

The European trade union federations: profiles and power resources – changes and challenges in times of crisis

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1. Introduction

For a considerable time now, the European Union has been kept hanging in suspense by a multitude of overlapping crises. What started as a subprime mortgage crisis in the United States in 2007/2008 and turned into a world financial crisis, led to the sovereign debt crisis due to the public costs incurred by the crisis management policies adopted and finally turned into the ‘euro crisis’ because of the interdependencies within the euro zone. What we can see is that during this period, in addition to the general, transnational dynamics of the crisis, there were nationally fairly different trends and developments in the EU Member States (for a comparative analysis, see Bieling and Buhr 2015). While countries of the western and northern European centre could moderate the effects of the crisis and have now by and large overcome it, in the southern and some central and eastern European countries the crisis has had dramatic labour and social policy consequences and led to hitherto unresolved problems.

For the trade unions’ capacity to develop cross-border and supranational policies this means two things: first, the crisis has created nationally specific 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. Second, the transnational nature of the crisis has also created overarching, similar or complementary problems that can foster and promote joint European approaches. Empirical analysis of these conflicting trends of a crisis-induced divergence of trade unions’ power resources, capacity to act and political priorities, on one hand, and of the need and new opportunities for transnational solidarity and for joint European action on the other, requires a multi-level approach (Müller and Platzer 2016); in other words, a comparative analysis of national trade unions and industrial relations in the EU28 linked with an analysis of cross-border relationships and the EU-level trade union organisations.

This contribution focuses on the European level. It analyses whether and how the crisis impacted on the European trade union organisations’ power resources and their capacity to act. The empirical analysis will be based on an analytical framework that combines two approaches which the authors have developed elsewhere: a model of union power resources in a European multi-level system of industrial relations (Müller and Platzer 2016) and a typology of transnational union organisations which helps to differentiate the European trade union federations according to different functional profiles and actor qualities (Platzer and Müller 2011).

This analytical grid allows us a twofold comparative perspective: a diachronic one that compares the European trade union federations’ capacity to act ‘before the crisis’

(empirical reference year 2008) with the current conditions (empirical reference year 2018); and a synchronic perspective that uses the analytical grid to systematically embrace the complexity of the trade union landscape at European level and the diversity of organisational patterns. The analysis covers all the existing European sectoral trade union federations plus the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) at cross-sectoral level. The analysis is primarily based on quantitative data, complemented by further qualitative findings of previous studies conducted by the authors (Platzer and Müller 2011; Rüb and Platzer 2016).

2. Analytical framework

2.1 Trade union power resources in a multi-level system of industrial relations and functional profiles of transnational trade union federations

In recent trade union research, an approach has become established that analyses the role and power of unions by means of a power resources approach. The large body of literature that exists by now (see, for example, the anthologies by Haipeter and Dörre 2011; Schmalz and Dörre 2013) typically distinguishes four sources of power: economic-structural power, associational or organisational power, institutional power and communicative power. These four dimensions are partly mutually dependent, complementary and to a certain extent mutually exchangeable.

This power resources model and the corresponding analysis of power is essentially based on a national frame of reference. Not sufficiently taken into account, however, are the increasing political and socio-economic interdependencies in the EU and the growing importance of the European level of decision-making. For the purpose of this contribution it is therefore essential to add a transnational-European dimension to the power resources approach. A useful starting point could be the concept of a Europeanisation of industrial relations and collective bargaining in the context of a multi-level system of governance, which the authors have developed elsewhere (Platzer 1998; Rüb *et al.* 2013).

Based on this broadened perspective the following observations can be made:

- All four national power resources mentioned above are subject to trans- and supranational economic and political influences. These influences can weaken but under certain circumstances also strengthen these national power resources.
- Monetary, economic and social policy decisions at European level affect important parameters of competition – both between states as well as between trade unions and thus (directly or indirectly) the various national and transnational power resources.
- A genuinely European level of economic-structural, organisational, institutional and communicative power resources will gain in importance.

Based on these considerations the following European multi-level model of union power resources can be developed and utilised for the empirical analysis. In the given context two caveats must be added: first, as regards the analytical concept it is possible to outline only the basic framework and second, concerning the subsequent empirical

analysis, it is possible only to look at some power dimensions with a particular focus on the European level and the European trade union organisations’ functional profiles.

