

CELSI Research Report No. 40

ARTICULATION OF THE TRADE UNION'S
STRATEGIES ON UPWARD CONVERGENCE
OF SOCIAL STANDARDS IN THE
ENLARGED EUROPEAN UNION– VOICE OF
CEE COUNTRIES
ARTUS-CEE

NATIONAL REPORT: SLOVAKIA

DECEMBER 2020

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Articulation of the Trade Unions' Strategies on upward convergence of social standards in the enlarged European Union – voice of CEE countries

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National report: Slovakia

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In the line with the research goals of the ARTUS-CEE project, the main objective of this report is to analyse whether Slovak trade unions are able to undertake effective actions towards upwards convergence of social standards in the EU in the context of different industrial relations systems among the EU member states and weak EU-level industrial relations in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE).

This paper/report has been published under the ARTUS - CEE project, which received funding from the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission under the agreement No.VP/2019/0070.



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Union – voice of CEE countries**

ARTUS-CEE

National report: Slovakia

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Central European Labour Studies Institute



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*The author would like to thank Ivana Gallasová (CELSI) for research assistance to this project and Jens Arnholtz (FAOS), Marta Kahancová (CELSI) and Monika Martišková (CELSI) for valuable comments and suggestions for improvements.

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction 4
- II. Overview of recent developments in the national industrial relations 7
- III. Articulation of trade unions’ strategies on convergence of social standards in the EU... 11
 - 1. The European minimum wage..... 14
 - 2. Transnational collective agreements (TCAs) 16
 - 1. Cross-border cooperation 18
 - 2. Posted workers..... 20
 - 3. European social dialogue as a tool to build common standards within the EU..... 21
 - 4. ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’: trade union family “on paper” 25
- IV. Summary and conclusions..... 29
- V. Bibliography..... 32

I. Introduction

This report presents the Slovak case study prepared as a part of the research project ARTUS-CEE, financed by the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission under the agreement No. VP/2019/0070.

In the line with the research goals of the ARTUS-CEE project, the main objective of this report is to analyse whether Slovak trade unions are able to undertake effective actions towards upwards convergence of social standards in the EU in the context of different industrial relations systems among the EU member states and weak EU-level industrial relations in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). The analysis relies on an influential article by Slawomir Adamczyk who, supported by others, claims that there are two worlds within the ETUC family reflecting different involvement and strategies of trade unions from CEE and so-called old Member States in the EU-level structures (Adamczyk 2018; Czarzasty and Mrozowicki 2018).

The East –West divergences hypothesis that assumes differences among CEE trade unions vis-à-vis their counterparts from Western Europe was analysed according to the methodology of the ARTUS project on “the most controversial elements of internal European trade unions' discussion”. In particular, this report presents the views of trade unionists on five major topics:

1. The idea of a European minimum wage.
2. Transnational Company Agreements (TCA) as a potential additional European-wide level of collective bargaining.
3. Cross-border coordination of collective bargaining as a tool enhancing domestic-level collective bargaining.
4. The problem of posted workers as an example of so-called social dumping.
5. Expectations related to European social dialogue as a tool for building common EU standards.

In addition to these main areas, the research team identified additional aspects which enrich the main research questions presented above and agreed on the common structure of the national reports.

Methodology

The analysis combines three research methods: 1) desk research, and the original empirical evidence gathered through the 2) expert workshop and 3) expert interviews. Expert workshop was held in Slovakia with six representatives of peak level trade unions from sectors with substantial presence of multinational companies. In particular, three representatives were from the automotive industry (metal sector), one representative from the banking and finance sector, one representative from the peak-level trade union in metal sector and one representative from the commerce and tourism sector.

The respondents first completed the Auditorium Questionnaire Survey (AQS) which has been standardized for the whole research team, allowing them to gather opinions for comparative study at the CEE level. Next, the Focused Group Interview (FGI) has been conducted on the national level strategies of trade unions. For the group interview, a set of semi-structured open-ended questions have been prepared by the ARTUS-CEE research team. The FGI was moderated and led by the author of this report with the discussion lasting approximately two hours. Next, two expert interviews were conducted by the author, with representatives of national confederation and trade union representative from the gas industry (see Table 1). In addition, the author worked with original evidence from two expert interviews gathered for the EU-funded project EESDA (Enhancing the Effectiveness of Social Dialogue Articulation in Europe) and with original evidence from two expert interviews with the representatives of banking and commerce sectors gathered within her earlier research on strategies of social partners in negotiating wage inequality (project NEWIN). Overall, the report covers the experiences of thirteen trade union respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of conducted interviews

Interview code	Sector	EU affiliation	Organisation	Respondent	Date	Research method	Project
INT1	Metal (Automotive)	IndustriALL	Trade union	Representative 1	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS
INT2	Metal (Automotive)	IndustriALL	Trade union	Representative 2	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS
INT3	Metal (Automotive)	IndustriALL	Trade union	Representative 3	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS
INT4	Metal	IndustriALL	Trade union	Representative	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS

INT5	Banking and finance	UNI Europa (Finance)	Trade union	Representative	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS
INT6	Commerce and tourism	UNI Europa (Commerce)	Trade union	Representative	Sep-Nov. 2019	AQS, FGI	ARTUS
INT7	Gas	EPSU	Trade union	Representative	Sep-Nov. 2019	Expert Interview	ARTUS
INT8	National Confederation	ETUC	Trade union	Representative 1	Sep-Nov. 2019	Expert Interview	ARTUS
INT9	National Confederation	ETUC	Trade union	Representative 2	February 2019	Expert Interview	Archive CELSI (EESDA)
INT10	Metal	IndustriALL	Trade union	Representative (respondent INT10 is the same as INT4)	November 2018	Expert Interview	Archive CELSI (EESDA)
INT11	Metal (Automotive)	N/A	Trade union	Representative	May 2018	Expert Interview	Archive CELSI
INT12	Banking	UNI Europa (Finance)	Trade union	Representative	December 2015	Expert Interview	Archive CELSI (NEWIN)
INT13	Commerce and tourism	UNI Europa (Commerce)	Trade union	Representative (respondent INT13 is the same as INT6)	December 2015	Expert Interview	Archive CELSI (NEWIN)

The limitations of this qualitative approach are twofold. First, this report presents only the views of those actors that agreed to participate and/or be interviewed (positive selection bias), which may have omitted some important issues related to the subject studied. Second, where the interviews were not possible to conduct, an alternative source is presented, such as media articles, outcome of the conference, or other public statements. This, however, is not equal information compared to that which was gathered via semi-structured interviews or focus group interviews. In addition, it is important to remember that a small number of respondents of the audience questionnaire survey allows only for an illustrative comparison of answers and shall not be understood as an attempt to quantify the opinions of trade unions.

