



After the Great Recession: Unions' Views on Transnational Interests and Cooperation¹

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ABSTRACT

The aim is to describe and explain the similarities and differences between European trade unions concerning their views on transnational union interests and cooperation in the wake of the Great Recession. We do this by analyzing 221 responses from a European-wide web/postal survey distributed in 2015–2016 to union officials representing staff in employment sectors such as transport, metal and mining, construction, health care, and banking and finance. We find only limited sectoral differences, despite the varied impact of the Great Recession. The main findings are that unions in crisis-ridden southern European countries express a stronger orientation toward transnational union interests and cooperation. Unions in the northern and western European center express a weaker transnational orientation, in line with a renationalization strategy typically expressed in the form of national competitive corporative arrangements. This shows the importance of different institutional resources for unions across the various European industrial relations regimes.

KEYWORDS

Europe / Great Recession / industrial relations regimes / trade unions / transnational cooperation / transnational interests

Introduction

In this article, we analyze European trade unions' views on transnational trade union interests and cooperation after the Great Recession, that is, the 2008 financial crisis and the resulting economic, employment, and sovereign debt crises in Europe. Following new EU governance structures, the depth of EU involvement in member states' economic and social policies has increased with regard to policy aims, surveillance, and enforcement (de la Porte & Heins 2015; Scharpf 2013). Instead of expanding social investments to fight the economic crises (Bengtsson et al. 2017), austerity measures have been enforced, such as cuts in welfare spending and wages and deregulation of labor market institutions as well as implementation of policies intended to decentralize

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collective bargaining, end legal extension of collective agreements, or restrict collective action. These developments add to decades of labor market institution deregulation, social protection system rollback, and loss of union influence and membership.

Despite the transnational nature of the economic crises in several European countries – which, according to Müller and Platzer (2017, p. 289), have ‘created overarching, similar or complementary problems that can foster and promote joint European approaches’ – a possible consequence of labor market restructuring and austerity policies is that unions may (even more than before) address the challenges through nationally bounded action. If this occurs, unions will adopt a protectionist outlook, and we may expect less transnational union revitalization and ‘labour-based European agency and identity’ (Lehndorff et al. 2017, p. 30). Thus, due to stagnant national economic growth and weakened competitiveness, unions may approve of ‘competitive corporatism’. This means that unions will accept policies of wage moderation, so-called ‘concession bargaining’, resulting in a declining wage share in national income (Erne 2008; Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2013, 2015).

However, we expect diverse views and strategies across the various unions. They exist in different sectors of employment, varying in exposure to global market forces, and their activities are based in nation states and industrial relations regimes that are exposed to varying degrees of welfare retrenchment and anti-union policies. Unions located in countries badly hit by the Great Recession have seen deteriorating conditions for bargaining and influence on a national level (see, e.g., Dølvik & Martin 2015; Lehndorff 2015; Lehndorff et al. 2017). As a result of weakening resources at the local or national level, unions may look more to the transnational, European arena for collective action. This may not apply to the same degree to unions in states where the consequences of the Great Recession were less dramatic and the distribution of power resources and the capacity to act were characterized more by continuity than by change. But unions that are generally considered strong can also, if hit hard enough, prioritize local economic interests and a ‘national turn’ in union politics if they are offered generous state assistance (Bernaciak 2013). However, the question of whether this would entail the long-term erosion of transnational solidarity has been posed (Pernicka et al. 2017).

Against this background, the aim of this article is to describe and explain the similarities and differences between European trade unions concerning their views on transnational union interests and cooperation in the wake of the Great Recession. We will do this by analyzing responses from a European-wide survey distributed in 2015–2016 to union officials representing staff in sectors of employment such as mining and metal, construction, transportation, health care, and banking and finance.

Transnational interests and cooperation

Although the struggle between labor and capital transcends national borders, union activities have traditionally taken place within the context of national industrial relations. When power relations between labor and capital are increasingly being relocated in a spatial and temporal structure where labor is characterized as local and national whereas capital is coordinated globally and according to the logic of unlimited capital flows, asymmetric power relations increase (cf. Bieler et al. 2014). Whereas

transnational and multinational companies have global strategies, for example, to move their facilities to countries with lower wages and less generous labor standards, trade unions mainly have a national focus. This is so despite the institutionalization of transnational/international structures of trade unionism, and despite European unions' 'pronouncements on the need for international action' (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2013, p. 168). According to Erne (2008, p. 3), unions are 'profoundly linked to the nation-state', meaning that despite their internationalist ideology, national-level industrial relations and welfare arrangements have integrated them (and the working classes in general) 'into their nation-states and provided them with an important set of rights and benefits'. Thus, the collective identities of labor organizations and their constituents 'are predominantly national or sub-national in scope; subjective conceptions of common interests are similarly bounded' (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2015, p. 12; see also Keune & Schmidt 2009, p. 19).

But what might the specific context of economic, employment, and sovereign debt crises in Europe mean for unions' views on transnational union interests and cooperation? Concerning transnational *interests*, we will analyze union representatives' conceptions of their organizations' common interests using diverse categories of European unions as well as looking at whether unions should prioritize improving conditions for all workers in Europe rather than focusing solely on their own members. The latter, stronger assertion of common transnational interests may also be viewed as capturing a wider conception of worker solidarity. When Gumbrell McCormick and Hyman (2015, p. 1) discussed the complexity of the solidarity concept, they noted that solidarity – understood as common interests and in relation to trade unionism – was originally based on perceptions of class opposition or the notion that 'workers as a whole are victims of oppression and exploitation, individually weak as employees, consumers or citizens; but unity is strength'. This conception of workers as a whole is of relevance to the assertion of improving conditions for all workers in Europe. But another solidarity concept, called 'mutuality despite *difference*', is also of great relevance here. This concept concerns a particular community of interest where divisions due to difference (in occupation, employer, sector, or nation) are transgressed. Because collective identities have tended to be national or subnational in character, transnational trade union solidarity – mutuality despite difference of nationality among workers – must overcome national interests and replace them with 'a more diffuse recognition of the human condition' (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2015, p. 2).