Table 1 Trade union power resources in a multi-level system of industrial relations

	Sources and components of trade union power	
	National level	Transnational-European level
Economic-structural power	Power deriving from position in labour market and production process power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Power deriving from position in labour market and production process in transnational value chains; – Cross-border (positive or negative) effects of nationally different market power within the respective labour market and production models of member states
Organisational power	Membership strength, stability and vitality of union organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ability to aggregate national and local means of power at transnational level; – Cross-border networking along value chains and mobilising cross-border support of weaker unions by stronger ones; – Resources and competences of European-level trade unions
Institutional power	Securing influence in institutional arrangements	– Securing influence in European arenas based on EU Treaty and/or European law
Communicative power	Ability to take part in public discourses, to shape public opinion and to forge alliances with other actors of civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Coherence of ideological-programmatic positions; – Ability to represent common European strategies vis-à-vis EU institutions; – Ability to forge alliances with transnational NGOs

Source: Authors' compilation (Müller and Platzer 2016).

Following other contributions (for instance the one by Huke and Tietje 2015: 374ff), for this European multi-level model of trade union power resources the national level can be described as follows.

The economic-structural power of trade unions as collective interest groups is determined by the specific situation of workers in the labour market and production process. This ‘market power’ is based on the ability to influence or ‘disrupt’ processes of production and capital utilisation. This ability in turn depends on a number of parameters, such as skills level, substitutability of labour, unemployment rate and degree of labour market segmentation into a permanent ‘core’ workforce and precarious workers.

However, the economic-structural power resources can be realised only if they are linked with sufficient organisational power, which in turn is the result of employees joining forces in a trade union. Organisational power is initially defined numerically and materially: by membership and union density figures, as well as by financial and personnel resources, including ‘strike funds’. However, organisational power also has a qualitative dimension including the specific capacities to mobilise the membership, to generate the strategic collective action and to maintain the vitality and attractiveness of the organisation.

Institutional power is a ‘secondary’ but important power resource of workers and their trade unions. It is the result of historic struggles and social compromises between employers, governments and trade unions. It finds its institutional expression in the

specific shape of the labour law, the welfare state, the system of employee participation at company level, the collective bargaining system as well as in certain cultural traditions and practices of the industrial relations system. Institutional power secures union participation and stabilises or facilitates interest articulation by trade unions without a permanent ‘duty to mobilise’.

Communicative power refers to the ability of trade unions to engage in public debate and to (ideally) win the battle of ideas by successfully influencing public opinion and discourse and by ensuring the long-term presence and effectiveness of trade union ideas in social and public space. The communicative power resource also refers to the ability to cooperate with other civil society actors in influencing the public and published opinion (Huke and Tietje 2015: 374f subsume these two dimensions as discursive power and cooperative power under the single category of ‘societal power’).

At the European level, the trade union power resources can also be depicted in these four dimensions (see Table 1) and – in a nutshell – be characterised as follows.

In transnationally highly integrated production processes and markets, economic-structural power resources can (directly) take effect, if the workers and their unions have the cross-border capacity to disrupt production processes. This power dimension is influenced by the differences in the Member States’ labour market and production models because they provide the basis for the primary or market power of trade unions. The differences in unions’ market power, in turn, affect cross-border competition in the context of the internal market (*‘Standortkonkurrenz’*) and the European Monetary Union (see the problems of wage dumping).

The transnational organisational power resources are based on the specific national and local power resources of workers and their trade unions. Particularly important is, therefore, the national unions’ willingness to provide solidaristic transnational support and the ability of unions to cooperate across national borders and to develop a transnational countervailing power in variable networks. Finally, the transnational organisational power manifests itself in competences and the financial and personnel resources transferred to the European trade union federations.

The transnational institutional power resources manifest themselves in the unions’ ability to facilitate and/or secure influence in European arenas that are based on EU primary law through EU treaties and secondary law through EU regulations and directives. Examples of such arenas include the (cross-)sectoral social dialogue and the European or SE works councils at company level. Another example of transnational institutional power resources would be the adoption and implementation of EU law establishing an (optional) legal framework for transnational agreements at company level – but only if such a legal framework respects the trade unions’ prerogative in transnational collective bargaining (see Rüb *et al.* 2013).

