

# European trade unions in a time of crises – an overview

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## 1. Introduction

In today's Europe, talking about 'the' crisis can mean many different things. In some countries, most people would remember the almost-breakdown of the financial system in 2008, followed by a dramatic downturn in manufacturing industry and widespread fears about soaring unemployment, which sparked vigorous government stimulus programmes, leading to swift recovery in the second half of 2009. From the point of view of many people in, for example, Germany, today's crisis is something that is happening in other countries, notably in southern Europe. There, the term 'crisis' describes an ongoing story with long-lasting damage to the labour market, irrespective of the more recent modest economic recovery. Most European countries, however, should be located somewhere between these poles. While their economy began to recover in 2009, growth remained sluggish, sometimes interrupted by 'double dip' recessions, with the effect of a continuous and creeping deterioration of social and labour-market problems. The overall picture, in particular in the euro zone, is one of at best sluggish growth which has not contributed in any way to resolving the deeper structural economic problems that led to the crisis. For Europe as a whole, many economists are talking about a longer period of 'secular stagnation' (De Grauwe 2015; Summers 2016). Given the multifaceted character of the European crisis in terms of chronology and dimensions (political, economic, social, cultural and so on) the term crises might be more appropriate.

The importance of the 'silent revolution' (Barroso) of 2010 onwards, which gave rise to the 'New European Economic Governance', is essential here. It may be regarded as an attempt to institutionalise or even constitutionalise neoliberal policy approaches within the European Single Market and its euro-zone core (Bieling 2013). Next to prioritising austerity with its constrictive effects on the economy it has included a shift in the 'normative goals of European social policy (...) from the pre-crisis European Social Model to the postulates of neoliberalism' (Koukiadaki *et al.* 2016: 38). Arguably the most important socio-economic and political impacts of this re-orientation can be summarised as driving European countries apart. It is the link between the 'austeritarian regime' (Dufresne and Pernot 2013: 4) and its economic effects, on one hand, and on the other the political exploitation of the deepening crises of democratic representation and social cohesion by right-wing populist, nationalist and racist parties which is driving the EU into arguably its deepest crisis ever.

This dynamic is pushing trade unions in different EU member states into a peculiar situation. On one hand, they face joint and growing challenges across countries (such as unemployment, the growth of precarious labour and the rise in inequality, alongside

a long-term erosion of their membership base connected to fundamental structural and cultural changes). And against the background of the New Economic Governance, most of them are facing a much more streamlined neoliberal economic policy approach on the part of their national governments than in earlier decades. On the other hand, unions have to try and cope with these challenges under widely varying conditions. How has the crisis impacted on these conditions and on trade unions' capacities to cope with them? This is the question to be explored in the present book<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Varieties of unionism and the power resources approach

It is a well-explored fact that European varieties of trade unionism have already differed substantially for decades (cf. among many others Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000; Hyman 2001; Frege and Kelly 2004; Erne 2008). Given the profound political, economic and social importance of the ongoing European crises, we found it interesting to take a closer look at potential impacts of the Great Recession and the consecutive euro-zone crisis (with its interactions within the wider EU) on these varieties.

### 2.1 Beyond typologies and clusters

When we gathered a group of colleagues from 11 EU countries it was taken for granted that the crises cannot have the same relevance as driver of change for trade unions' situations and their policy approaches in each of the countries covered. While in some countries, such as Greece or Spain, the crisis has obviously been a decisive factor in explaining the current state of the unions, in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, the Netherlands or Germany, substantial changes may have taken place before the crisis, and in at least one of the countries covered here – Sweden – one might be tempted to ask whether there is any crisis-induced effect on trade unionism at all. Thus, against the background of recent well-informed analyses of European trade unionism, such as Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013, 2018), the focus of the present book is on the differing or even contrasting relevance of the crises and their varying impact on trade unions.

Given the potentially wide scope of the various pictures, we agreed that the country chapters should cover the following subjects:

- What have been the main features and drivers of trade unions changes over the past one or two decades (depending on the time span regarded as most useful for the respective country-specific analysis)? To what extent is the development of trade unions related to the country-specific socio-economic development path?

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1. The present book is the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Rough Waters: European trade unions in a time of crises* which was first published in spring 2017. This 2<sup>nd</sup> edition retains the broad lines of argument but the authors were given the opportunity to update their respective chapters. The editors want to thank all colleagues – academics and trade union practitioners – who sent us their helpful comments on the first edition. It is understood that the responsibility for the analyses and conclusions drawn in this book is fully ours, that is, the authors' and the editors'.

- What are the most important impacts of the Great Recession, the ongoing euro-zone crisis and the overall reinforcement of neoliberal policy approaches in the EU in this respect (whatever we find most relevant for the respective country)?
- How have trade unions reacted to the challenges described above? Are there indicators of new strategic approaches or initiatives for union revitalisation? How relevant are policy initiatives at EU level?

Further to these country level analyses, trade unions initiatives and strategies at EU level are the subject of the final chapter in the present book.

The choice of countries to be presented in this book was guided by the idea of reflecting the varieties of European trade unionism. In comparative industrial relations research there has been a tradition of categorising unions by identifying clusters such as the Nordic, Central, Southern, Eastern and Anglophone groups of countries. However, as Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2018) emphasise, ‘country groupings are a heuristic device that makes a mass of detail more comprehensible to the reader’ but should not be regarded as an analytical typology. The specific purpose of the ‘varieties of unionism’ approach (VoU) in comparative industrial relations literature, as Frege and Kelly (2004: 183) have it, is an analysis of the ‘national embeddedness of union strategies’. That is, it is about their embeddedness in country-specific sets of institutions and socio-economic development models or varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001; for a discussion of the different concepts cf. Bosch *et al.* 2009), but also in formative historical experiences which altogether shape trade unions and their practices. This is why the distinction between ‘the telescope and the microscope’ in comparative trade union research, as proposed by Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013: 6), are useful instruments in cross-national comparisons.<sup>2</sup> While the first allows us to classify countries along broad contours, the second helps us to identify differences between seemingly similar cases (*ibid.*). In fact, as demonstrated by the country analyses in the present book, in today’s Europe the country-specific ‘mountains’ within each cluster of countries resemble each other less than ever. The cleavages between unions *within* the groups of countries are deepening. The European crises are driving the countries apart, and the unions, too, are subject to this process of ‘divisive integration’ (Lehndorff 2015a).

## 2.2 Sources of trade union power: a brief overview

Union strategies and tactics develop in interaction with members and constituents, employers, the state and civil society (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). So does the power of unions. The discussion of the sources of unions’ power has a long tradition in union research. Visser (1995) identified ‘organizational’, ‘institutional’ and

2. ‘In any cross-national comparison one can use the telescope or the microscope. The first reveals broad contours rather than fine details, and from a sufficient distance one mountain may resemble many others. On this basis, comparativists create classifications of country groups, proposing a parsimonious catalogue of types rather than insisting on the uniqueness of each national case (which would make comparative analysis virtually impossible). But there is always a trade-off between parsimony and accuracy. Through a microscope, the differences between seemingly similar cases become all too apparent’ (*ibid.*).

‘economic power’ as the three major sources of union power which, however, would require additional union capacities to become effective. He pointed also to the influence of the structure of the union movement – that is, the degree of internal cooperation or ideological divisions – on its potential power. The more recent literature on union power resources draws on the concept used by Silver (2003) – building on Wright (2000) – in her analysis of the forces of labour in a long-time global perspective. It is a heuristic concept which has been widely applied and developed further over recent years, if not in a uniform way, as a useful approach in trade union research (Brinkmann *et al.* 2008; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; for an overview on the history of this approach see Schmalz *et al.* 2018). Drawing on this literature we distinguish, for the purposes of the present book, four major sources of union power, namely *structural*, *organisational*, *institutional* and *societal*.

*Structural power* (i) is based on the bargaining power of workers on the labour market, as well as in the labour process. Wright distinguishes two subtypes of structural power. The first, ‘marketplace bargaining power’ (Silver 2003: 13), results from the scarcity of workers in the labour market. The second, ‘workplace bargaining power’, results from the strategic location of workers within the labour process; that is, the more difficult workers are to replace due to their skills, a tight and regulated labour market and their particular position in the value chain, the stronger their structural power. While structural power can be influenced by unions only indirectly, it is directly shaped by the particular national socio-economic development model, as well as by economic and social politics and employers’ strategies in restructuring value chains and labour processes.

*Organisational power* (ii) is based on numerical strength, as well as on the unions’ ability to successfully mobilise the membership. The distinction between these two aspects is important as a large number of members in itself is not necessarily a sufficient base of organisational power. Organisational power is the power resource that is most strongly influenced by unions’ own activities. There is a mutual relationship between the size of union membership and unions’ financial capacities. These depend in a range of countries first and foremost on membership contributions, while in some countries direct or indirect subsidies based on collective agreements or legislation play an important role. This points to the crucial role of the institutional environment and its sometimes ambiguous implications (Hassel 2007).