After having discussed transnational interests, we continue our analysis with the topic of *transnational cooperation*, looking both at whether unions believe they should increase their efforts toward transnational cooperation within their sector/s (rather than cooperating with unions within other sectors in their own country) and at their thoughts on whether lack of transnational cooperation following the economic crisis has made unions in Europe more protectionist in their outlook.

Sectoral and nation-based industrial relations regimes

One point of departure for this article is the question of whether comparative research on industrial relations has the most explanatory power when analyses are based on 'nation-based industrial relations regimes' (cf. Visser et al. 2009), or when they are based



on ‘sector regimes’ (cf. Bechter et al. 2012; Howell & Givan 2011). In this article, the issue of transnational interests and cooperation is analyzed in relation to both national/supranational variations and variations between employment sectors, the aim being to discover what significance they may have, respectively.

Because workplaces are transnationally oriented to varying degrees, we expect to find differences related to employment sector. It is somewhat problematic to classify unions along these lines, as organizational demarcations do not simply coincide with employment and occupational divisions, and patterns differ across countries. Nevertheless, in our dataset, we can identify many organizations that primarily belong to one employment sector. Besides, a more heterogeneous category we call ‘transsectoral’, consisting of unions representing constituencies in several different sectors, we analyze responses from unions representing members in the following sectors: mining and metal, construction, banking and finance, and health care.

In general terms, manufacturing is largely characterized by cross-border production chains and exports, whereas the service sector is less likely to be. The cross-border nature of the metal industry is a key factor behind the development of unions into supranational actors, because they have lost much of their influence over capital at the national level (Andersen 2006; Traxler et al. 2008). Andersen (2006) observed that Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish unions in the metal sector are more willing to engage in European affairs than other Scandinavian unions are. On the contrary, more nationally oriented industries in private personal services and public services, such as health care, have been under less external pressure by production location transferability and international competition to engage in cross-border cooperation and, thus, have less developed sector-based cooperation and dialogue (Bechter et al. 2012; Glassner & Pochet 2011; cf. Larsson 2014). On the basis of the same dataset used in this article, Vulkan and Larsson (2018) show that unions in the metal sector (and mining) are the ones that have been involved to the highest degree in seven different forms of transnational cooperation during the preceding 5 years. Unions in the service sectors participate in fewer forms of cooperation than do unions in the other sectors. This is particularly the case for banking and finance, whereas cooperation is somewhat higher in the health care sector (though not significantly). ‘Transsectoral unions’ and unions in the transportation and construction sectors are found in between those in the metal and services sectors. Moreover, an analysis of responses from European union representatives (collected in 2010 and 2011) shows that unions’ transnational exchange of information on collective agreements takes place to a greater extent in the manufacturing sector than in sectors representing services and the professions (Furåker & Bengtsson 2013a). The results presented support the notion that employment sector is a crucial variable for understanding similarities and differences in actual transnational union cooperation. In this article, we will analyze whether this also seems to be the case as regards unions’ views on transnational interests and cooperation.

In addition to sectoral differences, comparative research on transnational union cooperation has focused on differences in institutional systems between countries and regions in Europe. There are several industrial relations typologies, based on commonalities between institutional arrangements and configurations (see Larsson 2015; Visser et al. 2009, pp. 49ff.; Van Rie et al. 2015, p. 211). This refers mainly to legal-institutional frameworks, collective bargaining practices (e.g., collective bargaining coverage and the presence of ‘multi-employer’ and ‘single-employer’ bargaining), and the relationship

between unions, employer organizations, and the state (e.g., union- or employer-friendly state policies and the existence of tripartite policy arrangements).

It is common among institutional theory approaches to conceptualize institutional arrangements as both developing through a longer process and having a relatively high degree of stability that constitutes a causal force shaping the strategies of societal actors (Hall & Taylor 1996; Mahoney & Thelen 2010). Consequently, it may be difficult to exchange institutional arrangements that have developed over time. Once a path has been trodden, we are likely to be bound by habit to follow it.

However, we should bear in mind that institutions transform both due to critical events, such as recessions, and due to various types of gradual change (cf. Mahoney & Thelen 2010). Concerning national industrial relations systems, increased global competition entails powerful pressure for liberalization (Streeck & Thelen 2005). One example of this is the development toward more decentralized bargaining systems in many European countries (Marginson 2015). These kinds of developments can lead to greater convergence of European industrial relations. Additionally, according to Lehndorff et al. (2017, p. 24), after the Great Recession, the typologies of country clusters ‘make less sense’ as ‘the cleavages *within* at least part of the respective groups of countries have grown’. Nonetheless, in line with mainstream institutionalist approaches, we will analyze whether the institutional legacies of nation-based industrial relations regimes have an impact in relation to the issues examined. We will use a typology of five different categories elaborated by Visser et al. (2009); these categories are Organized corporatism, Social partnership, Polarized/state-centered, Liberal pluralism, and Transitional (also called fragmented/state-centered).

Organized corporatism (the Nordic countries) is characterized by comprehensive unions and employer associations that are committed to ‘voluntary’ regulation of employment conditions through collective bargaining. Unions are normally the main representatives of employees in the workplace, collective bargaining coverage is high, and union density is characterized by exceptional high levels (Larsson et al. 2012; Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2013; Visser et al. 2009). Management and labor have a strong influence on state policy. Also, the institutional support offered by universalist welfare states, as well as the strong legislative support for unions, is an important power resource for unions (Korpi 2006).¹

Social partnership (countries in the western European center) is characterized by corporatist relations between the state, employer organizations, and unions, but with a high degree of autonomy for the social partners (Visser et al. 2009, p. 48ff.). Unions are divided along political and religious lines. Union density is low or moderate (although quite high in Belgium), but despite this, there are high levels of collective bargaining coverage. Employee representation in workplaces consists of a dual system where unions operate alongside works councils (except in the Netherlands, where the works councils are the principal form of employee representation).