The report is structured into the following section. The first section presents an overview of recent developments in the national industrial relations. The empirical evidence is presented in the second section on trade unions' strategies on convergence of social standards in the EU, which is divided into six sub-chapters discussing 1) the European minimum wage proposal 2) transnational collective agreements 3) the cross-border cooperation of trade unions 4) the posted workers directive 5) EU-level social dialogue and 6) the division of trade unions'

attitudes toward European integration (“us” versus “them” hypothesis). The last section offers a brief comparison and summarizes the findings.

II. Overview of recent developments in the national industrial relations

The Slovak economy is characterised by the high share of foreign direct investment (see Table 2), and the FDI inflow is mostly visible in the automotive and electronics industry¹ (Kahancová et al. 2019). Multinational companies, dominating in manufacturing and financial sectors, have been almost the sole contributors to the increasing volume of FDI (Czíria 2009). Economic growth in the 2000s has been accompanied by several labour market reforms aiming at liberalisation, deregulation and employment flexibilization. Nevertheless, the country’s employment protection index remains above the OECD average level of employment protection (see Figure 1).

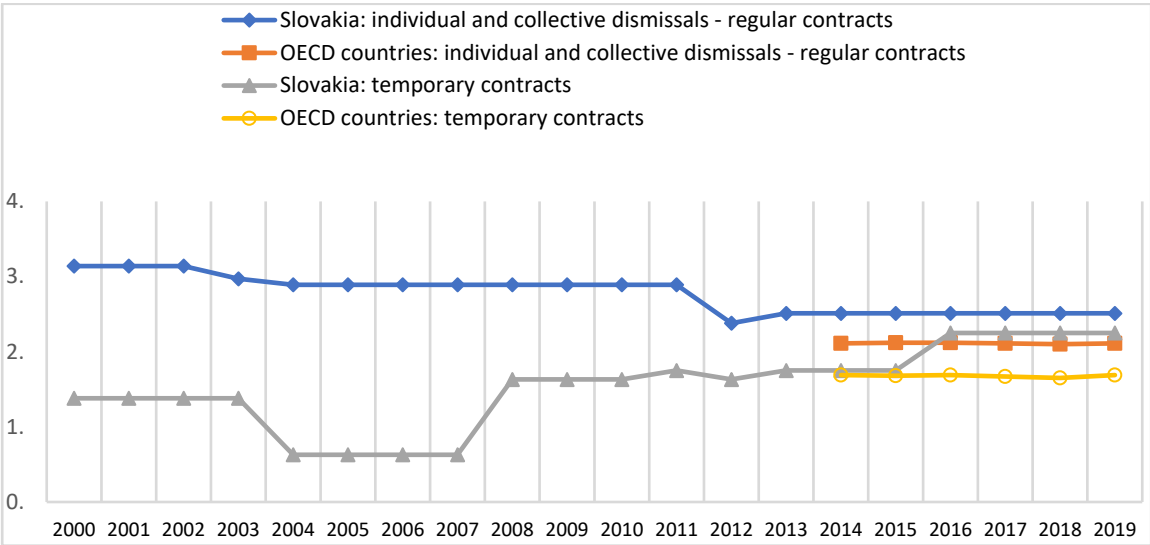
Table 2. Inward FDI stocks in % of GDP [TEC00105]

time	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
geo					
Czechia	61.7	64.2	61	63.1	65.1
Hungary	176.9	174	161	198.4	165.9
Poland	42.6	42.6	39.8	42.2	42.9
Slovakia	56.7	53.8	53.4	55.6	54.9

Source: Eurostat

¹ PSA Peugeot-Citroen car plant; Samsung Electronics LCD monitor assembly plant; Kia Motor car plant and related subcontractors; U.S. Steel company in Košice, Volkswagen car plant in Bratislava, to name a few.

Figure 1: Strictness of employment protection



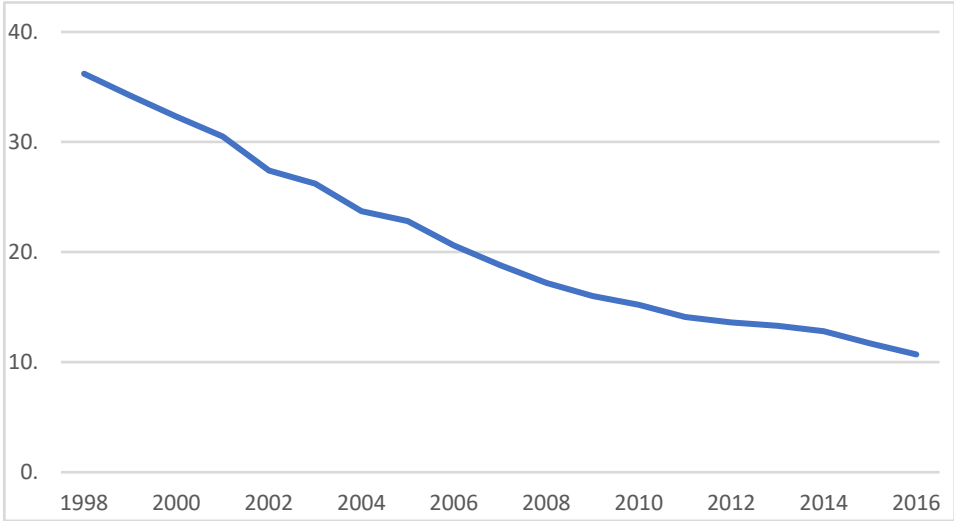
Source: OECD indicators of employment protection

Compared to the neighbouring countries from the Visegrad region, Slovakia was able to maintain functioning and transparent structures of social dialogue and collective bargaining at all three levels; the national, sector and company level. While the national tripartite body serves mostly as an advisory body to the Government with the most prominent subject of statutory minimum wage discussed annually, sector-level collective bargaining, although present, has been losing its power in last decade and the most prominent level of collective bargaining is multi-employer (between trade unions and a concrete employer association) and single-employer (at the level of enterprise/company). The vertical coordination of national, sector, and company level bargaining is rather limited (Drahokoupil and Kahancová 2017.)