*Institutional power* (iii) is ‘a result of bargains and conflicts that are based on structural and organisational power’ (Brinkmann *et al.* 2008: 25). Albeit in many different ways, its distinctive feature is to ‘codify or fix basic social compromises across business cycles and short-term changes in the balance of powers’ (*ibid.*). It includes institutions of economic governance that shape not only the capacity of unions to organise and represent workers (for example, Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999; Dribbusch 2003), but also their position in collective bargaining and corporatist arrangements. Institutional power may be supported indirectly by labour market regulations, such as a statutory minimum wage and the level and type of unemployment benefit, which influence the level of the ‘reservation wage’, and the nature and extent of statutory dismissal protection and other legal minimum standards. In some countries, institutions such as unemployment insurance impact on the capacity of unions to organise workers (the ‘Ghent system’).

Institutional power tends to be eroded when the underlying balance of power on which it is based fundamentally changes and it is very sensitive to legislative intervention. The importance of the ‘shadow of the law’ for autonomous collective bargaining (Bosch 2015: 64) was underscored by the EU Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) in its quest for ‘employment-friendly reforms’ which ‘result in an overall reduction of the wage-setting power of trade unions’ (European Commission 2012: 104).

Structural, organisational and institutional power are complemented by what can be summarised as *societal power* (iv). Two main components may be distinguished here. The first is coalitional or collaborative power, which is based on the capacity of unions to build coalitions and to act within civil society networks and includes the important link to political parties, which from the early decades of the labour movement have been a crucial channel for unions in many countries to represent workers’ interests in the political sphere. The second has been termed discursive or communicative power (Urban 2015), namely the capacity of unions to successfully influence the public discourse and agenda setting. The latter is very much based on their ability to mobilise their members or even sections of the wider society for political ends – a capacity that Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013) distinguish as ‘strategic or logistical power’.

The latter distinction highlights the importance of the fact that *resources* have to be *utilised* and *activated* when unions want to benefit from them. Lévesque and Murray (2010: 333) emphasise that ‘resources alone are not enough; unions must also be capable of using them’ and identify a number of ‘strategic capabilities central to union capacity building’. As we will see in some of the country analyses, this subjective factor becomes crucial once traditional ways of utilising power resources have been undermined by rigid neoliberal and deregulatory approaches.

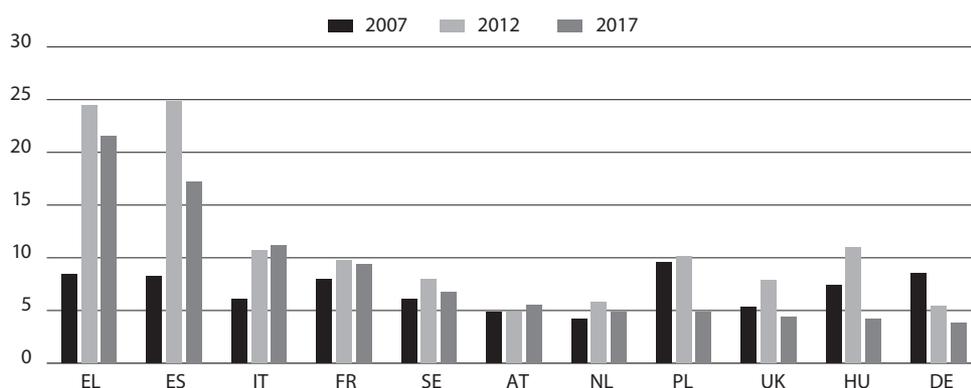
Last but not least, it is important to recall that union power is always relative to the power of employers or the state. As already mentioned, the power-resources approach is a heuristic concept. It helps us to understand the country-specific dynamics of trade union development. It is an open concept that takes into account the fact that important elements of power resources have overlapping features and are mutually dependant. Thus, as we shall see in the following chapters, its interpretations and applications may differ in detail but, as the contribution of Müller and Platzer to this book demonstrates, it can also be helpful for an analysis of the interaction between trade union power at national and at European levels.

### 2.3 Overall trends in the development of union power: some indicators

In order to get a rough impression of the overall trends in union power, a number of indicators of the respective power resources in the countries covered by the present book are of particular interest. In terms of overall structural power the unemployment rate is arguably a key figure. Figure 1 shows a fairly differentiated picture. Comparing pre-crisis levels with more recent ones, in almost half of the countries there have been only minor changes for better or worse. In Poland, Hungary and Germany registered

unemployment actually dropped, while it rose dramatically in Greece and Spain (although there has been some decrease over recent years). Although the impact on unions' power resources in the latter two countries is obvious, it should be noted that the situation is not necessarily more favourable for unions in countries with much lower unemployment, such as Hungary or the United Kingdom. The country chapters provide more comprehensive pictures of the changes in structural power resources, including changes in the economic structure of the respective country, as well as the increasing importance of precarious employment and the dissolution of past security across value chains (cf. also European Parliament 2016; Piasna and Myant 2017; Banyuls and Recio 2017). The latter can be crucial because even when employment is on the rise trade union membership may be concentrated in dwindling sectors, while growing sectors, and sections of the workforce, are scarcely organised.

Figure 1 **Structural power: unemployment rates, 2007, 2012 and 2017 (percentage of total workforce)**



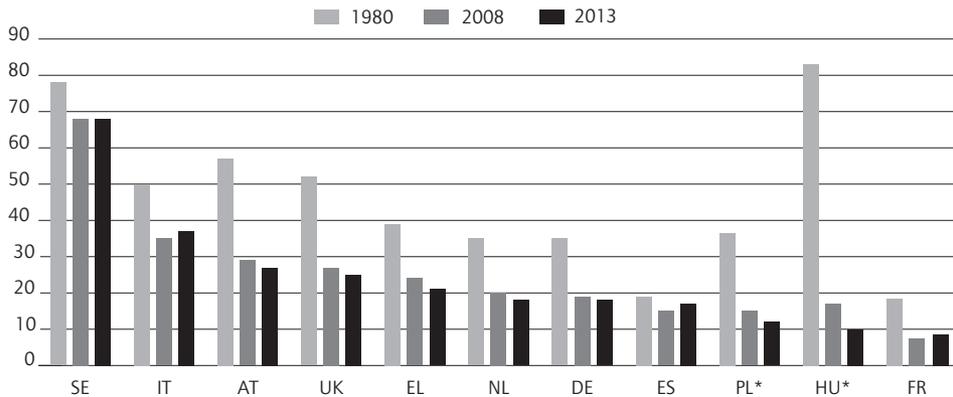
Source: Eurostat.

Union density is commonly used as an indicator of *organisational power*. Relevant for the subject of the present book is that union density has decreased since the 1980s in all the countries under review. As Figure 2 shows, this long-term decline has at least not been reinforced or sped up by the Great Recession<sup>3</sup>. As of 2013 union density was below 20 per cent in six of the countries covered here. The major exceptions were Sweden, with a still impressive more than two-thirds of workers unionised, and Italy, with the highest density rate of all countries without a so-called Ghent system. Detailed figures about the composition of membership by industry, sex and age can be found in the country chapters. This gives an idea of potential strongholds of union power (or deserts, for that matter), including the observation that union density and mobilising capacity

3. Note that the recent, if modest, rise in union density in Spain may be regarded as a statistical artefact as it reflects the uneven impact of the ongoing crisis on the labour market; that is, industries with low union density, such as construction, have been hit more dramatically than other sectors. For more details, cf. the contributions by Köhler and Calleja Jiménez on Spain and Leonardi for the exceptional case of Italy. As for the numbers on France, the data of the ICTWSS Database used in the figure differ from recent data analyses by DARES (Pignioni 2016) which indicate a fairly stable net density at an average of 11 per cent since the mid-1990s (for details see Pernot in the present book).

do not necessarily correlate. The latter may be more developed in some countries with limited organisational power, such as France, but such traditional capacities may have become exhausted in the course of the present crises.

Figure 2 **Organisational power: net trade union density, 1980\*/2008/2013**  
(percentage of all workers)



Note: \* 1990 for Poland and Hungary.

Source: ICTWSS Database; European Commission (2016).

A widely accepted indicator of *institutional power* is collective bargaining coverage. The comparison between long- and short-term changes in coverage rates as depicted in Figure 3 with changes in union density points at the ever increasing importance of the existence or non-existence of statutory extension practices (or their functional equivalents) in a number of countries (Schulten *et al.* 2015). As for the potential impact of the current crises, the comparison between the coverage rates of 2009 and 2013 demonstrates that a notable impact is observable most dramatically – as is to be expected – in Greece and, to a minor but still important extent, in Poland.<sup>4</sup>

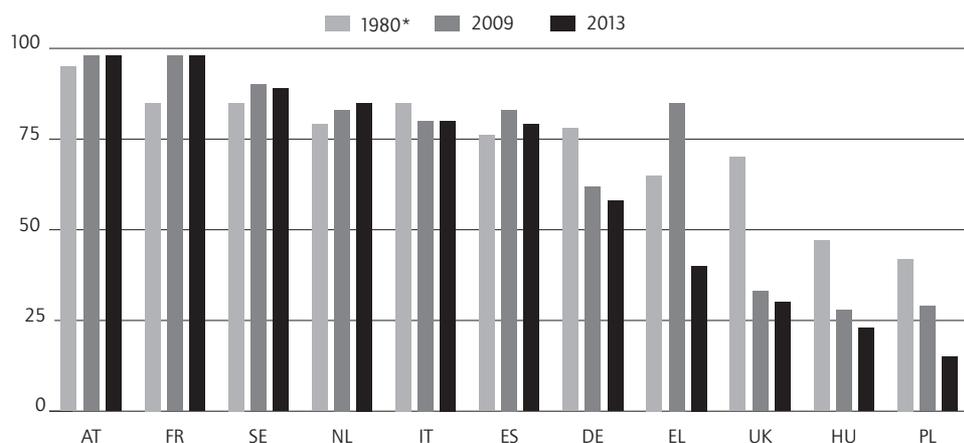
*Societal power* is particularly difficult to capture in quantitative terms. As a proxy we use here data from the Eurobarometer survey, which includes the question ‘whether the term [trade unions] brings to mind something very positive, fairly positive, fairly negative or very negative?’ Figure 4 gives a flavour of changes from shortly before the crisis until 2016. The striking observation here is the contrast between countries such as Austria or Germany, on one side, where unions’ reputation has improved over recent years, and some other countries – most notably Greece – where it declined dramatically<sup>5</sup>.