The Polarized/state-centered regime (the southern European countries) is characterized by a significant degree of hostility between employer organizations and unions, which allows for state intervention and extensive regulation of employment conditions (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2013, p. 20). Union density is low; the union movement is fragmented and – as in the Social partnership regime – divided along political and religious lines. However, collective bargaining coverage is high, owing to the high degree of employer organization and legal extensions (Visser et al. 2009, pp. 49–51).



Employee representation at the workplace level consists of a dual system (except in Spain, where the main channel of employee representation is workers' delegates and workers' committees).

The Liberal pluralism regime (the Anglophone countries) is characterized by a conflict-oriented relationship between capital and labor. While the state is typically noninterventionist, the role of the market is vital. Thus, the power balance is clearly tilted toward the employer side. In the UK, the industrial relations system is described in terms of 'voluntarism', characterized by a situation in which '[C]ollective agreements are not legally binding contracts, unions are not "agents" of their members, and there are no extension mechanisms to generalize agreements across whole sectors' (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman 2013, p. 25). Thus, the company constitutes the principal level of bargaining, and collective bargaining coverage is low (Visser et al. 2009, pp. 49–51).

The Transitional regime (the central-eastern European countries) is characterized by strong 'statist' features (Kohl & Platzer 2007). This is combined with a fragmented collective bargaining structure, with the company as the main level of bargaining and the lowest degree of bargaining coordination among the regimes discussed here (Visser et al. 2009, p. 51). The degree of unionization is similar to that in the Polarized/state-centered regime, and many small and medium-size companies are union-free spheres (Kohl & Platzer 2007, pp. 617–618). 'Business-friendly' free-market regulations dominate national policy agendas. Moreover, the administration of labor law as well as the enforcement of employee rights is weak.

Research on the effects of the Great Recession

In this section, we will continue by discussing the main effects of the Great Recession on industrial relations by presenting two country cases in each nation-based regime. Concerning the Organized corporatism regime, in Sweden, the effects of the Great Recession were deep but short-lived. The rapid recovery in Sweden's main export markets, stable domestic demand, aggressive interest rate cuts, and collective bargaining practices restricting inflation helped in bringing the recession to a close. Here, Sweden is used to illustrate the more general character of the Nordic countries, in that it is close to the ideal type of national competitive corporatism, meaning that it is wary of more ambitious and coordinated Europe-wide trade union measures that would challenge the national competitive corporative arrangements (Bengtsson & Ryner 2017; Svalund et al. 2013). Although similar in many respects to Sweden, Denmark suffered a budget crisis and the government was reluctant to contribute, causing the social partnership arrangement to be less pronounced after the Great Recession. Also, greater employer influence meant more restricted union involvement in decision-making regarding labor adjustments (Svalund et al. 2013).

Concerning the Social partnership regime, during the crisis, German unions made strong contributions to defending the competitiveness of German industry so as to save jobs and protect manufacturing industries (Dribbusch et al. 2017). This meant increased collaboration between unions and employers, where employment of the core workforce was prioritized through increased external flexibility, which helped buffer the crisis. But this also led to continued downsizing of the core workforce and outsourcing of services. As a result, unions demanded improvements not only for core workers but also for

agency workers and society as a whole. According to Dribbusch et al. (2017, p. 215), this has created an opportunity for unions to revive their position after decades of loss of union influence. In the Netherlands, the effects of the crisis on unions were limited, but the long-term trend of declining union density has continued, as have the slow growth of contractual wages and the increase in fixed-term contracts and self-employment. The unions have responded partly as a social partner not only to find a common approach to the crisis through social pacts but also to organize groups, such as precarious workers who have previously been ignored by the unions (de Beer & Keune 2017, pp. 241–242).

In the Polarized/state-centered regime, the effects of the Great Recession were massive. The key priority for unions in Greece, Portugal, and Spain was ‘the defence of the existing system of multi-employer collective bargaining and job creation’ (Müller & Platzer 2017, p. 305). In Greece, the government abolished the practice of minimum wage negotiations at the central level between management and labor, ‘thereby eliminating one of the few mechanisms through which trade unions could exert influence over general minimum labour standards’ (Lehndorff 2015, p. 165). This led to a huge cut in the statutory minimum wage, suspension of the extension of collective agreements, decentralization of collective bargaining as well as to company agreements having become the priority. In Spain, this last point has also become reality, as employer-friendly policies have weakened the functioning and minimum standards of collective agreements. For instance, the Labour Reform Act of 2012 contained a new principle which, according to Köhler and Calleja Jiménez (2017, p. 75), gives strong incentives ‘for employers not to renew collective agreements and instead to leave the workforce without protection’. This follows from the fact that the agreements end automatically 1 year after expiration, unless the employers want to renew them. As a result, collective bargaining coverage decreased dramatically the years after the legislation was enacted (Lehndorff 2015, p. 165).

Concerning the effects in the Liberal pluralism regime, in the UK, the Conservative government launched austerity measures, such as massive spending cuts in social welfare and the public sector. Also, anti-union policies have been installed, as the government has infringed on employment rights and tried to legislate for stricter rules concerning the right to strike. However, unions have reacted by becoming more militant, mobilizing coordinated public sector strikes and demonstrations against spending cuts, as well as several campaigns against austerity measures (Coderre-LaPalme & Greer 2017). In Ireland, the government ended social partnership arrangements with the unions in 2008–2009 and unilaterally reduced public sector pay, legislated for a lowered minimum wage and deregulated collective bargaining. The unions then tried to retain a coordinated approach to negotiating wages, reducing or freezing wages to reduce job losses, and following EU inflationary targets to promote competitive business. In some sectors, they have managed to settle some wage increases, while elsewhere they have more forcefully resisted infringements on wage settlement mechanisms. Still, the unions have experienced growing public distrust since the Great Recession (Geary 2016).