Social partners and their organisational structures are relatively stable. Trade union density has been rapidly declining in last ten years and is currently at the level of 10.7 per cent (see Figure 1). Likewise, collective bargaining coverage decreased from more than 50 per cent in early to 25 per cent in 2016 (see Figure 2). Social partner’s strategy (both trade unions and employers’) in defending workers’ rights has been heavily oscillating around legislative solutions in the past ten years (Kahancová et al. 2019), mainly due to their binding nature. This strategy, as will be highlighted later in this report, transpose to the EU level social dialogue as well, but contrary to the national situation, employers are satisfied with non-binding forms of outcome at the EU-

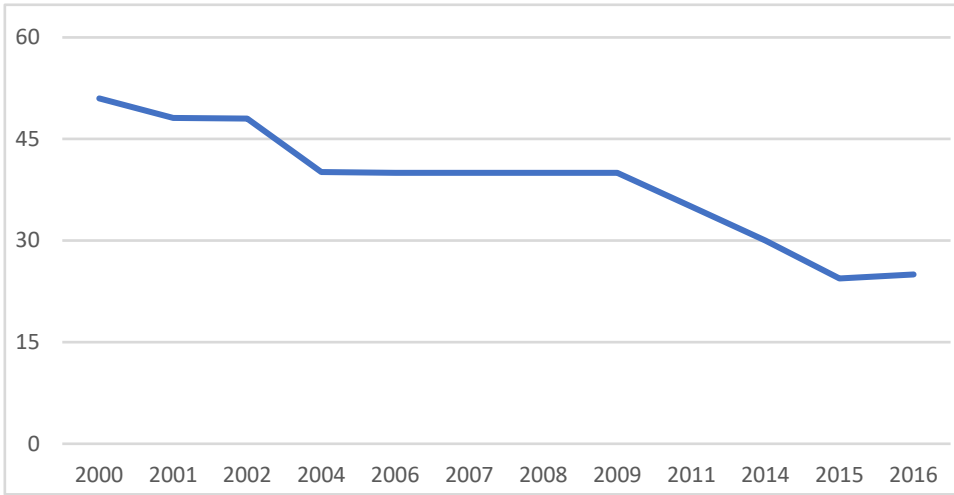
level (such as joint opinions, declarations, etc.) while trade unions prefer binding rather than non-binding solutions (Kahancová et al. 2019).

Figure 1. Trade union density in Slovakia



Source: OECD

Figure 2. Collective bargaining coverage



Source: OECD

The EC’s Representation to Slovakia, as a result of the EU Semester process, pointed out several limitations in the area of social dialogue. First, the Commission identified the limited capacities of Slovak social partners, not only financial, but also a lack of time needed to engage in inter-ministerial comment procedure. Second, while the EC supports social dialogue in

Slovakia via various projects from the EU Social Fund, such financial resources are of a low sustainability and there is a need of a national support scheme for social dialogue. The EC also points out structural changes in social partners' organisations, such as an establishment of a new Confederation, the Joint Slovak Trade Union (SOS) in October 2018, representing employees from among others, the healthcare, education and police sectors (European Commission 2019).

European integration and accession to the EU in 2004 is generally seen very positively by the public and social partners. For the latter, accession to the EU has opened several new possibilities of transnational cooperation and the ability to directly influence EU social policy. Importantly, EU integration influenced the operation and capacities of trade unions, through various grants and financial support that has become available (Kahancová and Sedláková 2018) and empowered them to participate in EU-level social dialogue (Akgüç et al. 2019).

All respondents of this project highlight the positive impact of European integration and accession to the European Union in terms of economic advancement. In addition, being a part of the Eurozone is seen as very positive (INT6). In fact, some respondents believe that being part of the Eurozone opens up the possibilities of participating in various non-formal working groups or meetings for Euro area countries, beyond the scope of other formal structures within the EU-level social dialogue (INT8). Similarly, Eurozone may be helping us in a sense of "*belonging to the core of Europe*"- feeling (INT4), in addition to its practical advantages such as easier economic comparability (e.g., in wage claims), and a better understanding on where Slovakia stands in comparison to other EU states (INT4).

The economic crisis of 2008 did not influence the Slovak economy as significantly as other countries, however, it was mostly visible in the production sectors. Although the crisis may have accelerated the decline of trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, especially in companies that had to undergo restructuring (Kahancová and Sedláková 2018), few trade unions reported an increase of trade union members (ibid.). The crisis induced economic changes resulted in an increased use of flexible forms of employment and precarious forms of work. In 2019, the lowest shares of unemployment have been reported in Slovakia, reaching 5.7 per cent. Several unprecedented trade union actions occurred in 2019. Initiated by the Metalworkers Federation, unionists submitted a petition to the parliament calling to cap the retirement age at 64 and was signed by more than 126,000 people. The cap has been approved

and is now part of constitutional law. This illustrates the trade unions' increased focus on legislation in recent years, but also an attempt to stay relevant in nation-wide socio-political debates.

III. Articulation of trade unions' strategies on convergence of social standards in the EU

This section presents the outcomes of the empirical analysis of trade unions' attitudes toward six major issues: (3.1) the idea of a European minimum wage; (3.2) the importance and expected developments of transnational collective agreements (TCAs); (3.3) cross-border cooperation with other organizations, including the coordination of collective bargaining as a tool to strengthen the national level of bargaining; (3.4) the problem of posted workers and highly mobile employees in the context of social dumping; (3.5) the possibility of using the European social dialogue as a tool to build common standards within the EU, including trade unions' expectations from the European pillar of social rights; (3.6) the quality of relations between CEE countries and "older" member states within European trade union structures at different levels, including the problem of protectionism/isolationism of Western trade unions.

First, the results of the Audience Questionnaire Survey are briefly summarized and presented. The second part of this section presents the responses gathered through the focus group interviews and individual expert interviews.

Results from the Audience Questionnaire Survey

Although the majority of AQS respondents said that they are familiar with the effects of European social dialogue, there was some confusion when asked to list concrete agreements (see Table 3). Only one respondent listed autonomous agreements (on active ageing, on fixed-term work, on discrimination, or on inclusive labour market), while others referred to the agreements with the ILO or in the case of the commerce sector, sector-level agreements between EU-level social partners and various multinational companies. Similarly, the respondents had a limited knowledge on the implementation side of agreements, with the majority claiming they are only familiar with the implementation mechanism for some agreements. In those cases, the implementation to the Labour Code, Constitution, or other laws (anti-discrimination law) were mentioned.

Considering the effects of European social dialogue at the workplace level, half of the AQS respondents registered them and half did not. All the respondents agreed that regulations on a European minimum wage are needed, and they are also aware of the current debate within the ETUC forum on this issue. Only one respondent thinks that negotiations leading to the conclusion of transnational collective agreements (TCAs) are not beneficial. At the same time, those in favour of TCAs also agree that there is a need for EU legislative framework to strengthen the impact of TCAs. However, four out of six respondents are not aware of any debate on transnational collective agreements within the ETUC forum.