4. Note that earlier reports about similar important recent decreases of collective bargaining coverage in Spain draw on preliminary statistics which are amended periodically by the Spanish Ministry of Labour (cf. <http://www.empleo.gob.es/estadisticas/cct/welcome.htm>).

5. The data for some countries differ from national surveys. This applies most notably to Sweden where national surveys yield less favourable results for the unions (cf. Bengtsson and Ryner in this book), and to Italy, where national polls indicate a more positive trend over recent years (cf. Leonardi). The data for Spain, however, are broadly in line with Spanish surveys that reflect a rapid decrease in trade unions’ public reputation over recent years (for details see Köhler and Calleja Jiménez and also Muñoz-de-Bustillo and Esteve 2017: 69).

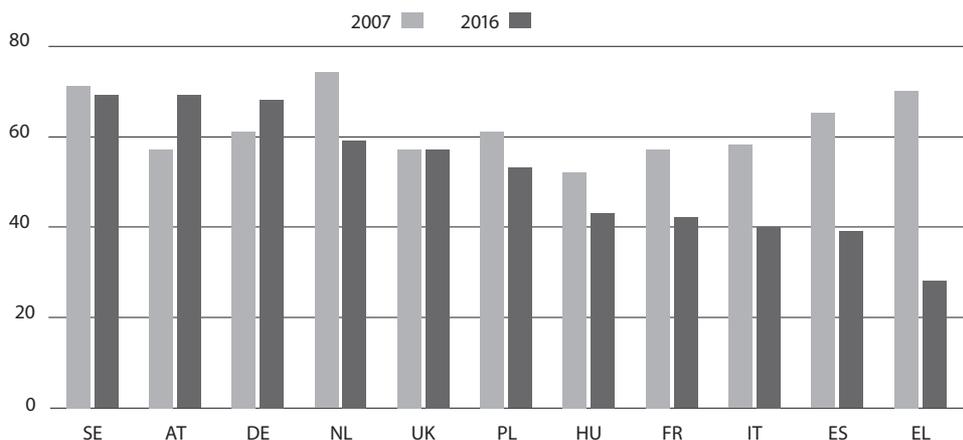
It is probably fair to assume that the reason behind this contrast is the perception of the actual impact of trade unions' activities and policy approaches geared to buffer or even curtail the negative social effects of the economic crisis. As for the collaborative side of societal power the country chapters provide interesting insights that help us to understand the respective political dynamics evolving from the interaction of unions with political parties and governments, but partly also from the turn towards campaigning on key policy issues either independently or in cooperation with social movements.

Figure 3 **Collective bargaining coverage, 1980\*, 2009, 2013 (percentage of all workers)**



Note: \* 2000 for Greece, Poland and Hungary.  
 Source: ICTWSS Database; European Commission (2016).

Figure 4 **Trade unions bring to mind something 'very or fairly positive' to EU citizens, 2007 and 2016 (%)**



Source: Eurobarometer.

This brief overview has already demonstrated that some of the overall trends, as reflected in the chosen key indicators, display some similarities across the board. The 'levels' of power resources, however, continue to differ in many respects. That is, despite some similarities in overall trends there is no convergence towards generally powerless unions. What is more, in some aspects the trends not only differ by country, but reflect contradictory developments also within countries, as demonstrated for example by the contrast between falling union density and rising union reputation in Germany, and the opposite development in Italy. Last but not least, the brief overview has already shown that the crisis years since 2008 matter in very different ways, if at all, for trade union power. While in some countries they have actually worked as a catalyst of *change*, what applies to all countries covered here is that they have worked as a catalyst of *challenges* which have affected trade unions already long before the current crises.

All in all, when it comes to understanding the specific trajectories of trade unions by using a 'microscope' when looking at their power resources, the country analyses in this book will show that what really matters in the end are the country-specific *interactions* between individual power resources, or *country-specific configurations* of power resources. The following overview of the country chapters highlights changes of these configurations over time, and the extent to which or in what way the present crises are relevant for these changes.

### 3. The crises as catalyst of change and challenges

In what follows we highlight the most important changes in the country-specific configurations of power resources, either before or in the course of the present crises. As the look at the overall trends has shown, in many countries discrepancies have grown over past decades between structural and organisational power resources, on one hand, and institutional power resources, on the other. Most unions could rely on institutional power resources which have, to a greater or lesser extent, helped them to outweigh the loss in organisational and structural power. While some unions were confronted with a more or less substantial weakening of these institutional power resources before the present crisis, others have been hit suddenly by a virtual demolition of institutions connected with the collective bargaining system. These interactions and mutual dependencies in relation to broader changes in national and international power structures are spelled out in the country analyses, of which the following overview gives a flavour geared to stimulating their analysis. The aim behind the grouping of countries in this overview is not to establish any new cluster or typology. Rather, it is to point at interesting challenges to familiar country-specific configurations of power resources across existing country clusters. We begin with countries in which the crises have triggered an imminent threat to unions' ability to act.

#### 3.1 Imminent threat

In Greece and Spain, the institutional anchors of trade union power were destroyed or at least, as in Spain, severely damaged. *Köhler and Calleja Jiménez* describe the trajectory of trade unionism in *Spain* from the late 1970s up to the current crisis as a combination of

weak union density, occasional mass mobilisations and a strong focus on unions' role in labour market institutions. Their structural and organisational power was concentrated in large manufacturing plants, the banking sector and public services, while the impressive employment growth was concentrated in sectors with much weaker trade union presence and went hand in hand with the rise of the precarious segments in the labour market in which trade unions are scarcely present. Nevertheless, unions were able to draw on extensive bargaining potential at sectoral and national level, and based on the 'erga omnes' principle industry-level collective agreements laid down minimum social standards for all dependent employees. Based on occasional mass mobilisations, important social pacts could be negotiated in bi- or tripartite concertation at national level.

When Spanish governments turned towards an increasingly harsh austerity and deregulation approach, the collective bargaining system was weakened substantially, following exactly the blueprint of DG ECFIN (European Commission 2012), and tripartite concertation was marginalised. This put unions in an awkward position, as Köhler and Calleja Jiménez emphasise, because they had 'neglected to maintain and develop independent sources of union power' in the years before the crisis, while being 'overconfident about their growing institutional power'. After some important general strikes and mass demonstrations these traditional instruments were exhausted and the emerging movement of the '*indignados*' largely regarded unions as part of the establishment. New forms of trade union action had to be developed. At some regional or local levels unions have taken steps towards decentralised bargaining, but the arguably most prominent – and successful – revitalisation attempt was the active role of public sector unions in the social movements against privatisation and cuts in public services (the so-called 'civic tides'). Altogether, the two authors observe a contradictory mixture of revitalisation initiatives and an ongoing 'suffering from a deterioration of their institutional and social legitimacy. With other sources of power neglected in the past two decades, the social and political effects of the economic crisis are becoming a major challenge for their future role.'

The ruptures and challenges experienced by the trade unions in *Greece* are even more dramatic. Compared with Spain, trade union density used to be higher, but the configuration of power resources was even more one-sided. Hence a much greater vulnerability as analysed by *Vogiatzoglou*, which popped to the surface in 2010 in the course of the execution of the Troika's dictates. With regard to structural and organisational power resources, union membership did not keep pace with the employment increase before the crisis, and it remained very weak among precarious and young workers. On the other hand, unions could draw on an important structural and organisational power in public services and utilities, in which union density was more than 80 per cent. These strongholds used to be the key pillar of trade union influence as unions could mobilise their membership base in support of top-level bargaining, but also for more general policy issues within the realm of the 'close links between the political system and trade unions'. But public services and utilities also used to be the pace setters in wage bargaining in general, and in setting the national minimum wage in particular. Thus, while employees in the public sector enjoyed significantly higher levels of social protection, unions' bargaining power in these strongholds had positive spin-off effects for large parts of the working population.

This key anchor proved fragile when social standards in general and the whole of the collective bargaining system in particular – including its relevance for the national minimum wage – were virtually dismantled by diktat from 2010 onwards. The traditional union–party links became ineffective as the allies of the political majority in the unions executed the Troika’s will. The remaining weapon was the political strike. The 30 days of general strike in 2011 and 2012 were an important contribution to the anti-austerity mass movement but, similar to Spain, their concrete effects were minimal. As a consequence, the institutional power resources were crushed, and societal power resources (including unions’ political standing amongst young people but also in a wider public) were weakened substantially. As *Vogiatzoglou* has it, ‘employers no longer need trade unions to secure labour peace’.