The transnational institutional power dimension also includes the new system of European economic governance, established in the context of the current crisis as a tool to improve macroeconomic coordination within the EU. In principle, this new system

of economic governance – and more specifically the European Semester process which forms the core of the annual cycle of economic policy coordination – represents another multi-level arena giving trade unions the opportunity to exert influence at different levels: at European level through the ETUC in the formulation of the country-specific recommendations; and at national level through the national unions in the formulation of the national reform programmes, which form the basis for the country-specific recommendations. In practice, however, under the current political power constellations this system has produced adverse effects, weakening the national power base of trade unions. Examples include, first, supranational interventions in national wage policies in the context of the European Semester and the Memoranda of Understanding between the so-called ‘Troika’ and the countries that needed the help of financial assistance programmes (Schulten and Müller 2015); and secondly, the crisis-induced pursuit of consolidation/austerity policies which are coordinated at European level and which change national institutional arrangements at the expense of trade unions.

The transnational communicative resource is not aimed primarily at ‘European public or published opinion’, because these are still weakly developed and because European policy is still dealt with primarily in national arenas of discourse. Rather, it is about the consistency of ideological and programmatic positions and about the ability of European union federations to align and aggregate national interests and to convey these interests and strategies at both national and European level. The coherence and substance of common ideas about European policies and about regulatory requirements is also an important precondition for successful networking activities and for the creation of alliances (‘advocacy coalitions’) within a diverse ‘Brussels lobbying scene’.

These four transnational power resources provide a first analytical frame of reference, which, however, needs to be further differentiated for an analysis of the organisational and political characteristics of European trade union federations. In doing so, we rely on the analytical concept of ‘functional profiles of transnational trade union federations’ (see Platzer and Müller 2011: 35–53). This concept is based on a multi-level approach and the premise that in the course of European integration problems of governance or problem-solving above the level of the nation-state play a significant role. Drawing on the logic and configuration of political processes in multi-level systems, with their different modes for the coordination of social action (Scharpf 2000: 11ff), and transposing it to the world of trade unions (Rüb 2009), this concept provides a staged classification schema, as seen in Table 2. This approach focuses on functional profiles and allows transnational trade union organisations to be allocated within this taxonomy, depending on the scope and nature of their activities.

It would go beyond the scope of this contribution to describe this model in more detail. It should, however be noted that the development of such a model rests on abstractions that are necessarily ‘ideal-typical’. This taxonomy can be looked at both diachronically as well as synchronically: that is, it can serve in historical terms to categorise the development of an individual trade union organisation and its key functional profiles in central policy fields. It can also be considered synchronically as a means of comparing the stages of development and characteristics of organisations. For empirical analysis and concrete application, this model – as a heuristic tool – has been further operationalised. That is,

Table 2 **Functional profiles of transnational trade unions**

Functional profile	Character of decision-making and scope of transnational activity
5. Supranational trade union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hierarchical control – Wide-ranging powers and mandates – Continuous autonomous exercise of core trade union functions, such as collective bargaining and relations with employers.
4. Associative governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Establishment of binding <i>joint decisions</i> – Standardisation of operational objectives (e.g. collective bargaining and/or coordination rules on relations with employers) – Case-by-case limited mandate (by topic or time) for transnational negotiations – Establishment of mechanisms for implementing and monitoring decisions – Establishment of internal procedures and transparency.
3. Coordination platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Negotiation of non-binding decisions – Regulated and structured agreement on joint positions – Standardisation of operational agreements (e.g. model agreements) – Agreements on positions with 'soft' orientation for affiliated organisations.
2. Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Regular and formalised exchange of information – Continuous agreement and communication of positions – Scope for exchange to improve mutual understanding.
1. Information provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Information exchange – Limited and issue-specific cooperation and agreement on positions.

Source: Authors' compilation (Platzer and Müller 2011).

specific indicators for different fields of activity (for instance, affiliate-related activities, company activities, wage coordination and industrial policy) were defined to allow the activities to be assigned to the functional profiles. Concretely, this means, for example, that a European trade union federation might exhibit characteristics of 'associative governance' in the field of collective bargaining, whereas the same federation might operate as a coordination platform for company-related activities.