The East-West divide was perceived as present by four respondents who agreed that some issues are perceived differently by the trade unions in old vs. new member states. Particularly mentioned were issues on working time (2), wage convergence (2), minimum wage (1), legal framework for TCAs (1), working conditions (1), health and safety at work, including issues of disability (2) and gender equality (1).

Table 3. The results from the Audience Questionnaire Survey

Question	The most common answer
1. Are you familiar with the effects of European social dialogue?	Yes, I can enumerate agreements (4)
2. Do you know how particular agreements were implemented in your country? What actions have the social partners taken to implement them?	Yes, but only for some agreements (3)
3. Do you see the impact of European social dialogue outcomes at the workplace level?	Yes (3) No (3)
4. Do we need regulations regarding the European minimum wage?	Yes (6)
5. Do you know the debate on the ETUC forum regarding the European minimum wage?	Yes (5)
6. Do you think it is beneficial for employees to negotiate and conclude agreements by trade unions with the central management of transnational corporations (TCA)	Yes (5)
7. Is the legislative framework contained in EU law (directive, regulation or decision) needed to strengthen of the impact of TCA?	Yes (5)
8. Are you familiar with the TCA debate in the ETUC /European industry federations forum?	No (4)
9. In course of international contacts, do you encounter issues that are differently perceived by trade unions from Central Europe and the so-called old Member States?	Yes (4)
10. How do you assess the involvement of unions in Slovakia in the operations of the ETUC?	Insufficient (3)
11. How do you assess the involvement of the Slovak state unions in the operation of European industrial federations (ETUFs)?	Insufficient (3)

The majority of respondents evaluated the involvement of Slovak trade unions in both ETUC and ETUFs as insufficient, their reasons being inadequate activity and involvement in actual debates and the lack of personal capacities to be more involved. A lack of financial resources and poorer language skills were also mentioned. This is in line with results reported by Kahancová et al. in their study on the articulation of EU-level social dialogue in Slovakia (c.f. Kahancová et al. 2019). One respondent claimed that participation at the aforementioned fora is only formal, mostly political, and has no tangible results (Table 3).

1. The European minimum wage

“There are some commitments that are only in the form of recommendations, but in this case, we would be very happy if this passed through the European Parliament and that it would come in the form of a directive that would be binding for all member states of the European Union.”²

Marián Magdoško

President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of
the Slovak Republic (KOZ SR)

The most recent topic which illustrates the divisions within the ETUC, is the idea of a European minimum wage. While most countries prefer a directive that would be legally binding for all, opposition comes from the Nordic countries, with the support of Dutch trade unions, while the French unions remain undecided (INT8).

On November 13, 2019, initiated by the President of Solidarnosc Piotr Duda, 24 trade union representatives from Central and Eastern Europe³ have signed a letter addressed to the ETUC's General Secretary and the members of the ETUC's Executive Committee, concerning the ETUC's draft resolution 'On Promoting Collective Bargaining and Ensuring the Respect of Workers' Right to Fair Pay'. The letter supports the idea of a EU framework directive for a European minimum wage and specifically states that it “takes into account the interests of organizations from countries with different levels of industrial relations development”, pointing out that the draft specifically addresses the problems of unions from the CEE region and the Balkans in their fight for a decent wage, an upward convergence and functioning system of collective bargaining (Solidarnosc 2019). Trade unions from the region's hope, that a common framework will be an example of “practical implementation of a 'social Europe' concept”, helping to secure an upward convergence in the area of minimum wage and collective bargaining.

²Quote retrieved from KOZ SR 2019a, available at: <https://www.kozsr.sk/2019/05/21/kongres-europskej-odborovej-konfederacie/>

³ Specifically, from PL, EE, LT, LV, CZ, SK, HU, BG, HR,RO and SRB. See the letter at: <http://www.solidarnosc.org.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci/kraj/item/19067-piotr-duda-do-ekzz-potrzebna-unijna-dyrektywa-o-placy-minimalnej-ma-poparcie-24-central-zwiazkowych>

Importantly, the representatives stress that the most appropriate instrument is a binding directive, since “(...) An ordinary recommendation with no binding legal effect will have little impact in Central and Eastern European countries” (Solidarnosc 2019). Reflecting on the differences of IR systems in the EU countries, the CEE trade unionists “admire the well-functioning industrial relations in the countries of Northern Europe”, however, to address the various challenges of the labour market, they expect a “solidarity-based and forward-looking approach” from other ETUC members and “common rules of play’.” (ibid.).

Trade unionists interviewed for this project are in general aware of the debate within the ETUC regarding the minimum wage⁴. For the representative of the Confederation, the debate is seen as a positive example and a situation where countries from the Visegrad region plus new member states (initiated by the Polish trade unions), got together and vowed to strive for an EU directive on minimum wage (INT8).

While the Slovak trade unionists understand the reasons for the division within the ETUC, the views on its justness differ. The representative from the metal sector believes the Nordic trade unions are afraid that a common framework will push wages down and endanger collective bargaining in their countries. However, in her view, this opposition is unreasonable: in 22 EU countries, the minimum wage is set by the law (statutory minimum wage), hence not during the process of collective bargaining (INT4). The interviewee from the banking sector highlights the Austrian experience and their negotiations over sectoral minimum wages, which is seen as a positive example, pointing out to why we too need minimum wage regulations:

“If we were able to negotiate minimum wages at the sector level with social partners, we would not have these problems” (INT4).

As the opinions expressed in the audience survey suggest, there is a consensus among all respondents from Slovakia that we need a European minimum wage. However, some variation on the procedural aspect of the minimum wage can be identified. While the general stand of the Slovak trade unions is always in favour of directives and binding agreements rather than recommendations, one respondent from the metal sector believes that in order to increase wages

⁴ The above-mentioned letter from the CEE trade unionists has been signed after the interviews for this project have been conducted.

in the region, we should not start with the minimum wage. In their view, a common European minimum wage should be the last step, a sort of automatic outcome after all other items at the country level are harmonized, such as the system of collective bargaining, sector-level negotiations, and similar (INT1).

Respondents point out that there is no real wage convergence in our region, Slovakia still lags behind the west and “keeps the status quo” (INT1). Especially sceptical are the respondents from the metal sector. According to them, personal capital of skills is low, people are in debt and wages increase slowly (INT3). There is no wage convergence without our own capital and value-added jobs (INT1) and hence, we will never reach the west (INT1-3). In commerce, race to the bottom is still visible and while some companies have left Slovakia, we still are cheap labour, especially in the retail sector (INT6).