Finally, many unions in the Transitional regime have long suffered from being fragmented and politicized. Thus, ‘crisis corporatism’ has become an unlikely option, as the impact of the Great Recession has either weakened or broken the established institutional exchange between management and labor, further limiting the role of the unions (Müller & Platzer 2017, p. 305). In Hungary, the crisis ushered in to power the national conservative, right-wing political party FIDESZ. Several anti-union policies were implemented,



such as laws severely limiting unions' ability to strike, and the government has actively dismantled many of the institutional channels of unions (Neumann & Tóth 2017). As a result, there has been a general decline in union density and the capacity for union work, both nationally and internationally. By comparison, Poland was the only country in the regime to avoid recession, but still unemployment increased to 14% in 2013. Polish union density has also experienced a long period of decline, meaning a general loss of union power, as unions have limited influence through collective bargaining and tri-partite concertation. However, according to Bernaciak (2017), the unions have had more success with mobilization-based initiatives, especially those centered on campaigns against precarious employment. Also, strikes and demonstrations have been on the rise since 2010, and the main unions have been successful in jointly organizing them.

Research on transnational cooperation after the Great Recession

In this section, we will continue by discussing the main effects of the Great Recession by presenting some studies on transnational cooperation in relation to each nation-based regime. Bieler (2005, 2008) has stated that unions with major national power resources are less interested in European activities. Thus, we might expect that unions in the Organized corporatism regime would have a low preference for transnational cooperation. Interviews with Swedish union representatives have shown that European collaboration is viewed more as a threat than as an opportunity (Bieler & Lindberg 2008, p. 212). This is attributed to the Swedish model in which the social partners are highly self-regulating and have good access to national policy-making (Bieler 2008, pp. 99–100). Other studies stress that Nordic unions are reluctant to changes toward supranational policies and regulations or participation in European demonstrations and boycotts (Furåker 2017; Furåker & Bengtsson 2013b; Furåker & Lovén Seldén 2013; Glassner & Vandaele 2012; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman 2013; Larsson 2014; Vulkan & Larsson 2018).

The previously mentioned study on preference for participation in European demonstrations and boycotts showed that unions in the Social Partnership regime had the highest level of participation in these types of transnational union collaborations (Larsson 2014). That unions in large countries such as Germany are expected to have more positive attitudes toward transnational cooperation, at least compared to the more Euro-sceptic Nordic unions do, follows from a point made by Traxler et al. (2008). The EMU is seen as a stimulus to transnational coordination of collective bargaining: There is a need for 'pattern-setters' often from large countries that are more vulnerable to competitive bargaining and hence have more to gain from cross-border cooperation. Thus, it is claimed that Germany is 'the centre of gravity for "inter-regional" initiatives for cross-border bargaining networks' (Traxler et al. 2008, p. 222). Unions in the Social Partnership regime also have comparatively high expectations regarding European integrationist approaches through the European Trade Union Confederation (the ETUC) and the European Trade Union Federations (the ETUFs) (Larsson 2015; Mitchell 2007; cf. Müller & Platzer 2017).

Concerning transnational union cooperation, the previously mentioned study of European demonstrations and boycotts showed that unions in the Polarized/

state-centered regime, next to those in the Social Partnership regime, had the highest level of participation (Larsson 2014). They are also more in favor of a stronger mandate for supranational European union organizing (Larsson 2015).

Regarding the Liberal pluralist regime, there is research showing that, in the UK, union capacity for transnational cooperation is weak, and there is little sign of organizing in industry (Umney 2012). Furthermore, the ‘Brexit’ process could weaken the transnational interests of the unions, in that they are currently more concerned with domestic events (Coderre-LaPalme & Greer 2017). Like the unions in the Organized corporatism regime, unions in the UK tend to be more skeptical and nationally oriented with regard to strongly coordinated transnational union cooperation, such as transferring influence to organizations like the ETUC or campaigning for statutory minimum wages on a European level (Furåker 2017; Furåker & Bengtsson 2013a; Furåker & Lovén Seldén 2013; Larsson 2014, 2015; Mitchell 2007).

Concerning the generally weak national position of unions in the Transitional regime, they are comparatively more in favor of European integrationist approaches to transnational union cooperation. This translates into higher expectations on the ETUFs and the ETUC (Larsson 2015; Mitchell 2007; cf. Müller & Platzer 2017). However, after the Great Recession unions have shown modest engagement in cross-national demonstrations, boycotts, or bans, which should be seen as a result of both the limited tradition of contentious actions and workers’ weaker identification with unions in this regime (cf. Bieler & Schulten 2008; Hassel 2009; Larsson 2014; Vandaele 2011).

Data and key variables

The data for the following analyses were collected through a questionnaire, which in most cases was translated into the native language of the respondent or otherwise completed in English. The questionnaire was distributed in 2015–2016 to representatives of 602 unions in 36 European countries. The units of analysis are officials representing organizations rather than individual union members. We targeted unions representing staff in one or more of the following sectors: mining and metal, construction, transportation, health care, and banking and finance. The intention was to cover sectors with broad variation in production processes, work organizations, and exposure to international competition (cf. Crouch 1999). The selection process involved approaching the total sample, with surveys sent out to all known unions in the above-mentioned sectors. The individuals responding for their organizations were leaders of their organizations (a secretary-general, president, or vice president) (66%), international secretaries or correspondents (17%), or persons delegated by the leaders to complete the questionnaire (17%). As the aim of the paper is to analyze responses at an organizational level, combined with the required knowledge and experience of the union’s transnational cooperation, these respondents were considered more suitable than rank-and-file members, which may have lesser knowledge of the issues here dealt with.

The overall response rate was 37%, with a total of 221 cases. The response rate differed to a great extent across the various regimes: Organized corporatism (62%), Social partnership (39%), Polarized/state-centered (32%), Transitional (27%), and Liberal



pluralism (18%). To improve the response rate, we used a mixed mode survey approach (Fan & Yan 2010). In the first stage, a web survey was distributed to potential respondents, resulting in 156 returned questionnaires. In the second stage, nonrespondents of the web survey were sent a hard copy of the questionnaire, resulting in the completion of 65 additional responses. The postal surveys particularly improved the response rate of unions associated with the Transitional regime. The percentage of partial respondents for the different variables in the survey ranges from 12% to 0.5%, which we assess to be within the span recommended by Newman (2014) where pairwise deletion is a reasonable missing data treatment for construct-level missing data.