3. The European trade union federations before the crisis: power resources and functional profiles

In a first step, this analytical toolkit will be used to describe the European trade union federations' state before the start of the crisis. This section will also cover the 1990s and early 2000s because of the far-reaching changes that took place in those years in terms of EU integration (completing the internal market and creation of the monetary union) and the eastward extension of the EU ('big bang'). In 2008, which serves as the reference year for the analysis of the European trade union federations during the crisis years, there were 13 of them (see Table 3), which together with the ETUC at the cross-sectoral level form the 'European union family'. Because EMF, EMCEF and the ETUF:TCL merged in May 2012 to form the new organisation industriAll European Trade Union, the number of European trade union federations decreased to 10 in 2018.

Table 3 **Organisational data on European trade union federations (2008 and 2018)**

European trade union federations	Total membership represented (million)		Affiliates		Countries		Head office number of staff	
	2008	2018	2008	2018	2008	2018	2008	2018
ETUC	60	45	86	89	39	39	46*	61
EPSU	8	8	209	265	36	49	16	19
UNI-Europa	7	7	320	272	50	50	n.a.	23
ETUCE	5.5	11	112	132	30	51	10	12
EMF	5.4		69		33		20	
EMCEF	2.5	7	128	192	35	37	8	24
ETUF:TCL	1		70		40		4	
EFFAT	2.6	2.6	120	120	35	35	11	11
ETF	2.5	5	223	230	40	42	14	16
EFBWW	2.3	2	68	76	27	34	8	9
EuroCOP	0.53	0.53	34	35	26	27	1-2	2
EAEA	0.30	n.a.	135	n.a.	27	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
EFJ	0.28	0.32	53	70	34	44	4	6

Note: * number for 2006.

Source: Compiled by the authors, based on organisational data.

Acronym	Full name
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
EPSU	European Federation of Public Service Unions
UNI-Europa	Union Network International - Europa
ETUCE	European Trade Union Committee for Education
EMF	European Metalworkers' Federation
EMCEF	European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation
ETUF:TCL	European Trade Union Federation – Textiles, Clothing, Leather
industriAll	European Trade Union
EFFAT	European Federation of Food, Agriculture & Tourism Trade Unions
ETF	European Transport Workers' Federation
EFBWW	European Federation of Building and Woodworkers
EuroCOP	European Confederation of Police
EAEA	European Arts and Entertainment Alliance
EFJ	European Federation of Journalists

The analysis of the European trade union federations' power resources will focus mainly on their organisational and institutional power. The European trade union federations' economic-structural power resources are weakly developed because of their very nature as second-order organisations. As a consequence, their economic-structural power resources essentially depend on the interplay of two key factors: first, the structural power resources of their affiliates – that is, the affiliates' capacity to disrupt production processes; and secondly in the absence of a European legal basis for collective action, on the affiliates' willingness to put their market power at the disposal of the European trade union federations or at least to use it in a coordinated manner in a transnational context. The European trade union federations' communicative power resources – in the sense of their capacity to influence public and published opinion – is limited because the latter itself is weakly developed at European level, so that the struggle of ideas is taking place mainly in the arenas for public discourse at national level.

3.1 The European trade union federations' organisational power resources

Key indicators for the organisational power resources of European-level trade unions are their financial and personnel resources and their capacity of aggregating and coordinating their affiliates' national means of power at transnational level. Concerning the European trade union federations' financial resources, the most significant challenge in the pre-crisis era was the need to integrate trade unions from the former Eastern bloc after the end of the political division in Europe. The integration of trade unions from central and eastern Europe, on one hand, led to a significant increase in membership and geographical scope of the European trade union federations, which, in principle, increases their organisational power resources. However, at the same time enlargement has exacerbated the structural resource problems of the European trade union federations. Due to the limited resources of most of the central and eastern European trade unions, the European trade union federations were faced with rising demands in terms of providing training and advice to the new affiliates, but also in terms of enabling them to fully and comprehensively take part in their activities, for instance by simply covering the costs of attending meetings at transnational level. Despite repeated moderate increases in the European trade union federations' subscription fees, their financial resources have not kept pace with the rising demands of integrating a large and heterogeneous membership. As a consequence, the European trade union federations became increasingly dependent on 'external' financial support in their operations, especially as far as member-related activities are concerned (training, advice, research), most of which is project financing by the EU.

