lithuania's independence, trade union confederations competed with each other. Over time, however, competition gave ground to cooperation, in particular at the national level. This trend was already discernible in the late 1990s, but a coordination centre for all national trade unions was established only in 2007. One year later, for the first time in Lithuania's contemporary history, the leading union confederations organised congress of all trade unions functioning in the country, also inviting independent unions not affiliated to any of the major national organisations. During the meeting, unions discussed the possibility of coordinating their activities and taking joint actions in the face of the crisis. Even though they did not sign any particular agreement, the meeting helped boost mutual trust between the participating organisations, improved their public image and facilitated work on joint protest actions that were subsequently launched in reaction to the downturn (see section 2.1).

During the crisis, multiple violations of employee and trade union rights were recorded; in its aftermath, in turn, there was strong pressure to make the labour market more flexible in order to stimulate the development of the national economy. Under these unfavourable circumstances, national and sectoral unions actively sought the support of international institutions and partners. They accordingly addressed international bodies such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, the International Labour Organisation and the European Trade Union Confederation, searching for assistance for trade union activities in Lithuania.

In 2011, after almost a year of unsuccessful attempts to push for an increase in the minimum wage, trade unions approached Lithuanian Members of the European Parliament, the ETUC and the European Economic and Social Committee to ask for their support (Blaziene 2011). In a similar vein, once the court did not permit the organisation of industrial action at UAB Svyturys-Utenos Alus, Lithuania's biggest brewery, trade unions complained to the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant,

Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the EESC, pointing to restrictions on the right to strike and alleged breaches of the Lithuanian constitution and regulations on human rights.

In parallel to international advocacy, trade unions actively participated in international trade union networks. In 2010, for instance, they attended the Baltic Subregional Meeting of the PERC Human and Trade Union rights network, where trade union representatives from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Russia's Kaliningrad region revealed instances of trade union rights violations in their respective countries and discussed how to fight them. All those activities did not pass unnoticed in Lithuania: the Parliament, the government and individual ministries were challenged and forced to explain the rationale for policies that harmed the interests of employees and unions during meetings with international representatives and experts visiting Lithuania at the initiative of the unions. According to trade union representatives, this external pressure facilitated the social dialogue process during the crisis and in the post-crisis period, making the government more open to considering the trade union point of view (group interview 2 2015).

## 2.6 Campaigns and media-oriented instruments

A considerable number of projects and trade union initiatives were financed by the EUR 2.5 million Programme for Strengthening the Social Dialogue in Lithuania that ran between 2007 and 2011. Measures implemented within its framework encompassed the development of direct contact with workplace-level employee representatives through training and seminars; public communication and information campaigns in the radio, on television and in the press; the establishment of bipartite and tripartite councils at all levels; and the provision of legal assistance and counselling to union members and non-members. Trade union teams would visit different regions of the country, hold meetings with local residents, speak about their activities and about the possibilities of protecting employee rights; they would also organise round-table discussions with regional employers, trade unions, municipal administrations and NGO representatives. During the crisis, trade unions used the Programme to get involved in direct work with individual workers at the local level. According to trade union representatives, without additional funds it would have scarcely been possible to organise these activities on such a large scale (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015). In this regard, the Programme was seen as a very timely means of contributing to trade union survival during the crisis; at the same time, unions pledged that direct work with potential union members, initiated during the project, would be continued in the future.

With a view to increasing public awareness of trade union activities during the crisis, unions not only sought to have their voice heard through various radio and TV programmes, but also collaborated with universities, colleges and vocational training centres (cf. Butković, this volume). Trade union representatives held lectures for students on the trade union movement in the EU and Lithuania, explaining to them unions' role in society and the principles of social dialogue. In the eyes of the union representatives interviewed (group interview 1 2015; group interview 2 2015), such

activities proved highly effective as most young people in Lithuania had not been aware of what trade unions stood for or in what activities they had been engaged, and what benefits might be related to union membership.

## Conclusions

The crisis of 2008-2009 had a negative impact on the Lithuanian labour market and the population's living standards. It led to the reduction of GDP, the employment rate and the average wage, whereas the unemployment rate and the number of social benefit recipients were on the rise. At the same time, however, the downturn had some positive effects on Lithuanian trade unions insofar as it motivated them to launch several new initiatives designed to strengthen their position at company level and in the national and regional-level social dialogue.

In reference to the theoretical framework outlined in the Introduction to this book, we may conclude that the innovative practices pursued by Lithuanian labour organisations fall predominantly within the category of strategic innovation; in addition, they encompassed elements of organisational innovation and targeted new constituencies such as young people, the unemployed or broader society. Instruments used by the unions involved social dialogue, organising, heightened mobilisation and media- and service-oriented tools. In this regard, particular emphasis should be put on the conclusion of the National Agreement; the establishment of regional tripartite councils; the implementation of a new system for labour disputes; the further development of anonymous union membership; and the opening of unions to non-salaried workers and the unemployed.

In post-crisis Lithuania, trade union density and collective bargaining coverage remain low and company-level collective agreements are an exception rather than the rule. The collective bargaining process is impeded due to the enduring structural problems and negative employer attitudes, and, in the social dialogue process, the government tends to cater first and foremost to employers' demands. In this regard, Lithuanian trade unions still have a long way to go until they are able effectively to represent and defend the interests of employees, restore the confidence of broader sections of Lithuanian society and to ensure the long-term, harmonious socioeconomic development of the country. The above overview of initiatives suggests, however, that trade unions are able to react promptly to changing socioeconomic circumstances and to cooperate with their partners at home and abroad in the pursuit of social goals.

## Interviews

Group interview 1 with representatives of the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation and its sectoral trade unions representing public and private services and manufacturing sectors: Lithuanian Service Workers Trade Union, Lithuanian Trade Union of Food Producers, Lithuanian Trade Union of Health Care Employees, Vilnius, 24 November 2015.

Group interview 2 with representatives of the Lithuanian Trade Union 'Solidarumas' (conducted by telephone), 26 November 2015.

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All links were checked on 9 January 2017.