In a quite gloomy way this description applies to trade unions in *Hungary*, too, with the exception that over recent decades they have not benefited from the level of respectability among a wider public comparable to that of their Greek or Spanish counterparts. *Neumann and Tóth* describe the extremely difficult situation of the fragmented Hungarian union movement since the 1990s. Structural power resources tend to be limited due to the high share of precarious employment. Weak representation of low skilled, precarious and in particular young workers, on one hand, and the rapid drop in union density in formerly well represented (public) sectors, on the other, had reduced the organisational power resources substantially already before the crisis. As for institutional power resources, sectoral bargaining had been scarce from the beginning, while decentralised bargaining was limited to state or municipality owned companies and parts of the private sector, primarily larger manufacturing companies. Thus, the remaining crucial anchor for institutional power was top-level tripartite negotiations dealing primarily with the national minimum wage, which rose faster than average wages. The social democrat MSZP who were in government most of the time used to be the main political ally of the leading trade unions.

This system crumbled and was eventually dismantled in 2009. In the case of Hungary, it was not the Troika but the IMF that dictated the turn to austerity. Similar to Spain and Greece the beginning of this turn was executed by social democrats (MSZP). But other than in the two Southern countries it was not confronted by a left-wing or grassroots mass movement. The opposition was led by the right-wing Fidesz party, which was a first step towards a political split within the union landscape. Fidesz won a landslide victory in the 2010 elections and began a turn towards a policy approach described as ‘economic nationalism’ by *Neumann and Tóth*. Key labour market policy measures of the Orbán government have been – next to massive public works programmes – an anti-strike act, the abolition of the favourability principle in collective bargaining and a substantial weakening of tripartite negotiations, which until recently led to an ‘institutional vacuum’ for trade unions in the private sector. Against this background the current government established relations ‘with one or two preferred partners’, as *Neumann and Tóth* put it. While over recent years important mass movements for the defence of social rights and of public services, such as education, were initiated or supported by the more radical and activist unions, attempts to organise a civil movement- and union-based political opposition to the right-wing government have failed so far. Against the background of low unemployment, however, the Fidesz government has begun to be slightly more open

to trade union demands, the priority on the unions' side being increases in the statutory minimum wage, which has given a stronger tailwind for local pay increases in the private sector in some large companies. As the two authors conclude, whether this tailwind can be translated into a more sustainable system of collective bargaining will depend on the strength of representation and organisational power at the workplace, which may contribute to the success of local bargaining and to 'the badly needed union renewal'.

This kind of experience is light years away from those in countries in which trade unions with strong power resources present a picture of continuity. But as we will see, the road has become more bumpy in these antipodes, too.

### 3.2 Behind continuity

In our set of countries, the two antipodes to the trade unions in the most crisis-ridden countries are those in Sweden and Austria, which are widely perceived to be two flagships of stability and continuity in European unionism.

As far as *Swedish* unions are concerned, the analysis of *Bengtsson and Ryner* supports this view for the years 2008 onwards as no perceivable change in the role of the unions was caused by the crisis. As the two authors argue, the change had happened much earlier, in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Sweden suffered from its deepest economic crisis for decades, which turned out to be a crisis of the socio-economic model which had previously shaped the country. In the 'Rehn-Meidner' decades, trade unions' 'solidaristic wage policy' had played a key role in guaranteeing an economically and socially balanced development path. In this era, unions could draw on a mutually supportive interplay between their strong structural, organisational, institutional and societal power resources: high and rising rates of employment, high union density within the 'Ghent' framework, high collective bargaining coverage and strong links between unions and the Social Democratic Party.

The two authors analyse the restabilisation – if on different foundations – of the system following the turmoil of the 1980s. The unions retreated gradually from their leading role in macroeconomic policy and established the so-called 'Europe norm' in wage bargaining: the share of profits claimed by leading export-oriented manufacturing companies has been accepted ever since as an 'exogenously given' condition of the annual corporatist framework agreements on a 'wage corridor' for all sectors. Against the background of the rise of public and private services in union membership and the persisting gender wage gap, the ongoing dominance of the blue-collar LO in setting this guideline has sparked increasing inter-union tensions and conflicts. Nevertheless, the 'decided shift towards supply-side oriented competitive corporatism' is still being widely regarded as 'the best within the limits of the possible', which is attributed by *Bengtsson and Ryner* to the fundamental shift in the balance of power: the rise of international financial market capitalism, which entails a dramatic increase of foreign (mainly US- and UK-based) ownership by institutional investors, which has changed fundamentally the terms of corporate strategy, including the required rate of return on capital. The two authors assess this fundamental structural change to be more important than a certain

weakening of institutional and organisational power resources in the 2000s triggered by right-wing governments.

*Austria* is another example of unions ‘standing on shaky ground, despite their strong position and surprising institutional stability’, as analysed by *Astleithner and Flecker*. The structural power resources of Austrian unions have traditionally benefitted from low unemployment rates, but began to come under pressure in the 1990s. Furthermore, the organisational power resources have shrunk substantially as union density rates dropped continuously from, originally, almost 60 per cent in the early 1980s to less than 30 per cent today. Nevertheless, the institutional power resources have resisted these challenges most of the time. Due to the institutionalised Austrian ‘social partnership’ system sectoral agreements continue to provide for exceptionally high coverage rates. Moreover, corporatism includes strong links between the social partners and the political system, which for decades has provided trade unions with important societal power resources.

The foundations of this building were shaken in the early 2000s when a conservative-extreme right-wing coalition government took over. This period proved that ‘the institutionalisation of social dialogue rests on a fragile system of reciprocal acceptance between social partners and politicians’, with the implication that unions lost large parts of their institutional and societal power. What is more, financial scandals at a union-run bank in the mid-2000s put the unions’ organisational and societal power resources under additional pressure. The return of a new ‘corporatist’ government on the eve of the crisis, however, and the following management of the crisis provided a platform for unions ‘on which to get back into the game of concertation’. The newly gained political tail-wind was used by the unions for a more confrontational wage policy based on greater membership involvement, and for a reactivation of their capacities to influence public discourse. However, as in some other countries, the soaring support for an extreme-right party among workers is pushing the unions into an awkward situation. But trade unions’ main ‘strategic dilemma’, as summarised by *Astleithner and Flecker*, is reflected in the widely shared view that ‘losing the commitment of employers’ interest groups to social partnership would probably undermine the foundations of the Austrian system of industrial relations’.

These two authors characterise this dilemma as the ‘gilded cage’ of Austrian unions. In some other countries, however, the social outcomes of similar tightrope acts are definitely much worse than in Austria or Sweden. This is why the crises have worked, in one way or another, as a catalyst that has either brought long-term problems of unions to the surface or has fostered new strategic approaches. In most cases, as we will see in what follows, it is a mixture of both.

### 3.3 Between corporatism and activism

The *Netherlands* may be regarded as a typical example of this mixture. As *de Beer and Keune* summarise, the economic crisis ‘has not led to profound changes in the position of the Dutch trade unions, but it has nevertheless reinforced particular long-term

tendencies in Dutch industrial relations'. The trends in structural and organisational power resources are similar to those in many other countries: labour market power did not benefit from employment growth, which has halved union density since the 1970s. However, the collective bargaining system with its high coverage rate and usual practice of extension has remained untouched. Taken at face value the same applies to top-level tripartite concertation which has been at the core of the 'Polder model' since the early 1980s. Given the key role of wage moderation in this setting real wages have on average stagnated over recent decades.

This system only experienced a serious challenge in the aftermath of the crisis and the reinforcement of austerity policy. In 2011 the two largest FNV union federations refused to accept a social pact in 2011 on a radical reform of the pension system, which had been signed by the leadership of the FNV confederation. This conflict brought the confederation to the brink of break up. The difficult process of 'reshuffling' the confederation by rebalancing the internal weights was also reflected in the unusual fact that the 2013 social pact did not include the traditional wage moderation paragraph. The partial strategic reorientation included a more confrontational and membership-based approach to wage policy, organising initiatives, campaigns addressing precarious labour and the partly successful 'Young and United' campaign against the low minimum wage for young people. Given the growing tensions between employer federations and trade unions and the uncertainty of better outcomes based on more confrontation, in particular in wage bargaining, *De Beer and Keune* underline that the more activist approach continues to be a controversial issue within and between the unions and is seen by many 'as a departure from unionism based on social partnership and collective bargaining'. The strategic dilemma mentioned above pops up again.

Interestingly, the question about how to deal with tripartite concertation under current conditions has triggered new dynamics in the *Polish* trade union movement, too. *Bernaciak* analyses the limited structural and organisational power resources of the two biggest unions against the background of long-term problems of the Polish economy and labour market, with its low employment rate, soaring precarious labour and a virtually 'union-free' SME sector. The union landscape has been characterised by a low density rate and cleavages between the unions. Societal power resources, too, have tended to be weak in terms of both mobilisation capacities and public prestige. Similar to Hungary, these limitations could not be offset by collective bargaining, which is weak beyond the remnants of the public sector. Hence the strong interest of the two biggest unions in top-level tripartite concertation.