2. Transnational collective agreements (TCAs)

The Slovak legislation does not address the legal effects of the transnational collective agreements and whether such an agreement is directly enforceable or not. In general, the enforceability of the agreement is to be addressed through the national, company-level employer and the employees’ representatives at the company. However, the real enforceability of TCAs in cases of non-compliance remains questionable (Olšovská et al. 2014).

While the respondents of the Audience Questionnaire Survey generally agreed that the transnational collective agreements are beneficial, and an EU-wide legal framework for TCAs is needed, the following group discussion revealed a shared scepticism among the participants related to the implementation and enforcement of these agreements. Several respondents claimed that TCAs are “*not possible in reality*” and “*impossible to realize in practice*”, not only in the EU but also worldwide⁵ (INT1; INT2; INT3; INT7). They mentioned the differences in legislature and in IR systems being the main reasons behind their scepticism. The representative of the Confederation also admits that the conclusion of TCAs is a sensitive topic for the national trade unions:

⁵ Automotive industry in Slovakia includes employers from other than EU countries.

“In some countries, where you have a good valid collective agreement, you are afraid to open it again and modify it somehow.” (INT8)

Similarly, according to the representative from the gas industry, the problem lies in different living standards in the EU countries (INT7). A trade unionist from the commerce sector points out the differences in wage levels in EU countries. In commerce, differences in national legislature on various aspects of working conditions such as the number of working days, overtime, work during the rest days and weekends complicates this issue even more. However, those aspects of working conditions are seen by the respondent as the only area which TCAs could successfully address (INT6).

Another aspect suggested by some respondents, which is more visible in multinationals with non-EU ownership, is differences in a corporate culture. The culture where “an employer a priori sees trade unions as a problem”, referring to the company as “global company but with a local [meaning hostile] approach”, prevents conclusion of any successful TCAs (INT2).

Regarding the instrument for implementation at the EU level and acknowledging existing structural and institutional differences between trade unions from the east and west, interviewees in general agree with binding solutions. Although some representatives of the automotive sector are “not even worried that [binding TCAs] will happen” because the EU needs competition (INT3), others welcome that the western trade unions opened this question, valid for the whole society (INT2). One of the positive outcomes of the proposed binding TCAs, especially for the metal sector, is that the agreements would be valid for both contractors and sub-contractors in the sector (INT4).

The representative of the banking sector named several global framework agreements, such as a Global Agreement between BNP Paribas and UNI Global Union⁶, which is in their view quite broad, not concrete, staying at the level of declarative statements (INT5). On the other hand, in commerce, the existence of several international agreements between MNCs and UNI Europa/Global Union contributes to successful social dialogue at the company-level in

⁶ The agreement is available at: <https://www.uniglobalunion.org/news/global-agreement-between-bnp-paribas-and-uni-global-union-advances-labour-rights-gender>. The database on transnational company agreements, compiled by the ILO and the European Commission, is available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=978&langId=en&company=&hdCountryId=&companySize=§orId=&year=&esp=&geoScope=&refStandard=&topic=151&keyword=&mode=advancedSearchSubmit>

Slovakia, since adherence to them “improves the path in Slovakia” compared to some Slovak companies where it is hard to establish trade unions and/or initiate collective bargaining (INT13).

Transnational collective agreements touch upon another important aspect of multinational companies, which is the existence of **European Works Councils** (EWC). Evidence from the interviews shows that several respondents (banking and gas industry) have experienced issues either with the establishment of the EWCs or with the scope of decisions that EWCs should be a part of. Especially in the Slovak gas industry, which has a complicated structure of ownership, several practical issues were at a stake, such as whether the EWC should be established, who can participate, and which national laws would actually be applicable for it to function. In the gas industry particularly, the union representatives have been dealing with structural questions related to establishment of EWC for three years, together with Hungarian and the Czech representatives from the same company. In 2019, the EWC was established, but the Slovak gas trade union is not part of it due to the structure of the company ownership (the Slovak ownership is only 49 per cent). The company operates under the Czech labour code which says that EWC are to be established when company has more than 50 per cent ownership, but also grants this possibility if it takes managerial decisions. The respondent believes the latter is the case (INT7).

1. Cross-border cooperation

The Confederation (KOZ SR) cites on their webpage “above-standard” contacts with the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (ČMKOS). Both trade union centres acknowledge their close cooperation, often reflected in public statements and articles such as “Cooperation between Slovak and Czech trade unions know no borders and can be an example for other countries” (KOZ SR 2019b). Confederations coordinate their positions on issues such as collective bargaining, wage increase, wage convergence between East and the West, labour legislation, health and safety, but also common PR and marketing strategies. Employment of foreigners in the context of social dumping is also one of the key areas of their cooperation (KOZ SR 2019b).

The confederation also subscribes to “close relations” with the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and Polish and Hungarian trade union centres. According to KOZ SR, closer cooperation was a result of a need for

intensive exchange of knowledge and experience to address the challenges typical for the region, i.e. transformation of the economy into market conditions and the construction of new democratic institutions in the CEE region.

Bilateral cooperation with the trade union headquarters of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries is also important for the KOZ SR, especially in “amending social legislation”. It is also stated that V4 countries “consult and coordinate” joint positions, in delivering their opinions to the ETUC (KOZ SR 2019c). The group, which claims to meet regularly, for instance addressed the traditionally low turnout among the V4 countries in the elections to the European Parliament in 2019 and stressed the opportunity to give Europe “a clear social face”.

[The respondents for this project confirmed that given the common history, culture and language with Czechia, the most common cross-border cooperation is between the Czech and Slovak trade unions across all sectors of the economy.](#)

In the automotive sector, cross-border cooperation with the trade unions from the same company in a different country is more common than within the state cooperation between unions from competing companies (INT1). For instance, trade unionists from KIA (Žilina, Slovakia) cooperate and meet with trade unionists from Hyundai in Ostrava (Czechia), as both companies both belong to the Hyundai Motor Group. The cooperation mostly serves the purpose of information sharing, especially during the time of collective bargaining (INT1). As explained during the discussion, when management uses arguments such as “but in Žilina they agreed”, they can easily check the information due to their personal contacts (INT1).

Similarly, in the gas industry, the best cooperation is considered to be with the Czech trade unions (part of EPSU and PSA). The Slovak trade union belongs to the regional group of countries from CEE region and West Balkans. Interestingly, Austria was a part this group before but asked to join the Nordic group with Germany (INT7).

In commerce, trade unions substantially rely on the cross-border cooperation with their partners to secure stronger position vis-à-vis the employer (INT6). Several platforms exist in the sector, such as “Vienna dialogue” (Viedenský dialóg) and annual meetings of the Visegrad four (V4) countries (ibid.). In May 2017, Polish, Slovak, Czech and Hungarian trade unions in commerce

published a common declaration in which they all expressed their concern about the method and level of remuneration of workers in commerce in V4 countries compared to the workers from Western Europe (OZPOCR 2017).