Similarly sobering is the result when looking at the personnel resources of the European trade union federations' secretariats, which in some ways are the bearers of the historical, organisational and political knowledge and experience of the federations, and which represent the overall organisation in its daily operations at 'Brussels level'. In the pre-crisis period, only half of all ETUFs employed more than ten staff. Even the at the time largest sectoral European trade union federation, the EMF, which in 2008 employed twenty people, had a cadre of full-time transnationally-active officials that is smaller than the regional offices of many national trade unions. Thus, even though the

secretariats of the majority of European trade union federations had grown somewhat in terms of staffing in the pre-crisis period, in no instance was this sustained or substantive enough to cope adequately with the increasing demands placed upon them.

However, the key determinant of organisational power resources is not financial and staffing capacity alone but also the intensity with which affiliates are involved in transnational cooperation, and the extent to which they make their know-how and (staff) resources available to the work of the European trade union federations. Nevertheless, even adding together the staff resources of all the European trade union federations, including the Brussels offices of some national trade union organisations, the problems of transnational capacity still remain severe given the much greater resources of the employers' side at European level, and the widening of the gulf between the representation of employer and employee interests since the Single Market programme.

This brings us to the European trade union federations' capacity to aggregate and to coordinate their affiliates' interests and activities as the third factor determining their organisational power resources. Here also the growth in membership due to the integration of trade unions from the central and eastern European countries made things more complicated. Institutionally, because of the greater diversity of national trade union identities and practices; and politically because of the limited capacity of central and eastern European trade unions to implement transnationally agreed policies at national level.

The European trade union federations responded to this challenge by improving their internal working structures. In the late 1990s they began to establish internal coordination bodies to synchronise and coordinate their affiliates' activities. These coordination bodies were set up with respect to three broader policy areas: firstly, (sub-) sectoral issues mainly related to EU-level industrial policy initiatives or sectoral social dialogue; secondly, issues that concern a particular group or category of employees, such as female or young employees; and thirdly, cross-sectoral issues such as the coordination of collective bargaining and company policy. These issue-specific committees provided the context in which national affiliates were able to develop a greater understanding of each others' standpoints and create the trust needed to agree common positions and 'binding' guidelines. As such these internal coordination structures were an institutional precondition to improve the European trade union federations' organisational power resources through a more intensive interaction between representatives from national affiliates.

However, there were considerable variations in the degree of intensity and frequency of committee work within individual federations, depending on the sub-sector or issue. And there are even greater differences in the scope and intensity of transnational communication and coordination between the federations. These differences can be attributed to a number of factors. They can be due to the age of the federation: that is, a certain amount of time needs to have elapsed for long-term learning processes to have taken place before functioning transnational operational structures, based on mutual trust and confidence, can emerge. Differences can also be attributable to the specific demands posed by a European trade union federation's 'logic of influence' – that is,

the need for transnationally-coordinated strategies in relation to the EU's regulatory activities, which vary from sector to sector. And finally, they can be anchored in the 'logic of membership', such as limited resources or a long-term political lack of capacity or willingness to cooperate on the part of the affiliates.

The field of transnational collective bargaining coordination is a case in point with regard to how the increase in the willingness of national affiliates to commit themselves to the coordination processes managed by the European trade union federations increased their organisational power resources, with European trade union federations assuming the role of 'virtual coordinators' in discussions on wage formulae, negotiating guidelines and bargaining topics. However, they were not directly involved – either before or during – in the national level negotiations of their affiliates. While they may have evaluated whether affiliates had adhered to agreed coordination rules, they had no powers to sanction any breaches. European trade union federations fulfil important functions in the area of process management, communication and (on occasions) conflict resolution and overall organisation in the sphere of European bargaining coordination. How these functions are configured in detail varies considerably from federation to federation.