Concerning person-level missing data, the nonresponse rate is 63% for the survey as a whole. Missing data techniques are of limited use for dealing with person-level missing data to analyze the degree of nonresponse bias present in the results. This is especially true in our case where there are no other studies of the same nature that have compared the answers of respondents against nonrespondents (cf. Newman 2014). What we can do is to report relevant information that can aid future research in understanding the degree of nonresponse bias potentially present in our results. In a large-scale review of published response rates, Anseel et al. (2010) list major predictors of high rates. Worth mentioning is that surveys distributed to top executive respondents have a considerable lower response rate in comparison with non-managerial respondents. Concerning unions, it is, however, unlikely that rank-and-file members in general are informed about their organization's transnational interests and cooperation, which poses a problem. Thus, due to the choice of respondents in our study, we argue that it is unavoidable to have relatively low response rates. To personally distribute the surveys is the strongest predictor of high response rates, but the nature of the survey would make that approach extremely costly and was not an option. Using identification numbers and showing university sponsorship of the survey are also predictors of high response rates, but these factors were part of the study design. The only predictor of high response rates that could reasonably have been incorporated into the study design would have been giving advance notion of the survey. This could be expected to have had a modest effect on the response rate (Anseel et al. 2010). Finally, it should be noted that the response rate for the Liberal pluralism regime is particularly low. The results related to this regime should thus be treated with specific caution.

In this article, we primarily analyze responses to four sets of questions or statements on transnational trade union cooperation. First, we analyze a question on common transnational interests: 'To what degree does your organization have common interests with the following groups of trade unions within your sector in Europe?' The five different groups of unions are 'Unions in EU member states', 'Unions in non-EU member states', 'Unions in Euro-zone countries', 'Unions in countries outside the Euro-zone', and 'Unions in neighboring countries'. Second, we posed a question concerning to what degree the union agreed with a number of statements. The first statement relevant to the issue of common transnational interests is: 'Trade unions should give priority to improving the conditions of all workers in Europe instead of focusing on their own members'. The second and third statements related instead to the issue of transnational cooperation: 'We should have more transnational trade union cooperation within our sector/s rather than cooperation with unions in other sectors in our own

country' and 'The economic crisis has made trade unions in Europe more protectionist in their outlook'. Scores indicating the degree of support for these statements, ranging from *To a high degree* to *Not at all*, are presented in Tables 1 and 3. These statements are also analyzed using ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression with robust standard errors (Eicker-Hubert-White) to assess correlations with employment sector, nation-based industrial regimes, organization size (Tables 2 and 4), and EU and Eurozone membership (Table 2). All four of the statements are coded 0–3 (0 = *Not at all*, 3 = *To a high degree*).

Following the classification of nation-based industrial relations regimes discussed earlier, unions were assigned, respectively, to the *Organized corporatism* (n = 73), *Social partnership* (n = 35), *Polarized/state-centered* (n = 35), *Liberal pluralism* (n = 9), and *Transitional* (n = 69) regimes.

Six sectors of employment were used in the analyzes: *Banking and finance* (n = 22), *Health care* (n = 58), *Transportation* (n = 51), *Construction* (n = 21), *Metal and mining* (n = 30), and *Transsectoral* (n = 37). The two last classes differ from the original selection of sectors, and were created for pragmatic reasons. It was impossible to retain the distinction between metal and mining sectors, because the same unions covered these two sectors in many countries. Similarly, the category *Transsectoral* was created because many responding unions reported that they had members in more than one of the specified sectors and, thus, could not be assigned to a specific sector.

Regarding the variable organization size, we use this as a proxy for the unions' resources, based on self-reported number of members in response to an item with the following seven alternatives: *fewer than 5000 members* (n = 63), *5000 to 9999* (n = 29), *10,000 to 19,999* (n = 25), *20,000 to 49,999* (n = 27), *50,000 to 99,999* (n = 25), *100,000 to 249,999* (n = 30), and *250,000 members or more* (n = 21).

EU and Eurozone membership are both based on whether or not a union was a member in the respective arrangement in 2015.

Results

The first aspect analyzed in the Results section is whether unions believe that they have common interests with same-sector unions on a European level, that is, with unions in EU member states, in countries that are not EU members, in the Eurozone, outside the Eurozone, and in neighboring countries. We present the results of the degree of common interests in Table 1. Concerning unions 'in EU member states' and 'in neighboring countries', 64% and 68%, respectively, of the union representatives respond that they believe, to a high degree, that they have common interests. Concerning the statement 'in the Eurozone', the number that respond to a high degree is 49%, that is, a markedly lower number agree. Finally, the results of the alternatives 'in countries that are not EU members' and 'outside the Eurozone' show a considerably lower number of representatives who believe they have common interests to a high degree (23% and 27%, respectively). The most common response for these two alternatives is having common interests 'to some degree'. Also, more than one-fourth of the representatives believe that they have common interests with these categories of unions only 'to a low degree' or 'not at all'.



Table 1 Extent that trade unions have common interests with the following groups of trade unions within the sector. Percent

	To a high degree	To some degree	To a low degree	Not at all	Total
In EU member states	64.3	31.5	1.9	2.4	100 (n = 213)
In countries that are not EU members	22.9	49.8	21.5	5.9	100 (n = 205)
In the Eurozone	48.8	38.9	8.9	3.5	100 (n = 203)
Outside the Eurozone	27.3	44.3	22.2	6.2	100 (n = 194)
In neighboring countries	68.3	25.5	5.3	1	100 (n = 208)

Studying the effects of the regression analyses on the various categories of unions, regarding unions in EU member states (Table 2, column 1), quite a high intercept is observed. This indicates a generally high level of perceived common interests with this category of unions. Concerning size of organization, representatives of larger unions report more common interests than representatives of smaller unions do. Regarding sectoral differences, union representatives in the health care sector and transsectoral sector believe that they have less common interests compared to those in the transport sector (but notice the low statistical significance). Concerning nation-based industrial relations regimes, there were no statistically significant results. However, unions in the Eurozone report having more common interests with unions in EU member states compared to unions outside the Eurozone (but notice the low statistical significance).