2. Posted workers

Several studies point out that it is difficult to find a common position on posted work among the EU countries due to vast differences in systems of industrial relations (Adamczyk 2018; Surdykowska and Owczarek 2018). In Western European countries, the directive on posted workers represents combating social dumping, while in Eastern Europe, the discussions revolve around the ability to compete in the single market, despite lower wages. Consequently, Slovakia was among those (mostly CEE) member states⁷ which issued a ‘yellow card’ after the proposal from the European Commission on equal pay for posted workers⁸, resulting in a subsequent re-examination of the proposal.

We could therefore expect posting of workers to be another example of divergent opinions between of Western vs. Eastern trade unions. However, the Confederation of the Trade Unions KOZ SR opposed the yellow card supported by the Slovak government and agreed on the common position with their colleagues from the Czech trade unions and ETUC (Gabrižová 2017). Subsequently, the Slovak government changed their position and in 2017, supported revisions to the Directive (Surdykowska and Owczarek 2018).

In Slovakia, the number of workers potentially affected by the directive on posted workers is still rather low⁹, although with a potential to grow dynamically (Surdykowska and Owczarek 2018, p.15).

The KOZ SR’s expert praised good cooperation and frequent meetings with Malta and the Netherlands during the time of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2016, when the Posting of Workers Directive was being prepared (INT8). The former president of the KOZ SR and vice-president of the ETUC Jozef Kollár stated that Slovak trade unions specifically

⁷ Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

⁸ In sum, all rules on remuneration that are applied to local workers should also be applied to posted workers.

⁹ Approximalely 0.7 per cent of labour force (Gabrižová 2017). Posting in relation to the county’s population reaches approximalely 3 per cent (for detailed study see Surdykowska and Owczarek 2018).

plan to use the Presidency to enforce the revised Directive and supported the opposition to the ‘yellow card’ (KOZ SR 2016).

“It is not often for the European Commission to do something like this directive which makes all workers working abroad equal. (...) We are aware that the future of Slovakia lies and will lie in a united Europe. Our goal is not only to have equal pay for equal work, but also to apply this principle Europe-wide. This is the first step we can take to ensure that our employees and citizens will not be treated as secondary citizens in other European countries.” (Kollár in KOZ SR 2016).

At the same time, contrary to the aims of the Slovak employers and the Government, the Confederation did not like the fact that the Mobility Package on posting of drivers was taken out of the Posted Workers Directive. Our respondent is, however, unsure about the current divisions on this topic within the ETUC (INT8).

3. European social dialogue as a tool to build common standards within the EU

The Confederation of Trade Unions in Slovakia (KOZ SR) participates at the EU structures since the independence in 1993. The respondents highlight positive relations and close cooperation with the ETUC, which is seen as improved by and after the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2016, especially due to the new contacts and people.

The Confederation, however, stresses their limited capacities when representing workers at the EU-level. KOZ has only one representative responsible for the EU agenda (the International Secretary at Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovak Republic), who participates at the ETUC Executive Committee meetings (four times per year, paid by the EC) and at the Steering Committee¹⁰ which meets eight times per year. The meetings of the Steering Committee are financed from the KOZ SR’s budget. Overall, the same representative travels to Brussels at least twelve times per year (INT 8). Depending on one person for all aforementioned responsibilities not only raises concerns over internal transferability of knowledge within the organization, but also poses a risk for secure and sustainable representation.

¹⁰ KOZ SR’s President is a member, International Secretary is a deputy.

In addition, the ETUC has 17 working groups on various issues, with one member and two deputies from the Confederation. According to the evidence, the representative from the Metalworkers Trade Union OZ KOVO covers several working groups/committees for the Confederation (INT8; INT4). This representative evaluates the participation at EU level structures (ETUC, EESC, European Sectoral Federations, Tripartite Committees) as “extremely important” (INT4). The respondent admits to being more active at the sector level within IndustriALL, where the differences of opinions among trade unions also exist but are not as visible as within ETUC (INT4). One of the reasons, according to the interviewee, is better representation and participation of CEE countries in sector-level structures. Related to this, any effective mechanism for mutual recognition of membership within ETUC is seen as complicated due to the varieties of national IR systems and different structure of social dialogue among EU members, which have different representativity criteria for trade unions (INT8).

Among the most important **topics** at the EU level are wage convergence, employment of foreign nationals and related social and wage dumping, gender equality, work-life balance, working time, and similar (INT10). According to the high-ranked representative of the Confederation, Slovak and Czech trade unions were particularly responsible for pushing forward (to the ETUC) the topic of unequal pay and wage convergence (INT9).

There is a general agreement among all trade union representatives from Slovakia that their preferred mode of outputs are **binding agreements** such as directives. If this approach does not succeed, trade unions push for recommendations and autonomous agreements as outcomes of the EU level social dialogue. In this regard, KOZ SR was in favour of more directives related to the European Pillar of Social Rights (INT8). The unions also acknowledge the different preferences of Nordic countries, who are in favour of non-binding decisions.

During the discussion, one respondent acknowledged that by strong reliance on legislative solutions, trade unions hinder their own position in the system:

“the reason why we want to settle everything by the law and legal stipulations is because in Slovakia, collective bargaining coverage is 24.4 per cent and trade union density 11 per cent. This is why we push for the minimum wage set by the law, overtime bonuses defined by the law... But the opposite is happening: the more we focus on legislation, the weaker collective bargaining is, and I don’t like it and don’t agree with it.” (INT4)

The representative from the banking sector disagrees:

“Strong laws do not hinder the position of trade unions, because we have enough work to control their enforcement.” (INT5)

Two respondents that regularly participate at the EU-level meetings identified as problematic **the implementation** of the EU **bipartite social dialogue** (with ETUC and Business Europe) **to the national level** in a form of the autonomous agreements (INT4; INT8). One of the reasons is a reluctant position of national level employers’ association. Even though four autonomous agreements have already been implemented into the national legislation, trade unions claim to have difficulties in cooperation with the employers. In the words of our respondent:

“maybe agreement on active aging is not so sexy, but the next one will be on digitalization” (INT8).

There is also a sceptical opinion towards the abilities of Slovak members of parliament: even if a good directive is approved at the EU level, the Slovak National Council makes “a mockery” out of it during the implementation process to the national law (INT7).

Several factors that may help or hinder the outcomes of the EU level social dialogue. **Continuity in representation** is seen as a crucial factor for the unions, both in terms of continuity of their demands and positions but also in terms of concrete representatives attending the meetings. It is seen as very difficult to “*get back on track*” with the topics and issues presented at the EU-level, once the representative skips certain meetings (INT4).