Overall, before the crisis, European trade union federations applied the approach of 'imitating tried and tested practice'. That is, in practice, the structures of internal decision-making and procedural rules on transnational coordination developed by the EMF have been progressively adopted by other European trade union federations, at least in terms of their basic features. In general, in the field of transnational collective bargaining the European trade union federations have widened and enhanced their functions. Whereas their functional profile in the field of collective bargaining up until the 1990s was confined to that of a forum for information exchange, the development of agreement on ('binding') collective bargaining guidelines and/or minimum standards, and the establishment of monitoring procedures, have since meant that their functions have been extended towards that of a coordination platform. To varying degrees, this now applies to the majority of federations. Some European trade union federations, such as the EMF or the EFBWW, have even showed signs of associative governance, at the least as far as the formalisation and institutionalisation of the management of wage interdependencies is concerned.

3.2 Institutional power resources

The European trade union federations' institutional power resources are heavily 'preconfigured' by specific opportunity structures at European level which allow them to engage in supra-national processes of norm-setting and in processes of formal and informal lobbying at European level. These opportunity structures can be the result of the sheer density of EU legislation in certain policy areas, on one hand, and the emergence of new arenas in the context of the EU's multi-level structure of governance such as the European social dialogue at (cross-)sectoral level and European Works Councils at the company level, on the other.

An example of how the density of EU legislation has shaped the European trade union federations' institutional power resources is the field of industrial policy and the

European Commission's decision in 2002 to reinvigorate sector-specific industrial policies in order to strengthen the competitiveness of European industry (European Commission 2002). In this context several sector-specific initiatives were launched which provided scope for the institutional involvement of the respective European trade union federations in sectoral dialogue forums and tripartite committees, which were created to advise these sectoral initiatives.¹ In doing so, these institutionalised sector-specific forums extended the European trade union federations' capacity for exercising influence through dialogue with political decision-makers and the employer side, and to introduce certain subjects into the policy agenda.

However, at the time, the key focus of the Commission's industrial policy approach was manufacturing industry. The service sector was almost entirely excluded from consideration for a sectoral policy (Kirton-Darling 2007). This means that the 'pre-configured' politics of influence and the corresponding forms and degrees of intensity of union lobbying at European level differed widely by sector, depending on the salience of EU policies and the relevance of supra-national regulatory sovereignty in setting sector- or branch-level parameters. Because in the service sector there were fewer possibilities for exerting influence through institutionalised channels, the European trade union federations in these sectors (in particular UNI-Europa, EPSU and EAEA) were much more dependent on informal lobbying and the use of their communicative power resources through mobilising their members and the wider public in the context of political campaigns.

The proposal for the Services Directive issued in January 2004 is a case in point. In order to press its demands UNI-Europa and EPSU, together with the ETUC initiated an extensive and ultimately successful campaign that consisted of a broad range of measures. One element was direct lobbying of EU institutions through participation in official consultations and tripartite social summits, as well as meetings with representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. The lobbying efforts also included calling on their national affiliates to try to influence national policy-makers and members of the European Parliament. These lobbying efforts were accompanied by member mobilisation to participate in European demonstrations organised by the ETUC in Brussels and Strasbourg during plenary sessions of the European Parliament (Kowalsky 2007). As a result, the trade unions were able to fend off the most unwanted aspects of the provisions through a joint exercise entailing a coherent multi-level approach coordinated by the ETUC based on the interplay of institutional and communicative power resources.

Another important factor that in the pre-crisis period increased European trade union federations' institutional power resources was the emergence of new arenas of transnational industrial relations – not least as a consequence of long-term efforts by trade unions. In the first place, there are the Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees (SSDC), which are overseen by the European Commission and which 'compel' sectoral employer

1 Examples of such sector-specific initiatives are 'LeaderSHIP 2015' in the shipbuilding industry, 'STAR 21' in aerospace, 'Cars 21' in the automotive industry and the REACH initiative which aimed at developing a future European policy on chemicals. In addition, there were more traditional European sectoral policy areas such as the European agricultural policy and the European fishery policy.

associations to take on the role of employer organisations and create a ‘counterpart’ to the European trade union federations. And secondly, new arenas emerged at European company level which opened up new transnational fields of activity for trade unions as a result of EU regulatory intervention (EWC Directive, European Company Statute).

In the pre-crisis period, social dialogue led to six framework agreements concluded by the ETUC at cross-sectoral level² and another six agreements by the sectoral European trade union federations in the context of the 38 SSDCs which existed at the end of 2008³ (Platzer and Müller 2011: 806–807). Given the essentially voluntaristic character of sectoral social dialogue and the lack of any means of exerting pressure by trade unions through strikes and collective action, these negotiations do not amount to real collective bargaining. However, these results nonetheless illustrate that the social dialogue provided the institutional framework for co- and self-regulation by trade unions and employers’ associations at (cross-)sectoral level.