The results for common interests with unions in non-EU countries (column 2) show that representatives of larger unions have more common interests compared to those of smaller unions. Concerning sectoral differences, representatives in the transsectoral and health care sectors have less in common compared to those in the transport sector. This seems to be the case for the banking and finance and metal and mining sectors as well (but notice the low statistical significance). Regarding nation-based industrial relations regimes, union representatives in the Liberal pluralism regime have more in common compared to those in the Polarized/state-centered regime (but notice the low statistical significance). However, when using 'Transitional regime' as the reference category, representatives in the Social Partnership regime turn out to have less in common with unions in countries that are not EU member states (data not shown). Also, unions in the Eurozone report more common interests than those outside the Eurozone (but notice the low statistical significance).

Studying the results for common interests with unions in the Eurozone (column 3), the data show that representatives of larger unions have more common interests compared to those in smaller unions. There are no statistically significant results concerning type of sector. Regarding nation-based industrial relations regimes, it turns out that representatives in the Organized corporatism regime have less in common with unions in the Eurozone compared to those of the Polarized/state-centered regime (but notice the low statistical significance). This is an expression of the fact that four of the five countries in the Organized corporatism regime are nonmembers of the Eurozone. Moreover, the findings reveal a somewhat surprising outcome, namely that union representatives in countries outside the EU believe they have more in common with unions in the Eurozone than union representatives active in the EU do.

Table 2 Trade union's degree of common interests with other categories of trade unions in Europe

	In EU member states	Non-EU member states	In the Eurozone	Outside the Eurozone	In neighboring countries
Sector					
Transport (ref.)					
Metal and mining	-0.16	-0.40 ⁺	0.04	-0.21	-0.25
Construction	-0.07	-0.26	0.08	-0.10	-0.07
Health care	-0.24 ⁺	-0.50 ^{**}	-0.25	-0.32	-0.09
Banking and finance	-0.05	-0.46 ⁺	-0.15	-0.42	-0.27
Transsectoral	-0.31 ⁺	-0.37 [*]	-0.20	-0.17	-0.12
Regime					
Polarized/state-centered (ref.)					
Organized corporatism	-0.17	0.38	-0.40 ⁺	0.41	0.15
Social partnership	0.00	-0.27	-0.20	-0.24	0.16
Liberal pluralism	0.25	0.45 ⁺	-0.38	0.49	0.09
Transitional	0.04	0.23	-0.23	0.31	0.05
EU membership					
Member state (ref.)					
Nonmember state	0.14	0.17	0.27 ⁺	0.16	0.13
Eurozone membership					
In the Eurozone (ref.)					
Outside the Eurozone	-0.33 ⁺	-0.31 ⁺	-0.11	-0.47 [*]	0.11
Size	0.09 ^{**}	0.11 ^{**}	0.011 ^{***}	0.13 ^{**}	0.03
Intercept	3.41	2.72	3.28	2.58	3.50
N	208	200	198	190	203
R ² adj.	0.037	0.055	0.013	0.067	0.000

Results of OLS regression analysis: Unstandardized b-coefficients.
 Levels of significance: ⁺p < 0.10; ^{*}p < 0.05; ^{**}p < 0.01; ^{***}p < 0.001.

Concerning the results for common interests with unions outside the Eurozone (column 4), we can, once again, see that representatives of larger unions agree more with the statement than do those of smaller unions. There are no statistically significant results for type of sector. Regarding nation-based industrial relations regimes, with the Polarized/state-centered regime as a reference category, there are no statistically significant effects. However, when the reference category is changed to 'Transitional regime', union representatives in the Social Partnership regime turn out to have less in common with this category of trade unions (data not shown). Moreover, union representatives in



the Eurozone report more common interests than do those outside the Eurozone. Finally, the results for common interests with unions in neighboring countries (column 5) show quite a high intercept, indicating a generally high level of common interests. Following this, there are no statistically significant effects for the variables analyzed.

To sum up, the first set of statements regarding whether union representatives have common interests with unions within the union's sector in Europe show, first, some sectoral differences. Union representatives in the transport sector believe they have a stronger degree of common interests with unions on a transnational level than representatives in the health care sector do. One probable explanation is that the transport sector is more heavily subject to international competition than is the health care sector, as the latter is often organized and funded by public authorities (cf. Furåker 2017). Another tendency is that, in comparison with representatives in the transport sector, union representatives in the metal and mining, health care, banking and finance, and transsectoral sectors agree less with the statement that they have common interests with unions in non-EU member states. Second, size generally matters, meaning that representatives of larger unions see more common interests than representatives of smaller unions do. Third, we find few statistically significant results concerning the effects of nation-based industrial relations regimes. But there are three interesting findings. In comparison with representatives in the Polarized/state-centered regime, those in the Liberal pluralism regime believe they have more in common with unions in non-EU member states. Also, in comparison with representatives in the Social partnership regime, those in the Transitional regime express more common interests with unions in countries that are 'not EU member states' and unions 'outside the Eurozone', which is the situation for many of these unions. Finally, union representatives in the Organized corporatism regime believe they have less in common with unions in the Eurozone compared to representatives in the Polarized/state-centered regime. Fourth, the factor of Eurozone membership has some explanatory value, as unions within the Eurozone seem to have more common interests with different categories of European unions than do unions in countries outside the Eurozone.

Besides this, what we earlier described as a stronger assertion of common transnational interests and a wider conception of worker solidarity is analyzed: whether unions 'should give priority to improving the conditions of all workers in Europe instead of focusing on their own members'. We see the response pattern in Table 3. The results show that 25% agree to a high degree, 41% to some degree, while 33% have responded 'a low degree' or 'not at all'. Thus, the responses show that there is a great deal of variation among union representatives around Europe.