This fragile configuration was seriously shaken by the reinforcement of neoliberalism in the course of the European crisis. While Poland remained untouched by the first phase of the crisis, its long-term social problems were exacerbated, most importantly the prevalence of precarious 'junk contracts', in particular among young people. A tripartite anti-crisis pact negotiated in 2009 included a set of social elements that were not taken up by the Tusk government. Now trade unions began to mobilise for a higher minimum wage and against 'junk contracts'. After its re-election in 2011 the government did not carry on the practice of tripartite negotiations which in the meantime had already come to be regarded by the unions as 'PR corporatism'. Now for the first time ever the three

unions joined forces for campaigning and mobilisation efforts that reached their peak in a general strike in Silesia and mass demonstrations in Warsaw in 2013. *Bernaciak* emphasises that next to the anger of all unions about being rebuffed by the government, the driving force behind this convergence of union action has been more fundamental: it reflects the ‘limits of collective patience’ in Polish society, given the disappointment about the lack of social improvements after decades of trust in the benefits of ‘belt-tightening’ policies.

What followed, however, resembles the problems faced by the Hungarian unions. In the run-up to the 2015 election the PiS party, which has been the traditional political ally of *Solidarność*, campaigned for social justice. While the sweeping victory of this party brings ‘social problems from the streets back to political cabinets’, as *Bernaciak* puts it, it ‘has ‘disarmed’ the unions and significantly lowered their mobilisation potential’. Thus, disappointment among all unions about the limited social engagement of the new government has so far not led to a revival of union activism, and their absence from pro-democratic mass protests against the PiS government signals their hesitance to endanger regained union-government links.

The tensions between corporatism and activism have shaped recent changes in Italian and French unionism, too, if in very different ways.

### 3.4 Decline and defence of institutional power resources

Trade unions in France and Italy share a challenge which is at the centre of the respective analyses: the decentralisation of collective bargaining systems in the course of current mainstream policy approaches.

*Pernot* analyses the structural and organisational power resources of trade unions in *France* as a process of long-term continuous decline. Nevertheless, there has been a longstanding capacity of mass mobilisation able to ‘force social and political demands and issues into the public arena’. This exceptional combination of organisational and societal power resources, which used to go far beyond the low share of union members, has been most effective whenever the politically splintered and competing unions acted in unison. Given the characteristic French ‘statism’ collective bargaining coverage continues to be among the highest in Europe, and the periodical hike of the statutory minimum wage works as a pace setter and equaliser across sectors for the lower and medium parts of the wage scale. This makes France another example of the anchor function of unions’ institutional power resources as a main target of ‘reforms’ in the course of the crises.

Initially, the crises since 2008 and of the euro zone drove French governments to an intensification of top-level bipartite and tripartite concertation which, at face value, gives the impression of ‘crisis corporatism’. However, as *Pernot* argues, its single most important effect has been a deepening political cleavage between the trade union federations as some insist on the chance to influence legislative projects, while others regard these events as something that *Bernaciak*, for the Polish experience, calls ‘PR corporatism’. In fact, most

important labour market legislation initiatives were not subject to previous consultation in tripartite meetings, most notably the highly contested labour law changes in 2016 and 2017. One of the most controversial issues within these substantial reforms of the Labour Code has been the new approach to the decentralisation of collective bargaining. While up to the crisis decentralisation aimed to activate the local basis of collective bargaining, the concept enshrined in the new labour law is to give local bargaining on important subjects priority over sectoral agreements. Given the weakness of the collective bargaining capacities of union representatives at establishment level, *Pernot* expects that decentralisation may turn institutional resources into a trap that keeps local union representatives busy without being able to get a grip on actual working conditions.

Similar tendencies towards the fragmentation of collective bargaining by decentralisation and the levering out of the favourability principle were pushed forward in *Italy*, but unlike in France they could be stopped due to the resistance of the biggest union. By and large, there has been a great deal of continuity over time regarding the structural and organisational power resources of Italian unions. Even though labour market power has long been hampered by sluggish economic and employment growth, as well as by the high share of precarious workers, union density has been almost stable in the course of the 2000s, the highest level among countries without a Ghent system. Like their French counterparts, but drawing in addition on their strong and well-funded organisations, Italian unions have high mobilisation capacities. The two-tier bargaining system established by a top-level social pact in the early 1990s had proved stable up to the crisis, too. The dissolution of the old party system, however, gave way to what *Leonardi* calls a 'progressive marginalisation' of trade unions by the political system.

In Italy, as in other Southern European countries, the euro-zone crisis was taken by the national government, at the behest of the EU institutions (in this particular case it was the ECB) as grounds on which to try to hollow out the collective bargaining system. The government triggered several framework agreements from 2009 onwards, which included, among many other things, a clause about the possibility for company-level agreements to deviate to the worse from a national contract. Supported in its opposition by labour court rulings, FIOM-CGIL went into conflict with employers and the other unions and campaigned against the potential reversal of the hierarchy of norms. It eventually achieved another framework agreement in 2011 that confirmed the primacy of industry-level agreements. Shortly after this agreement, however, the government passed a law that levered out the favourability principle. Nevertheless, the main employers' associations and trade unions stuck to their 2011 compromise. While using this example, as well as insights into the revitalisation initiatives of Italian unions to draw a much less pessimistic picture than his colleagues from other Mediterranean countries, *Leonardi* comes to the conclusion that Italian trade unionism has been 'resilient' and 'capable of resisting the onslaught of the crisis', but he also points to the gap between the power resources 'Italian trade unions can still formally rely on – members, financial resources, bargaining coverage, ability to mobilise – and the results they have been able to achieve over the past 25 years' in terms of basic social and employment conditions. One key aspect of his explanation, besides the ever deepening structural deficiencies of the Italian economy, is the lack of reliable partners in the policy arena – an issue to which we will return.

While in the cases of Italy and France the importance of the European crises as a catalyst of challenges has popped up more recently, the power resources of UK unions – to which we now turn – have suffered from substantial setbacks since long *before* the crisis.

### 3.5 After the setbacks

From the 1980s, trade unionism in the *United Kingdom* has developed against the background of the historic defeats in the Thatcher era. Nevertheless, as *Coderre-LaPalme and Greer* emphasise, ‘trade unions remain an important presence in Britain’. To some extent, their structural and organisational power resources reflect the dramatic deindustrialisation of the United Kingdom, as well as the more recent growth of the public sector under New Labour. Today the public sector is the single most important stronghold of British unions. In spite of the rise in female union membership overall union density dropped continuously but is still at a higher level than in, for instance, Germany. British unions’ institutional power resources, however, are very limited. Roughly speaking, sectoral collective bargaining has survived only in public services, while local bargaining in the private sector is more the exception than the rule. As a consequence, *Coderre-LaPalme and Greer* conclude that ‘British unions increasingly rely on their discursive power in their campaigning in the public sphere’.

This is exactly what has become crucial since the radical turn of UK governments towards harsh austerity from 2010 onwards. Unions face the dilemma that resistance against the dramatic cuts in public services, most notably against the retrenchment of the National Health Service, have found support in public opinion, but strikes in the public sector continue to be regarded by many as a fight for public sector privileges. Without refraining from targeted industrial action, trade unions have tackled this dilemma by large-scale campaigning and coalition building, including mass demonstrations based on the mobilisation of their members, as well as on broader alliances, which have contributed to an image of unions as defenders of the welfare state. Campaigning has been successful in particular regarding the defence of the NHS but the overall situation of trade unions continues to be difficult, given the ongoing attacks of the government against their structural and organisational power resources (job cuts in the public sector), and against their remaining institutional power resources (including an anti-strike bill and reductions of institutional rights in the public sector). Given the lack of political allies important parts of the union federations decided to join the efforts to renew the Labour Party in the support of Jeremy Corbyn.

Maybe surprisingly, the challenge to become ‘more political’ faced by British unions has been shared, if under substantially different conditions, by their counterparts in *Germany*. While the structural and organisational power resources of German unions have traditionally been more evenly distributed across sectors than in some other countries, since the 1990s the gap has widened between large parts of manufacturing industry and the public sector, on one side, and much of the private service sector, on the other. In a short period of time overall union density in Germany dropped more than in virtually all other Western European countries, before the unions managed to slow

down or halt the decline over recent years. What proved crucial is the interplay between falling union density and fragmenting structural and institutional power resources, which is reflected in the continuous decline of collective bargaining coverage and the rise of precarious employment in the aftermath of labour market deregulations in the early 2000s. The fact that these ‘reforms’ were implemented by a Social Democrat-led government alienated many trade union members from their traditional and closest political ally. Thus, all major unions’ power resources were painfully reduced up onto the mid-2000s.

This experience led to important revitalisation initiatives already before the 2008/2009 crisis, but the crisis itself triggered a remarkable turn of events. It was not just the well-known ‘crisis corporatism’ which helped unions to regain public reputation but also their more confrontational and self-confident activism in wage bargaining, in industrial action aimed to upgrade social services and in public campaigning, most prominently for a statutory minimum wage. One, if mostly implicit, side-aspect of this approach has been the increasing awareness that German unions are facing the particular responsibility, as we put it in our country chapter, ‘to regard proactive approaches to primary *and* secondary distribution as one major contribution to fight the imbalances in Europe’. That is, any progress in re-regulation of the labour market and in public social investment strengthens the domestic market in Europe’s biggest economy, which is particularly important for the other countries in the monetary union.