Personal capacities are crucial for all sectoral trade unions and for the Confederation. Compared to countries such as Austria, which has ten trade union representatives working at their foreign departments plus an additional three people working directly at their Brussels office (INT8), the Slovak representation is according to the respondents understaffed (INT4; INT8; INT10). The Slovak trade unions have no permanent office in Brussels, or a representative at the Slovak Representation to the EU in Brussels. The Confederation “*has the possibility to be involved, but they would need more people.*” (INT8). The representative of the metal sector points to the fact that although she is not an employee of the Confederation and

has her own agenda, she attends the meetings of the ETUC's Collective Bargaining and Wage Coordination Committee on behalf of the Confederation:

“It is also extra work, but I know it is important and that the Confederation does not have enough personal capacity” (INT4).

In a small country with limited resources, the lack of financial resources is substituted by close personal contacts and active, enthusiastic individuals. The fact that **personalities and the formal position matter** has been mentioned several times by the respondents, referring to the topic of wage convergence, promoted by the former president of the Slovak Confederation and that time one of the Vice-Presidents of the ETUC.

Another barrier to successful and meaningful participation at various EU forums is **language barrier**. Trade union representatives feel that the lack of Slovak or Czech translations puts them at a competitive disadvantage when presenting specific issues, for which professional vocabulary is needed (INT4; INT5; INT6).

Overall, the unions are still most active at the national level. The **lower level of involvement in EU social dialogue**, or preference for involvement, is demonstrated by the attitude that

“certain European issues are too abstract for me” and “(...) firstly, we have deal with the priorities here [at the national level] and then we can deal with the issues communicated at the EU level” (INT9).

At the same time, involvement in European structures is seen as *“beneficial”*, *“prestigious”* and helpful in providing support in difficult situations at the national level (from the ETUC to the Confederation) (INT9). The representative from the banking sector points to the limits of EU level social dialogue and questions its ability to positively impact the upward convergence of social standards in the banking sector. Currently, there is no sector-level collective bargaining in banking due to the fact that their partner, the Slovak Banking Association (SBA) is not interested in bargaining. Trade unionists reported to the UNI Finance (Global Union for all finance and insurance workers) that a member of the European Banking Federation is not a social partner in their respective country but have not gained any support so far (*“UNI did not do anything to help us”*) (INT5).

Concerning the expectations for a **European pillar of social rights**, trade unions see the pillar as beneficial and in general agree with its content, however, they have pointed out the issue of its enforcement and implementation in all EU states. Some respondents, aware of the existence of 20 principles, were not sure how these principles will be transferred into practical steps and legal decisions. In relation to this, a former President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (KOZ SR) claimed:

“Working people can no longer wait. It is high time to stop debating, move to action and start working.” (Jozef Kollár in KOZ SR 2017)

4. ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’: trade union family “on paper”

This subchapter evaluates the quality of relations between the countries from Central and Eastern Europe and ‘old’ member states within the European trade union structures at different levels. It also evaluates and addresses the hypothesis about the protectionism/isolationism of Western trade unions.

Overall, trade unionists interviewed for this project agreed with the Adamczyk’s claim about the two worlds within the trade union family, or as one respondent calls it, **trade union family “on paper”** (INT1). All of the respondents identified certain tensions between the opinions in older vs. new member states. However, there is no unified agreement on the “cut” of this division. Rather than the division between Old Member States vs. CEE countries, or new member states, the respondents claimed that this division may alter: not only we have evidence for an east-west division but also for a north- south division between the Nordic states and southern States with completely different economic situations. Similarly, some respondents felt more comfortable referring to the stronger vs. weaker trade unions, both in economic terms and in terms of trade unions’ power. Nevertheless, all these “cuts” are often interrelated: while western trade unions have a more developed system of IR and collective bargaining, new member states continuously struggle to establish and improve social dialogue and collective bargaining in their countries.

Looking at the variations across sectors, respondents from the metal sector ascribe the differences among us vs. them to the different levels of IR structures (INT1; INT3). The strength of the trade union’s voice is seen as a legacy of historical events, a different starting position of trade unions in Slovakia, and different experiences with collective bargaining. Older

member states may have functional sector-level collective bargaining and negotiations, but in Slovakia, sector-level CBAs are too general, copying the legislation, or referencing the specific conditions agreed in company level collective agreements (INT1). At the same time, “western” trade unions may share the same aims as unions from CEE, but they are more successful in reaching them (INT3).

A trade union representative from the banking sector agrees with the hypothesis about the division in opinions between old and new member states. This is, according to their experience, especially visible when it comes to wages and their comparability in different countries within the banking sector. Although on paper, every transnational issue should be consulted at the European Works Council (EWC), the trade union had a problem of bringing the issue of budget allocation to the council (INT5). The general stand of the Slovak trade union representatives in the banking sector is to have the same rules in all countries, not the same wages (percentage of flexible wage the same). Despite this, there is a reluctance to support their claims:

“Abroad they say, [the wage setting mechanism] is a matter of the Slovak management and we should negotiate with them. They start from the fact that the company has only one budget, and if in Slovakia, they cut a flat increase from it [of wages] for everyone, then less of it remains for the Italians. We cannot expect support from their trade unions. We are left alone.” (INT12)

The different strength of the trade unions’ voice correlates with lower law enforcement and trade union rights in various countries (INT5). As an example, the interviewee mentions different regulations on working time, especially on overtime work. Likewise, the strength of the union varies country to country, which she demonstrates by an example that trade unions in Slovakia cannot initiate court cases (only an individual worker can).

The representative from the metal industry has a personal experience with different opinions within ETUC and agrees with Adamczyk (2018) that trade unionists from the west have a “protectionist approach” – they are conscious about the demands of the trade unions from the new member states which should not disrupt their achievements over the years (INT4). The respondent also mentioned several off-record discussions (which they are not comfortable publicizing), referring to concrete examples of a different approach to the same topic from their western colleagues (INT4).

According to the respondent, **the principle of solidarity is missing in almost every issue discussed**, which has been especially seen during discussions on European minimum wage:

“If you could have heard the discussion within the committees, it looked like there are two enemy groups sitting at the table. We were arguing to the bone” (INT4).

The trade unions from northern Europe claimed it is not enough to wait and see how the EU will help, as unions from the new member states should **improve their structures themselves**, referring to their own structures of social dialogue which have been built over the last several years. The answer from the Polish trade unions was, that they are trying, but they have a broken system of social dialogue and collective representation.