The impact of the social dialogue on the European trade union federations’ institutional power resources varied depending on the political and strategic importance they attribute to the social dialogue, which in turn depends on the circumstances of their branch. Overall, social dialogue has increased the ‘formal’ recognition and upgrading of the status of the European trade union federations as representatives of their affiliates’ interests vis-à-vis the employer side. It not only strengthened the European trade union federations’ institutional power resources but also their organisational power resources. First of all, because the significance of the European trade union federations as the ‘locus’ of intensive inter-affiliate communication and coordination has tended to grow, since even ‘soft’ objects of negotiation require that federations ensure that affiliates’ interests are reconciled and marshalled into a coherent position at European level. SSDCs have also played a significant role for all the federations from a logistical, financial and strategic standpoint as the incentives offered by the European Commission (rooms, interpreters, travel costs, finance for sectoral studies) are systematically used as a resource for affiliate activities.

Similar conclusions with regard to the European trade union federations’ institutional (but also organisational) power resources can be drawn in the field of company policy as a result of the emergence of EWCs as a new arena of industrial relations at transnational company level. The development of EWC activity has enhanced the status European trade union federations ETUFs in relation to the top management of European

2 These were three framework agreements on parental leave (1995), part-time work (1997) and fixed-term contracts (1999) and after the introduction of the open method of coordination at the beginning of the 2000s three autonomous agreements on telework (2002), work-related stress (2004) and harassment and violence at work (2007).

3 These six agreements were: European agreement on the organisation of the working time of seafarers (ETF in Maritime Transport SSD, 1998); Agreement on some aspects of the organisation of working time in the rail transport sector (ETF in Railway Transport SSD, 1998); European agreement on the organisation of the working time of mobile staff in civil aviation (ETF in Civil Aviation SSD, 2000); Agreement on the European licence for drivers carrying out a cross-border interoperability service (ETF in Rail Transport SSD, 2004); Agreement on certain aspects of the working conditions of railway mobile workers assigned to interoperable cross-border services (ETF in Railway Transport SSD, 2004); and the multi-sectoral agreement on protecting workers against silica crystalline dusts (EMF and EMCEF in the context of three SSDs for the extractive, the chemical and the metals, engineering and technology-based industries, 2006).

companies, the EU's political institutions and their own affiliates. In particular, during the early stages of the EWC process before the adoption of the EWC Directive in 1994, the European trade union federations were directly involved in EWC negotiations, sometimes leading them and on occasion coordinating national workplace and trade union negotiating teams. Due to the strong growth in the number of EWCs after the adoption of the EWC Directive such a strong direct involvement of European trade union federations in negotiating agreements was no longer possible due to their limited personnel resources, so that the role of negotiator and the control of negotiations were largely returned to national affiliates.

In the pre-crisis period, the EWC-related activities of the majority of European trade union federations comprised two key tasks: firstly, providing orientation, guidance and support for establishing and maintaining EWCs. In addition, some European trade union federations have also been able to steer the course of decentralised negotiations and provide support by developing procedural and substantive guidelines for negotiators. However, European trade union federations have no means of enforcing these, or of sanctioning breaches in the event of non-compliance by affiliates. The second key task was lobbying and campaigning in the context of the revision of the EWC Directive. As with the Services Directive, a crucial role in this context was played by the ETUC as coordinator and driver of a broader political campaign and as acknowledged European social partner with privileged access to formal channels of consultation and decision-making bodies.

Over time, a number of EWCs have progressed beyond information and consultation to negotiate transnational company agreements. This, together with the increase in the number of conflicts that occur within EWCs as a result of European restructuring, has led some European trade union federations to extend their areas of activity. These include, on one hand, securing closer European coordination between national trade unions in the field of company policy and, on the other, developing a transnational negotiating procedure that can link national unions and EWCs with the European trade union federation level.