While our analysis describes major differences in cultures and policy approaches between the two largest unions IG Metall and ver.di, it points at an interesting commonality: similar to the campaigning approach of their British counterparts German unions have managed to demonstrate that they not only care about their core constituency, but about society as a whole, fighting for equality and decency on the labour market. Irrespective of this paradoxical revitalisation of German trade unions against the background of the crisis, our analysis points at persistent problems in union density and challenges to structural and institutional power resources, including the need for re-regulation of precarious employment and for strengthening the collective bargaining system that ‘entail the need for unions to decide upon their capacities and willingness to act as autonomous political actors’.

As will be highlighted in what follows, the latter can arguably be regarded as a cross-cutting challenge for European unions.

#### **4. Contrasting parallels**

European trade union trajectories over recent years present a picture of increasing divergence. This calls to mind Italian industrial relations scholar Mimmo Carrieri’s reference to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, quoted by *Leonardi* (in this volume): while in good times all trade unions are fairly similar, in hard times they all suffer in their own different ways. This is why the country clusters frequently used in comparative trade union analyses make less sense today. While the North–South cleavage in

European unionism has become even deeper than before, the cleavages *within* at least part of the respective groups of countries have grown, too. This applies at any rate to the ‘Mediterranean’ group when comparing France, Italy and Spain (not to mention Greece). Divergences are growing within the CEE group of countries, too, as the analyses of Polish and Hungarian unions in the present volume demonstrate. And looking at Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, it is arguably more doubtful than ever whether it makes sense to regard these unions as belonging to one group.

Given the ever increasing diversification within European unionism, the most interesting question is what *connects* them. When Katz and Darbishire (2000) found ‘converging divergences’ when comparing challenges to trade unions around the world they emphasised the persisting importance of labour market institutions for the ability of trade unions to cope with these challenges. Looking at the unions analysed in the present book this view appears more relevant than ever. Given the stark contrasts between labour market institutions across EU countries and the aggravation of these differences in the course of the present crises, it should be underscored that institutions continue to matter. But equally important is the observation that unions share some basic problems in dealing with these institutions irrespective of the extremely different institutional settings. That is, the ongoing process of crises in Europe operates as a catalyst for challenges that are fairly similar across borders, while the capacities to tackle these challenges differ substantially.

In what follows, we will argue that the relationship between institutional power resources – or what is left of them – on one hand, and the role of trade unions as politically autonomous actors (which is part of their societal power resources), on the other, has become apparent as the single most important cross-cutting challenge. It is shared by all trade unions analysed in the present book and has been reinforced considerably by the economic and political upheavals in the past decade, irrespective of the very different ways unions have been affected by the crises. It is a contradictory development that can be described as ‘contrasting parallels’.

#### 4.1 Institutional power resources

As our overview of the country analyses shows, labour market institutions can matter in very different ways within country-specific configurations of trade union power resources. Hence the importance of the interaction between institutional and other power resources.

One aspect of this interaction is the potential ‘curse of institutional security (Hassel 2007): if institutional power is not buttressed by continuously renewed organisational and societal power, it may give rise to unjustified illusions of power and will in the long term become hollowed out and fragile (Dörre 2008). In their detailed analysis of seven ‘peripheral’ EU countries Koukiadaki *et al.* (2016: 80) indicate that ‘when state support in the form of extension mechanisms and the favourability principle were withdrawn, unions were not able to draw on other resources to rebalance the structure of bargaining’. A similar observation is that public sector unions that in some countries

were used to relying on traditional and centralised bargaining privileges are realising how much they have become dependant on ‘their governments’ political benevolence’ (Schmidt *et al.* 2017: 215) the moment this privilege is withdrawn overnight.

Albeit in an — by European standards — indirect and prudent manner this may become a serious challenge even for Austrian unions if the new right-wing government puts into practice its plans to weaken the chamber system, one of the most important anchors of trade union institutional power in that country. Most dramatic, however, was the Greek unions’ experience of being deprived of institutional security virtually overnight. This is why *Vogiatzoglou* argues that ‘all the elements that explain the failure of the Greek trade unions to cope with the crisis and austerity challenge were already present in 2010’. This harsh assessment may be put to the test in the near future. After the de facto destruction of the Greek collective bargaining system in the course of implementing the Troika’s diktats the 2016 ‘Memorandum’ stipulated that an international expert group be commissioned to elaborate proposals for future labour market regulations. Arguably against the expectations of the EU Commission the recommendations of this group of experts are very much in favour of re-establishing strong social minimum standards and a viable collective bargaining system (Expert Group for the Review of Greek Labour Market Institutions 2016). The Greek government has announced that it will follow the advice of the experts after the end of the third Memorandum. However, this announcement has been harshly contested by the IMF. In case the recommendations of the expert group actually serve as a basis for reshaping Greek labour standards the unions’ ability to meet the challenge this entails may actually be improved by these regained institutional power resources but there is much to *Vogiatzoglou’s* reasoning that ‘a re-establishment of the collective bargaining system as such will not be sufficient to regain trade unions’ capacities to act and to move trade unions out of their awkward situation.’

Another aspect of this interaction relevant for most unions covered in the present book is the way trade unions cope with the challenge of decentralisation of collective bargaining, or with the attempt to virtually demolish it by abolishing the favourability principle and providing opt-out clauses for individual employers (Keune 2015; Leonardi and Pedersini 2018). Albeit in different ways, many unions face this problem. To take an example apart from the very specific juggernaut experience of the Greek unions, the Spanish unions had to cope with a severe blow when the right-wing government entered office in 2012. While Spanish unions, unlike their Greek counterparts, managed to encourage some employers to maintain the previous hierarchy of standards and to refrain from opting out of the sectoral agreements, the effectiveness of collective bargaining has been weakened significantly, as is demonstrated by the evolution of collectively agreed wages and salaries (Fernández Rodríguez *et al.* 2016). While acknowledging this approach to be ‘moderately successful’, *Köhler and Calleja Jiménez* point at the underlying limitation that organisational and societal power resources are ‘very difficult to mobilise for trade unions after decades of an almost exclusive orientation towards institutional power resources and representative forms of collective action’. The latter refers to the practice of general political strikes, which proved to be crucial at important stages in the making of the Spanish welfare state but exhausted their potential more recently in the opposition against austerity.

As compared to Spain, trade unions in Italy – most notably CGIL-FIOM – have been able to draw on a larger set of power resources in defence of collective bargaining. The disobedience and mass mobilisation of the biggest union against top-level compromises that might have hollowed out the existing architecture of collective bargaining proved to be effective; to date, new framework agreements have disregarded the government's decision to abolish the favourability principle. *Leonardi* regards the greater decentralisation involved as manageable for Italian unions due to their comparatively strong membership base and their active role in the interest representation bodies at company or establishment level. The latter aspects are worth mentioning when looking at France, where unions are facing a similar challenge in the implementation of the recent changes in labour legislation with their 'reversal of the hierarchy of norms' on important issues. *Pernot* highlights the problem of local union representatives being absorbed by obligatory regular negotiations with limited impact. Given the weak trade union density, his assessment is that these institutional changes will work as a trap, rather than a power resource, for French unions.

The obvious conclusion from these differing experiences is that unions are in a position to curb the fragmentation of collective bargaining systems, and to turn disorganised or destructive decentralisation into organised decentralisation if they can deploy or develop power resources *beyond* their links to the established political sphere.

The example of the British unions is telling in this respect. *Coderre-Lapalme and Greer* insist that in the face of low and declining organizational, institutional and structural power resources 'unions are able very effectively to assert their societal relevance'. One may have the impression that the more difficult it gets for unions to pursue their objectives within an established institutional setting the more likely it gets that they will be inclined to try and find their way as independent actors. As the experiences of trade unions in Hungary demonstrate, however, this view requires important qualifications – most crucially, as the UK example shows, regarding organisational and associational power resources, including the development of campaigning capacities. Maybe surprisingly, there are parallel experiences in Germany where unions since the mid-2000s have resorted to political campaigning as a reaction to dwindling institutional power resources. Unlike in the United Kingdom, however, these campaigns have been focused on repairing or replacing damaged or broken institutional anchors (such as the campaign for a statutory minimum wage). Moreover, even classic revitalisation activities such as organising initiatives have been linked with these attempts to re-strengthen institutional power resources, in particular by establishing works councils (*Haipeter and Dörre 2011*).<sup>6</sup>

The importance of the interactions between power resources becomes visible also when looking at 'social movement unionism', which is widely regarded as a crucial element of trade union revitalisation. As observed by *Köhler and Calleja Jiménez* in relation to Spanish unions, when organisational power resources have been neglected in the

6. Linkages between organising and other revitalisation activities with country-specific industrial relations systems and trade union traditions are a typical feature in many countries; for a recent overview see *Nizzoli (2017)*.

past while institutional power resources have become weaker, the rise of new social movements may well provide an opportunity but also a threat: ‘The opportunity comes from the possibility to develop revitalisation strategies such as coalition-building, whereas the threat is related to the possibility that these new social movements may displace or marginalise unions’.<sup>7</sup> The examples of new areas of joint action between unions and non-union social movements presented in the chapter on Spain show that the opportunity may outweigh the threat, but that it is the link between societal and organisational power resources that will ultimately tip the balance. The cooperation with the increasingly activist Spanish women’s rights movement that became visible on 8 March 2018 is a telling example here, as it is ‘the increased presence of women *in* the trade unions [our emphasis] which is a valid asset for establishing solid cooperation with feminist groups in terms of broadening the social base and political reputation of trade unions.’