“I do not condemn them for that. It's great! But we should build it too. The fact that they have a strong position, that they hang together and can succeed; it is from them that we should learn, and I cannot criticize it.” (INT4)

In general, the respondents identify three sensitive topics, corresponding to the answers from the Audience Questionnaire Survey: 1) wage convergence 2) European minimum wage and 3) working time. While the different views on European minimum wage and wage convergence have already been presented in section 3.1, the discussions on working time follow a similar pattern. While some TU representatives opt for shortening working time, trade unions from Nordic countries believe that people should work any amount of time they want (INT4). However, these countries also have a big proportion of part-time workers and hence, face different challenges on the labour market, compared to countries such as Slovakia, where part time employment is very low.

“They deal with issues which for us may be salient in 10-15 years, that is why uniting the demands is extremely difficult and I don't feel a spirit of solidarity.” (INT4).

A representative from gas industry **disagrees** with the notion of division within the ETUC family. Rather, the respondent feels that western trade unionist *“absolutely don't understand”* the problems of the Slovak workers:

“[referring to the Dutch trade unions] You are dealing with social issues, with wage increases (...) but the reason why the big multinational companies are here is because we

are still cheap labour. And as soon as we start to have demands, they threaten us with their departure, and this is the problem we are dealing with.” (INT7)

Thus, the representative of the Slovak gas trade union does not feel that within ETUC, there is a division of opinions among trade unionists, rather a **“misunderstanding of our demands”**, which is even more pronounced when we travel further south-east. The division between east and west is, however, according to his view present among the employers. (INT7)

Similarly, while the respondent from the commerce sector agrees that there is a division of opinions, more than “geographical” it is a division of **stronger vs. weaker trade unions**, both in terms of **strength of trade union movement** and **economic situation** in the respective country (INT6). Economically stronger players are then put into the forefront compared to other countries. In addition, based on their unsuccessful experience in establishing the EWC at a multinational company in commerce, the respondent believes that *“a Slovak employee is much more vulnerable than an employee from other countries”* (INT 6).

While Adamczyk’s voice seems not to be the mainstream one at the ETUC (INT4), the discussion revealed that we need look at the **representation within various committees and working groups**. “Nordic In” group for instance meets regularly to discuss every important issue and agree on common positions. In the view of our respondent, they *“go as one soldier”* as opposed to the voice from CEE countries, which do not have as many representatives within some committees. Interviewees from the metal and banking sector especially point out that the Hungarian representation is missing from several committees (*“they simply do not attend”*). Similarly, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Croatian representation is scarce according to our respondents.

Connected to the representativity, trade unions from western countries may be **stronger due to their higher financial contributions to the ETUC**, which is dependent of the size of the membership: the more someone contributes, the stronger voice it has (INT6). Financial resources, which is another important aspect of low(er) participation at the EU-level meetings, thus also influence the strength of the unions at the international fora.

As identified in the section on EU level social dialogue, language barriers pose an important challenge for the meaningful representation at the European level. Translations are rarely secured for smaller countries such as Slovakia or Czechia, although trade unionists from

different countries may have the same problems with English. In situations where smaller countries systematically lack this type of support, it is not unusual that coalition building is problematic. In addition, without language, trade unions have no voice, thus any differences in opinions may not be heard. When representation is not continuous (due to several factors) a stronger voice of trade unions from CEE is problematic to establish.

Another important aspect, which was more difficult to articulate and admit during the discussion, is what can be called as a **low collective self-esteem of trade unions from CEE countries**.

“When listening to the discussions of the western trade unionists and the issues they are facing, we ourselves sometimes feel afraid to make our demands in order not to look foolish and not to be laughed at.” (INT4)

And they give an example:

“We here are asking for the two per cent wage increase and they deal with the issues of work-life balance and a four-day work week.” (INT4)

This is related to the general debate of a rather passive culture of political representation in post-socialist countries, to which several respondents pointed during the discussions. According to the interviewee from the commerce sector, more active engagement at the international level can only be achieved by more proactive engagement of workers in trade unions at the company level.¹¹

IV. Summary and conclusions

Several conclusions can be made based on the analyzed documents and empirical evidence. First, trade unionists interviewed for this project agreed with the Adameczyk’s claim about the two worlds within the trade union family, pointing to the fact that EU trade union movements is rather trade union family “on paper” than in real life.

Second, the situation, as perceived by the Slovak representatives, may be more dynamic than described by their Polish colleague, suggesting that there are no static two (old vs. new trade

¹¹ Commerce sector in Slovakia especially suffers from low trade union density, which is even lower at MNCs.

union groups within the ETUC, sectoral committees or other EU-level fora. Trade unions from the new member states were able to build various coalitions across the “traditional” lines, such as the Vienna memorandum group, uniting six metalworkers’ trade unions from six member states. Cooperation between the Visegrad 4 countries has also been cited as being successful. An example of a common statement by the CEE trade unions on European minimum wage proposal also points to the fact that perhaps, the time has come to build coalitions based on the shared values rather than shared systems of trade union density numbers.

Third, as the example of the Slovak Presidency in 2016 shows, timing and personal contacts matter. Several respondents explicitly mentioned that Slovakia was able to push forward the topic of wage convergence due to the fact, that one of the Vice-President of the ETUC was Slovak representative.

Fourth, several barriers to more meaningful and successful participation at the EU level persist. Among the most challenging is low representation due to the poor personal capacities of the unions, language barriers and financial constraints. This has also been confirmed by the outcome of the EESDA project, which also show that the most common barrier to participation at the EU-level social dialogue are capacity barriers, identified by the 65.5 per cent of trade union respondents from Slovakia (Kahancová et al. 2019).

Fifth, acknowledging the differences of IR structures which contribute to the power of trade unions at the EU level, cultural differences, including differences in political culture, also play a role at the EU-level. As one representative states, trade union representation in the EU can be compared to the civic society in Slovakia, which has been more or less sleeping. The pro-active approach to problem solving is still something we need to learn.

The report shows that trade unions in Slovakia are aware of the most important topics identified by the research team of the ARTUS-CEE project. The most salient issue for the trade union representatives across the economy is wage convergence, where they support the idea of a European minimum wage. Closing the gap between the social standards in each country is another important issue, reflected in the fight for legally binding decisions at the EU-level (including a preference for legally binding transnational company agreements) which are seen as a security net for the enforcement of workers’ rights.

The most important recommendation for the trade unions across Europe, based on this research, is the following: trade unionists from countries with more developed structures of social dialogue and collective bargaining should recall and remember the principle of solidarity, on which the EU is based. At the same time, trade unionists from Central and Eastern Europe should remember to build coalitions across various sectors and issues, remembering the same principle of solidarity.

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