We continue by analyzing results from the statement on worker solidarity using regression analyses. There are no statistically significant effects for organization size for this statement or the two other statements analyzed below. This is in contrast to the findings showing clear differences in common interests with other categories of European unions found between smaller and larger unions (see Table 2).

Continuing to the statement on worker solidarity, the results presented in Table 4 (column 1) show that union representatives in the mining and metal, construction, and banking and finance (but notice the low level of statistical significance) sectors agree to a higher extent with the statement compared to representatives in the transport and the health care sector. Health care is typically a part of public welfare state services and does not usually experience any serious foreign competition. Thus, in comparison with unions in sectors subject to stronger international competition, unions in the health care

Table 3 Union representatives' preferences and perceptions concerning three statements on transnational interests and cooperation. Percent

	To a high degree	To some degree	To a low degree	Not at all	Total
Trade unions should prioritize to improve the conditions for all workers in Europe rather than focusing on solely their own members.	25.4	41.3	25.8	7.5	100 (n = 213)
We should have more transnational trade union cooperation within our sector/s rather than cooperating with trade unions within other sectors in our own country.	34	41	19.3	5.7	100 (n = 212)
The economic crisis has made trade unions in Europe more protectionist in their outlook.	18	53.3	22.6	6.2	100 (n = 195)

sector may see little incentive to improve the conditions for European workers overall. Additionally, in the wake of the Great Recession, health services in many countries have been exposed to austerity measures that may have forced a more protectionist orientation. But why do we find that representatives in the transport sector also downplay transnational worker solidarity? Their viewpoints can be seen as an expression of the tough competition companies in the sector face from other countries (see, e.g., Bechter et al. 2012; Erne 2008). This fierce competition may have increased following the Great Recession, with low economic growth and mass unemployment in many European economies. A situation such as this would make it difficult for these types of unions not to focus on their own members at the national level.

What are the effects of unions being situated in nation-based regimes? Union representatives in the Organized corporatism, Liberal pluralism, and Social partnership regimes agree to a lesser extent with the statement than do those in the Polarized/state-centered regime. Particularly, the results from the Liberal pluralism regime should be treated with caution due to the very low response rate among union representatives in this regime. Moreover, there are no discernable differences between the responses of representatives in the Polarized/state-centered regime and those of representatives in the Transitional regime.

Continuing to the first aspect of transnational union cooperation, we analyze whether there should be more transnational cooperation on the sectoral level rather than cooperation with other unions in the home country. About one-third of the union representatives agree to a high degree (Table 3). Adding also those that agree to some degree, this is the case for three-fourths of all respondents. Continuing to the regression analyzes, there is no statistically significant effect of sector (Table 4, column 2). Concerning nation-based industrial relations regimes, representatives in the Organized Corporatism and Social Partnership regimes agree to a lesser extent about increasing efforts to establish this form of transnational cooperation in comparison with those in the Polarized/state-centered regime. This also means that there are no statistically significant effects between unions in the Liberalism pluralism and Transitional regimes and the

Table 4 Union representatives' preferences and perceptions concerning three statements on transnational interests and cooperation

	Preference for improving conditions for all workers in Europe	Preference for transnational sector cooperation	The economic crisis has made unions more protectionist
Sector			
Transport (ref.)			
Metal and Mining	0.44*	0.10	-0.13
Construction	0.57**	0.09	-0.09
Health care	-0.04	-0.25	-0.15
Banking and finance	0.40 ⁺	0.02	-0.11
Transsectoral	0.25	-0.07	-0.18
Regime			
Polarized/state-centered (ref.)			
Organized corporatism	-0.88***	-0.65***	-0.52**
Social partnership	-0.44*	-0.62**	-0.66**
Liberal pluralism	-0.74**	-0.11	-0.30
Transitional	-0.20	-0.19	-0.08
Size	-0.03	-0.04	0.02
Intercept	2.21	2.59	2.12
N	208	207	191
R ² adj.	0.194	0.097	.082

OLS regression analysis: Unstandardized b-coefficients.

Levels of significance: +p < 0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

representatives in the Polarized/state-centered regime. One potential factor explaining the different views on the need for transnational cooperation between unions in southern Europe and the Transitional regime, on the one hand, and unions in the western and northern European center, on the other hand, is the extent to which unions have been collaborators in enforcing 'competitive corporatism' to boost national competitiveness (cf. Erne 2008). Support for this is found in an additional analysis of responses to another statement in the dataset, which shows that union representatives in the Transitional regime believe that 'transnational union cooperation is needed to avoid certain countries getting competitive advantages over others' (data not shown).

Continuing to another aspect that we can interpret as perceived lack of transnational trade union cooperation, the results show that many union representatives agree, at least to a certain extent, with the statement that the economic crisis has made unions more protectionist in their outlook: 18% agree to a high degree and 53% to some degree (see Table 3). Thus, if the perception exists among union representatives that many unions have become more protectionist, it is easier to understand that many would like to have

increased transnational union cooperation within their sector/s rather than cooperating with nationally based unions, as seen in the former statement that was analyzed.

Continuing to the regression analyzes on whether the economic crisis has made unions more protectionist in their outlook, the results do not show any statistically significant effects of type of sector (see Table 4, column 3). Concerning nation-based industrial relations regimes, union representatives in the Organized corporatism and Social partnership regimes agree to a lesser extent with the statement compared to those in the Polarized/state-centered regime. The effects are once again fairly clear, showing a high level of statistical significance.