Last but not least, the relevance of the interactions between power resources is demonstrated by the ‘tightrope act’ characterised by the well-known distinction between the ‘logic of membership and logic of influence’ made by Schmitter and Streeck (1981), to which de Beer and Keune and Astleithner and Flecker refer in their analyses of Dutch and Austrian trade unions. As both analyses suggest, these two logics entail a strategic dilemma, but they are not mutually exclusive and — in contrast to what was originally conceived by Schmitter and Streeck — can even be mutually supportive. Presumably, any attempt to develop a mutually supportive interaction between these two logics will not be possible when the ‘logic of influence’ is understood as identical with a ‘logic of institutions’. But as the country studies in this volume demonstrate it still remains an open question how both logics can be developed in practice, and not just in theory, as mutually supportive drivers of union revitalisation.

In one way or another, this question is addressed as a strategic dilemma in most country chapters of the present book, most prominently regarding bi- or tripartite top-level concertation which in a number of countries has been established as either a formal or a *de facto* institution over past decades.

## 4.2 Political autonomy

Irrespective of its formal institutionalisation, once governments abandon established corporatist approaches everything depends on trade union capacities to mobilise their membership and beyond, and their discursive potential to influence the political agenda. This is particularly pertinent in countries in which ‘social dialogue’ has more and more become a purely formal practice that serves primarily ‘to provide political legitimisation for governments and has little to do with genuine participation’ (Bosch and Lehndorff 2017: 47).

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7. In this context it is worth recalling the suspicion expressed by Hyman (2007: 206) shortly before the crisis that unions may become ‘outsiders in a terrain where until recently the role of insiders was comforting and rewarding’ and have to seek ‘cooperation, often uneasy, with other social movements which have never acquired the respectability gained by trade unions in most countries’.

By way of example, *Vogiatzoglou's* critical assessment that the agenda of Greek unions continues to be dominated by a certain 'nostalgia with regard to the pre-crisis period' describes a situation in which counterbalancing power resources are available or mobilised to a limited extent only. *Bernaciak*, in turn, describes a contrasting parallel with the case of the Polish unions in the period before the election of the present government. The experience of being rebuffed by the then neoliberal government and mocked with a mere 'PR corporatism' triggered an activation of Polish unions which, for the first time in decades, turned towards politically autonomous action. What is more, when comparing the upheavals in tripartite concertation in Poland with those in the Netherlands, the interesting observation is that the Polish unions joined forces – at least for a certain period – while the Dutch union confederation almost split over the issue before agreeing on a new organisational structure and some fresh policy approaches. But the core issue was the same: *How to become both politically and practically a more autonomous actor?*

If in a different way, the challenge to regard 'logic of membership and logic of influence' as mutually supportive in practice is most relevant in those countries in which unions can still benefit from high levels of institutional support. *Astleithner and Flecker* raise the question of the extent to which the institutions of social partnership in Austria have turned into a 'gilded cage' for unions, while appreciating the reasons for regarding the present situation as the most feasible solution. Nevertheless, they observe the search for greater union activism and political independence, which reflects the awareness of this problematic in parts of the unions. It is in the same vein that *Bengtsson and Ryner* describe the pragmatic strategy of Swedish unions in the face of the fundamental shift in the balance of power towards international capital (with increasing inter-union tensions), while acknowledging the effective mobilisation activities of unions for the defence of labour law and social service provision. Nevertheless, they perceive that 'these objectives were achieved through a tactical retreat from policy domains in which the unions did not consider themselves strong enough to be recognised as a serious policy actor.'

In the case of Sweden, these policy domains include macroeconomic policy. In other countries this may be regarded as far away from unions' everyday core business. Nevertheless, they, too, confront the same problem. When CGIL presented a strategy for sustainable economic and jobs growth in Italy or, more recently, when it campaigned massively for a fundamental reform of labour law and the welfare state, it tried to respond to this challenge, even if it is not clear how to put this into practice and to gain political allies. British or German unions, too, are trying to connect their campaigns with demands for greater social justice in general, having – as *Coderre-LaPalme and Greer* put it – 'to some extent rediscovered their role as "swords of justice"'. But in many cases trade union demands are primarily 'defensive in objective' (*Bernaciak et al.* 2014: 40) even when supported by radical action, as sometimes in Southern Europe, and some give the impression of 'complaining about a "lost paradise"', as *Neumann and Tóth* describe it for Hungary.

Thus the challenge for unions of how to become a more autonomous actor – regarding their political and practical stance, as well as their programme and strategy – has arguably become the most prominent parallel amidst contrasting environments across

Europe. All country chapters address the uneasy situation entailed by the weakening, sometimes close to disappearance, of the traditional political allies of unions, most notably the ‘weakening of the social democratic political alliance’ (Murray 2017: 18), which is in many cases linked with socialist and social democratic parties’ adaptation to the neoliberal mainstream. As Bernaciak *et al.* (2014: 51) summarise, ‘little is left of a social-democratic “project” to inspire either parties or unions and to bind them together.’ Hence the decision of most British unions to actively support the current attempts to renew the Labour Party. Even though this might be regarded by some as a politically risky move, it makes sense given their experience that despite building up their discursive power, as *Coderre-LaPalme and Greer* have it, ‘it is unclear how much this has helped them in countering the initiatives of a hostile state.’

In some countries the situation becomes even more complicated when right-wing parties are the only ones to take up social claims of trade unions without reservation (at least as long they are in opposition, as is the case with the extreme-right Jobbik party in Hungary and its parliamentary activism in support of issues relevant for the trade unions). In Poland as well as in Hungary, to take two prominent examples, this has shifted unions into an awkward position, which has tempted them to avoid major political engagement and, as *Neumann and Tóth* have it, to ‘claim that they work independently of any political parties’.

It is more than obvious that this approach may provide for some short-term relief but is no viable answer to the more fundamental challenge of political autonomy. This problem is demonstrated most strikingly in Poland. As *Bernaciak* has it, the policy approach of the current PiS government is ‘more socially progressive than that of its predecessor’, but it follows ‘a neo-etatist, social conservative line, with the government “knowing best” what is good for workers and citizens more generally’. The fact that ‘Solidarność emerged as the closest government ally’ dealt a blow to the unity among trade unions regained in the preceding years. While it is unclear whether or when dissatisfaction among some unions leads to more open protests against government policies, the consequence of the persistent popularity of that government and the declining solidarity among unions has been that most trade unions ‘have so far been largely absent from pro-democratic initiatives’.

Other country analyses, too, demonstrate that the rise of right-wing nationalist and racist parties has become an increasing problem for many trade unions. Recent experiences in Austria, France and, more recently also Germany underscore the challenge for unions, as *Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman* (2018) have it, ‘which in most cases wish to pursue progressive, anti-racist policies but are also reluctant to alienate members and activists with very different opinions’. *Asthleitner and Flecker* give the example of the 2017 elections in Austria where 59 per cent of blue-collar workers voted for the extreme-right FPÖ, against 19 per cent of votes for the Social Democrats. They conclude that the debate on ‘how to react to the new far-right government’ has become one of the biggest challenges for the unions. The government ‘provides many reasons for more conflict-oriented policies’ but ‘given the labour movement’s restraint in confrontational strategies it remains an open question how strong the unions’ resistance against neoliberal political reforms will be.’

Of course, political autonomy does not mean that trade unions could or should try and act as a substitute for political parties (Deppe 2012: 53). But where unions once had political allies there is now in many cases a political vacuum, which in some countries is being partly filled by right-wing parties. Thus, if under extremely different country-specific conditions, in today's Europe, unions' societal agenda-setting power is more and more required for the defence or recovery of trade unions' everyday core business, that is, the improvement of working conditions. This is arguably the only way to encourage their still existing political allies, or to gain new ones.

Thus, when looking at parallels amidst contrasts, at *commonalities* in the rough European trade union landscape, here they are: if unions don't find a way to develop the capacities of politically autonomous actors, their long-standing institutional power resources are in a permanent and increasing danger of being dismantled, or of losing their effectiveness within a seemingly undamaged shell. This new requirement for 'strategic capabilities' (Lévesque and Murray 2010) referred to above is a cross-cutting challenge – or new territory of unionism – whose difficulties are reflected most prominently at the European level.

## 5. Europe – the elephant in the room

The relationship between trade unions and Europe is contradictory. In a way, 'Europe' is like the unspoken elephant in the room: it is obvious for everybody how crucial it is, but there is a great deal of insecurity about how to address the problem effectively and in some countries unions are reluctant to address it at all. As a consequence, the European trade union movement has not managed so far to *practice* a joint policy approach against austerity and labour market deregulation (Busch 2016). In a nutshell, the cleavage between (objective) challenges and (subjective) capacities at EU level – or the 'painful gap in European policy strategy' as Urban (2015: 286) calls it – has widened. Müller and Platzler in their chapter on European trade union federations describe the situation as paradoxical because, on one hand, 'the transnational nature of the crisis has created overarching, similar or complementary problems that can foster and promote joint European approaches', while on the other 'the crisis has created nationally specific and at the same time divergent problems and contexts for trade union action'.

