

I. General Outline

Background and Idea of the Project

Considering the European Union (EU) and its “predecessors”, the West-European states have established a unique and hybrid kind of political system in the second half of the 20th century. Common institutions are taking decisions which are binding for 27 (and more) member states and their citizens. Particularly the dynamics of the last two decades are remarkable: The member states have amended the original treaties via the Single European Act, the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice versions of the EC and EU-treaty. In this context, the institutional and procedural set-up as well as the scope of policy fields at the European level has been adjusted repeatedly by adding new articles and specific competencies.

As a result of the increasing importance of the European level, research on European integration has attracted growing academic interest. Especially transnational approaches have become a vital issue for historians and political scientists. However, national trade unions and industrial relations as well as different forms of transnational trade union cooperation have been disregarded by academics so far. The disregard of trade unions is particularly remarkable since the employees’ representation is playing an important role in discussions on a social model for Europe. Controversial topics like the social dialogue, the employment policy, the debate on transnational wage comparisons and the future of social partnership reveal both the increasing internationalization of labour markets and the new challenges.

Mission Statement and Relevant Issues

The evolution of trade unions in Europe and their attitude towards the integration process have been discussed – so far – only to limited extent. There is still a lack of studies which fulfil two important research targets: On the one hand, a systematic comparison of trade union politics in all EU-states including the new member states during the more recent decades; on the other hand, a study of national trade union reactions and adaptations to the challenge of European integration, which is common to all EU member states. These two dimensions of trade union research in the European context could be regarded as useful contributions to a wider perspective of the European Integration process, its historical evolution and the changes of industrial relations in Europe.

After the Second World War, the international system was dominated by the cold war. European trade unionism was divided in a Soviet-controlled unionism and various forms of

Western European trade unionism. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952 served as foundation for the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Treaties of Rome in 1958. These initial stages of European integration have confronted national trade unions with a new environment while Eastern European trade unions had to deal with other challenges at that time deriving in particular from the communist system. The two frameworks are hardly comparable, but they have to be regarded as a precondition to understand the evolution of trade unions in the 20th and 21st century. Especially in order to analyse trade unions in Eastern Europe since the transition phase after 1989/90 it is important to consider both traditions and new orientations.

The role of trade unions in Eastern Europe during the “transition phase” and their struggle for democratization as well as their “way to Europe” are highly salient for the later participation in a common policy of national trade unions at the European level. Considering the perspective to join the EU, national trade unions in the former communist states have developed their own European policies and strategies. The latest enlargement rounds have led to a European Union consisting of 27 countries overriding the historical separation between Eastern and Western Europe.

Trade unions are confronted with the growing amount of legal acts at the European level. Since economical questions are taken to the European level and especially since the common market has become effective, social issues are no longer left to the national state: The complexity of European structures, new decision-making-powers and working conditions under the terms of “Europeanization” and “Globalisation” have an effect on a majority of the European employees. Hence, it is a major task to analyse the strategic responses of trade unions.

In addition to the EU related approach it is necessary to take a closer look at different challenges for trade unions in Eastern and Western Europe in the last years: The employees’ representation organizations have to adapt their structures and their orientation due to the considerable changes in society and in political and economic spheres. Examples for these challenges are the demographic changes, the increasing dominance of post-industrial production practices, the rise of untypical or precarious employment and the decreasing number of trade union members.

Structure and Hypotheses

Based on this background, the Institute for Social Movements at the Ruhr-University of Bochum is organising a conference which should lead to a notable academic result. The Institute for Social Movements is an interdisciplinary academic centre for labour-related

research – referring in particular to methods of historical and political science. It is known for systematic studies on trade unions, parties and social movements linked with questions of social and labour history in Germany and Europe.

The conference intends to compare and analyse national trade unions in all EU-member states and their actions and reactions in the European context. It aims to undertake a country by country approach from the historical and the current perspective. Each contribution should be structured in three major chapters.

The first chapter should refer to the national context and present a general overview of the historical evolution of labour relations and trade unions structures in the national context; it is of special interest to outline the specific reactions and restructuring efforts of trade unions in Eastern Europe. The second part should reveal the reactions of national trade unions to the challenges at the European level – again both from a historical point of view and in view of more recent developments. In addition to this, transnational cooperation structures should also be covered in this chapter. The third chapter should be an in-depth analysis of “your” country in relation to the other trade unions under investigation. The different country studies should refer to the European context along the following hypotheses:

► **Hypothesis 1:** *Trade unions have reacted – from the historical perspective – in almost all member states only in a reluctant and defensive way as “late-comers” to the challenges of European integration.* This hypothesis focuses in particular on the historical evolution. It should be analysed at what time responses to the changes at European level have been taken. And it should be analysed if trade unions have developed common strategies or if national trade unions have reacted primarily in specific and spontaneous terms.

► **Hypothesis 2:** *The treaty changes at the European level have promoted the Europeanization of national trade unions.* This hypothesis is based on the assumption that national trade unions – though they might be regarded as “late-comers” – have reacted to the European integration process. This hypothesis refers in particular to the organisational structures. The growing amount of EC/EU legislation and political decisions at the EU level might have forced the Europeanization of the trade unions.

► **Hypothesis 3:** *As a consequence of European integration trade unions have converged in structure and politics – both at the national and the European level.* This hypothesis intends to analyse if the increasing participation at the European level has supported the creation of one or several “common” trade union type(s) – or least if the orientation at the European Union has led to converge structures and policies of Western and Eastern Europe trade unions. This hypothesis is also related to the question if one special (na-

tional) model or type of trade union representation and labour relations is more “appropriate” for the multi-level system of European integration than others. Thus, it should be asked if there are winners and losers among the national trade unions.