To sum up, our analyses have shown that union representatives' preferences and perceptions concerning transnational interests and cooperation differ markedly between unions in countries of the western and northern European center and those in the southern and central/eastern parts of Europe. This means that not only do unions in the Organized corporatism and Social partnership regimes agree to a lesser extent with statements on increased European worker solidarity and transnational sector cooperation, but also that this seems to follow from the fact that they also believe to a lesser extent that, after the Great Recession, unions have become more protectionist in their outlook.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed union representatives' views on transnational union interests and cooperation in the wake of the Great Recession. If we look at the effects of the nation-based industrial relations regimes, representatives in the Polarized/state-centered regime express a stronger orientation toward transnational union interests and cooperation. In this regime, we find the countries that were generally hit hardest by the economic crisis in the form of continuing austerity, mass unemployment, and the sovereign debt crises. The effects on workers and unions were severe following deregulation and anti-union policies. Thus, the conditions for unions to bargain and have influence at the national level have worsened. The official lenders – the 'troika' who negotiated the conditions for aid to particularly hard-hit crisis countries – demanded extensive structural reforms, such as reduced employment security or reduced minimum wages, unemployment benefits, and pensions. The anti-union policies simultaneously implemented by national governments had enormous consequences for union power and influence in countries such as Greece and Spain. Among other things, Greek unions experienced abolishment of minimum wage negotiations at the central level between unions and employer organizations, suspension of the extension procedure of collective agreements, and decentralization of collective bargaining. In Spain, following several labor reforms, the functioning and minimum standards of collective agreements have weakened considerably and, as a result, collective bargaining coverage decreased dramatically (see, e.g., Köhler & Calleja Jiménez 2017; Lehndorff 2015; Marginson 2015; Müller & Platzer 2017).

As emphasized by Müller and Platzer (2017, p. 289), in contrast to countries in southern Europe and some countries in the Transitional regime, 'countries of the western and northern European centre could moderate the effects of the crisis'. This means that the effects of the Great Recession have created nation-specific (or regime-specific) structural and institutional contexts and 'at the same time divergent problems and



contexts for trade union action, which make it more difficult for trade unions in Europe to develop common, coherent and transnationally coordinated strategies' (Müller & Platzer 2017, p. 289). Before the Great Recession unions in the Organized corporatism and Social Partnership regimes had already adopted what Erne (2008, p. 24) called 'a technocratic renationalization strategy', downplaying the traditional class conflict between the interests of labor and capital for the benefit of 'monistic alliances to boost national competitiveness' by constraining wage growth. This renationalization strategy is typically expressed in the form of 'competitive corporatist arrangements', such as social pacts at the national level (Erne 2008, p. 187). By using Sweden as a case that, in the words of Bengtsson and Ryner (2017, p. 277), 'conforms quite well with the ideal type of a nationally oriented competitive corporatism', the authors describe how powerful unions, in the aftermath of the so-called Nordic banking crisis in the early 1990s, retreated from the critique of neoliberal monetary policy, while they accepted competitive corporatism. This order was reproduced during and after the Great Recession, for example, seen in moderate wage pressures.

Moreover, the strategy of social partners acting as wage moderators is of great interest to European public authorities, who see rising labor costs as a key concern. Since the onset of the Great Recession, these authorities have increasingly demanded reforms of national wage-setting institutions through the EU semester system. As a result, commentators such as the ETUC have stated that the country-specific recommendations from the European Commission have 'trespassed on social partner autonomy' (Prosser 2016, p. 465).

To conclude, the renationalization strategy seems to have effected, among other things, unions' views on transnational union interests and cooperation. Especially union representatives in the Social partnership and Organized corporatism regimes express a weaker transnational orientation in response to the statements analyzed in this article. Returning to the Swedish case, the competitive corporatist logic, combined with factors such as the worker movement's nationally oriented welfare state discourse, seems to be impedimental to a more overarching European agency.

But we should not interpret trade union representatives' divergent views solely as outcomes of European countries having drifted apart economically and socially after the Great Recession. Eurozone membership seems to have some explanatory value as well. Unions within the Eurozone seem to have more common interests with different categories of European unions than with unions in countries outside the Eurozone. Concerning unions in the Organized corporatism regime, the results showing a weaker transnational orientation are consistent with findings from earlier research on Euro-skepticism among Nordic trade unions (see, e.g., Furåker & Bengtsson 2013; Glassner & Vandaele 2012). This skepticism is due to, among other things, great differences in social and economic standards between European countries, and it is also an expression of a strategy to conserve the Nordic model of labor relations. Moreover, union representatives in the western and northern European center conceive of the issue of unions having developed a more protectionist outlook quite differently (i.e., they agree to a lesser extent with the statement) from representatives in the southern and eastern parts of Europe. This finding can be interpreted as providing another example of the contemporary cleavage, or divergence in experiences, between trade unionists in Europe.

We end this article with another main finding. When posing questions about how widespread different forms of transnational cooperation *are* (or have been during the past few years), researchers have often found that sectoral differences seem to be more

important than national contexts. For example, Vulkan and Larsson (2018) show that employment sector explains more of the level of engagement in different forms of transnational union cooperation (during the preceding 5 years) than does nation-based industrial relations regimes. In the present study, it is somewhat surprising that, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, we do not find more clear-cut sectoral differences. In other words, we might have expected different sectors to have been effected to various degrees by the recession, thus causing union representatives to have responded in more diverse ways to the statements. Instead, what we found is that when representatives of European unions take a stand on how issues *should be* (e.g., to improve the conditions of European workers overall or to have more transnational cooperation within the sector), nation-based industrial relations regimes explain more than employment sector and organization size. Thus, following the critical events of the Great Recession, the depth of institutional transformation of industrial relations and welfare state systems seems to have varied with different nation-based industrial relations regimes. Because ‘the national areas of conflict for trade unions are drifting apart’ (Lehndorff 2015, p. 158), researchers still need to stress the importance of the different institutional resources for trade unions across the various European industrial relations regimes if they are to understand the future prospects for European collective action on the part of labor.

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Note

- 1 However, there are signs of possible change in the Organized corporatism regime. Although it is unlikely that we will see an outright attack on trade union rights in the Nordic countries, demands to restrict collective action have been made in the past decade, and less favorable terms for union membership have been implemented (see, e.g., Bergholm & Bieler 2013; Kjellberg 2011).