As to the former aspect, the undisputed fact is that the European Single Market and most notably the euro have made the development of European national economies increasingly dependant on each other. Before the economic crisis Europe saw a growing divergence between account deficit and account surplus countries. While many countries in Southern Europe but also the United Kingdom have followed a 'debt driven' growth model, most countries in Northern Europe have relied on an 'export-driven' growth model (Hein *et al.* 2016; Stockhammer *et al.* 2016). This was already true before the crisis when the common currency gave a boost to the mutual reinforcement of these two unsustainable growth models, namely Germany's increasingly surplus driven economy, on one side, and some deficit driven economies on the other. At the macroeconomic level this worked as a doomed-to-fail 'symbiosis of core and periphery' (Lehndorff 2015b:

163), while at industry and workplace levels it confronted — and continues to confront — unions and works councils on either side with the permanent challenge of labour cost dumping along and across value chains unfettered by exchange rates (Hürtgen 2008). It was the logic of a ‘competition union’ which collapsed temporarily when the bubble burst. Since the EU launched its austerity- and deregulation-focused ‘new economic governance’ after the near breakdown of the common currency in the aftermath of the Great Recession, the intertwinement of national economies on one hand, and of European economic policy on the other has become even closer than before. So has the link between trade unions’ national or industry-specific areas of conflict and the issues at stake at EU level. As *Müller and Platzer* reason, ‘in principle, a shift in the locus of political decision-making from the national to the European level should have strengthened the political role of the European trade union federations in representing the interests of their affiliates in the new arenas created by the new system of economic governance.’ But they add: ‘In practice, this did not happen – on the contrary.’

The reasons behind what these two authors call a ‘crisis-induced re-nationalisation of union policies and activities’ are manifold. The arguably fundamental one is the more and more predominant neoliberal policy approach and re-forming of EU institutions which makes the rise of any labour-based European agency and identity increasingly difficult. As Wickham (2016: 250) summarises, ‘the failure of the EU to secure any meaningful economic and social rights for ordinary Europeans increasingly undermines any legitimacy for the European project. We face the paradox that European elites are now destroying the only real basis for a distinctive popular European identity.’

It is on this basis that the problems highlighted in the present volume come into play. The most obvious one is what *Müller and Platzer* call the ‘divergence in the experience of the crisis’. Workers and unions on the ‘periphery’ are facing increasingly different problems as compared with their counterparts in the so-called ‘core’ countries, and vice versa. As a consequence, trade unions across European countries may feel like they are acting in different worlds, even though the roots of the problems they are facing are closely interrelated. As *Köhler and Calleja Jimenez* highlight with the example of the Day of Action and Solidarity against Austerity across Europe in 2012, ‘Spanish unions are more aware than most of their European counterparts of the need for transnational organisation and the importance of the European dimension’, but ‘the lack of support by central and northern European organisations motivated some disappointment and a certain Euro-scepticism.’ The example demonstrates that existing political barriers are even more difficult to overcome under the conditions of European economic governance which, while being a supranational regime, ‘simultaneously supports a nationalization of economic policy discourses as it puts member states in competition with one another’ (Erne 2015: 353). This has opened the doors for right-wing nationalism, which has turned into a serious challenge for trade unions cross-border solidarity in particular (if not exclusively) in the ‘core’ countries, while massive European campaigning against austerity and labour market deregulation is desperately needed, and ETUC resolutions legitimately demand a social turnaround in EU level economic policy.

What comes on top of this in a couple of EU countries is the weakening of trade unions’ power resources which, as *Müller and Platzer* underscore, are also ‘an essential

prerequisite for the European trade union federations' capacity to act at European level.' In a nutshell, economic policy decisions are more and more shifted towards European bodies, which requires powerful trade union players at this level, while within the same move trade unions' legs are being cut from under them in the most crisis-ridden countries. In the same vein, unions need to coordinate their wage policies more than ever, but the authoritarian decentralisation or even dismantling of collective bargaining systems in some countries undermine their capacities to do so. *Müller and Platzer* also point out that it is still an open question whether the outcomes of the current debate on a 'European Pillar of Social Rights' will help in the future – at least to some extent – to create some counterweight to these trends by at least moderately supporting trade unions' discursive or even institutional power resources at EU level.

The trade union policy gap between European needs and national resources is particularly large in countries where the capacities of trade union headquarters are more than exhausted by domestic conflicts. The picture of Hungarian unions drawn by *Neumann and Tóth* may serve as a particularly dramatic example here. But *Pernot's* look at France, too, shows how unions which used to be major contributors to joint European action can be absorbed by national campaigns, such as the one against the 'loi travail' under conditions of continuously weakening power resources. Last but not least, in many countries unions find it more and more difficult to deal with soaring right-wing nationalism which makes any justified and pro-European criticism of current EU policies a political tightrope act. In the same vein, it would be misleading – and provide a further tailwind for right-wing nationalism – to blame 'Brussels' for the full scale of anti-social policies in Europe. To take just one telling example, 'Agenda 2010' in Germany was quite obviously not following any 'Memorandum of Understanding' dictated by EU authorities. An equally obvious case is the United Kingdom, where 'the proximate cause of the unions' problems is the UK government rather than the European Commission', as stated by *Coderre-LaPalme and Greer*, with the consequence that 'the international context is at present a remote concern of the unions.' However, as the Brexit vote – and its support by many union members – demonstrated, unions cannot escape from this context.

But as argued in the chapters on Swedish and Austrian unions, there are even deeper reasons behind the difficulties or even reluctance to engage at EU level. *Bengtsson and Ryner* raise the question why of all unions it is the strongest ones that engage so little for a social Europe. They underscore the relevance of this question by arguing that a turn towards a macroeconomic policy approach at EU level informed by the Swedish Rehn-Meidner model could arguably be the best possible remedy to cure the worsening ills of the EU. The answer they give is that unions, too, prefer to focus on the defence of social achievements in their own country. The two authors describe this attitude as following the tradition of a 'strong welfare-nationalist character of the Swedish left and the labour movement' – an assessment which fits very well with *Erne's* (2008: 41) more general assumption that 'if organized labour still has confidence in its national power resources and believes that it can pursue national economic and social policies, it will tend to reject the European integration process as a capitalist project and try to pursue a welfare state renationalization strategy.' A similar line of argument, if against a different political background, is presented by *Astleithner and Flecker*. Austrian trade unions are

definitely more active at the European level than their Swedish counterparts, but they, too, see 'hardly any possibilities to influence policies within the neoliberal framework of the European Union'. They consider the nation state 'the only field in which unions have the ability to fight neoliberalism and to defend the social security and wage bargaining systems'.

In principle, trade unions in Europe, as in other parts of the capitalist world, confront the problem of what Marginson (2016: 1051) calls a 'growing governance gap at the international level'. What comes on top of this within the EU, however, is the particular nature of jurisdiction, supranational treaties and intergovernmental agreements at EU level. Since the Maastricht Treaty – and with an increasing dynamic since the establishment of the New Economic Governance – the priority of the 'free market' has been made a contractual and even constitutional cornerstone of the EU (Oberndorfer 2014; Lechevalier and Wielgohs 2015). The devastating effects of the policies based on this institutional enshrinement are reflected in the sluggish and precarious economic development of the euro zone and in the serious and long-lasting social damage in numerous EU countries. As a consequence, 'Europe' is regarded by more and more people as a threat to the social achievements of past decades. The seemingly most realistic response is to barricade behind the walls of the nation state. But behind these walls trade unions' room for manoeuvre is shrinking continuously even in Sweden, as *Bengtsson and Ryner* argue, due to the structural shift in the economic and political balance of power under the pressure of international financial capital. If one follows this analysis, the consequence is the need for greater supra-national counterweights. This is where a fundamentally reformed European Union *should* and *could* come into play. It is a policy turn, however, that 'needs to be transnationally coordinated or it will not take place' (Schulten and van Gyes 2015: 410). In fact, a build-up of social counterweights to neoliberalism in multi-level governance within the EU will become real only when more trade unions manage to develop multi-level policy approaches that anchor key issues of EU policy in their respective national policy agendas.

The ETUC and also some national unions (cf. *Leonardi* for Italy's CGIL and our chapter on Germany for DGB) have developed important programmatic contributions to social alternatives to the current predominant course of action in the EU. But as the final chapter on European trade union action demonstrates, there is a long and bumpy road from programmes to practical policies. Nevertheless, there are also important starting points to learn from (cf. *Bieler et al.* 2015). *Müller and Platzer* highlight the importance of successful multi-level campaigns such as the ones against the Bolkestein directive and against the privatisation of water. More recently, the TTIP/CETA/CISA campaign has added to this experience in a particularly impressive manner as it encouraged a growing number of social actors to take up this issue in their own countries.

One common feature of these campaigns has been an approach which links trade union action – to varying degrees – with other social movements. Another, if largely unspoken of, characteristic has been the fact that not the whole range of trade unions across Europe has been involved. It has always been joint action of those unions most affected or most interested (without interfering in the activities of other unions which are less affected or interested), and it has been this joint action which has supported

the case of unions and the respective social movements both at European and national levels. Thus, when ETUC Secretary General Luca Visentini (2016) calls for a discussion about ‘how to strengthen, relaunch and renew the European trade union movement’, there are not only weaknesses to overcome but also positive experiences to be taken as starting points.

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All links were checked on 16 April 2018.