Even though there were differences between the European trade union federations concerning the degree and sophistication of their activities in the field of social dialogue and EWCs, overall the emergence of these new arenas has provided favourable institutional conditions for the intensification of transnational dialogue and in some instances even negotiations with the employer side. In doing so, these new arenas have extended the European trade union federations' traditional repertoire of action beyond the field of labour diplomacy. That is, 'negotiation and agreement', a core historical task for trade unions and previously one reserved for the national level, has progressively acquired a transnational dimension. This has not only increased their organisational and institutional power resources; it has also affected their functional profiles in these policy fields, which have shifted from that of a forum for the exchange of information to one of a coordination platform and in some cases to that of a transnational organisation with attributes of 'associative governance'.

4. The impact of the crisis on the European trade union federations' power resources and functional profiles

Concerning the trade unions' capacity to act, the various crises that have emerged since 2008 represent a watershed. Not only because of their direct social and economic consequences at national level but also because of the entirely new institutional framework which has been set up at European level in an attempt to cope with the crisis. However, it should be stressed that, despite the deep economic integration of the EU and despite a dynamic that spans all the countries affected, the crisis has taken nationally different courses, with differing consequences (see European Commission 2014a; on social and economic divergence, see Kohl 2015). Whereas countries in Western and Northern Europe have been able to mitigate the impact of the crisis, it has had dramatic employment and social effects in the southern 'deficit countries', as well as some central and eastern European countries. This divergence in the experience of the crisis, with its differing impacts on labour markets, industrial relations, and social welfare, is also likely to have varying consequences for the political capacity and strategic direction of the collective bargaining parties and in particular the trade unions – both nationally and transnationally.

4.1 New political and economic framework conditions at the European level

In response to the crisis, the EU has developed a new system of economic governance comprising a whole range of instruments to improve macroeconomic and fiscal coordination across Europe. These instruments include: the European Stability Mechanisms (ESM), the European Semester, the Fiscal Compact and legislative initiatives such as the 'Six Pack' and the 'Two Pack'. It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to describe the various elements in more detail (for this see Leschke *et al.* 2015), but taken together these key elements of the new European economic governance embody a new policy style of European interventionism (Müller 2015; Schulten and Müller 2015).

This new policy style is characterised by three main features. The first is a shift in decision-making powers from the national to the European level, enabling European policy-makers to directly influence policies at national level. This also applies to policy areas in which the EU Treaty explicitly rules out any EU competences, such as social policy and wages and collective bargaining. The second key feature is the strengthening of executive bodies (such as the European Commission and the national finance ministers represented in the ECOFIN Council and the ESM Governing Board) vis-à-vis the arenas for parliamentary action – both at European and national level (Oberndorfer 2013). And the third central feature of the new policy style of European interventionism is the strong focus as regards content on so-called 'supply-side economics' based on austerity policies, deregulation and internal devaluation as the central elements of European crisis management.

This new policy approach and the new institutional setting of the new economic governance has transformed the context for trade union activity. In principle, a shift in

the locus of political decision-making from the national to the European level should strengthen the political role of the European trade union federations in representing the interests of their affiliates in the new arenas created by the new system of economic governance. Even more so in light of the traditional privileged consultative role of the ETUC as a recognised social partner. In practice, this did not happen – on the contrary. As the crisis unfolded it became increasingly clear that – for several reasons outlined in more detail below – the new system of economic governance would not increase the institutional power resources of the European trade union federations.

The neoliberal supply-side bias of the policies pursued in the context of the new institutional framework furthermore weakened the trade unions' power resources at national level, which in turn are an essential prerequisite for the European trade union federations' capacity to act at the European level. The austerity policies and the 'structural reforms' pushed through in the context of the Troika measures and the country-specific recommendations of the European Semester are aimed primarily at budget consolidation and the deregulation of the national welfare and collective bargaining systems. This approach is essentially based on the view that the current macroeconomic imbalances are the result of diverging developments in 'national competitiveness', putatively caused mainly by diverging trends in wages and unit labour costs (Müller *et al.* 2015). Before the creation of EMU, deficit countries would have had the opportunity to deal with their competitiveness problems by devaluing their national currency. However, because within the EMU this is no longer possible, the less competitive countries pursue a policy of so-called 'internal devaluation', which is a euphemism for cutting and freezing wages. In this belief system, the key to restoring (cost) competitiveness is do away with all kinds of 'institutional rigidities'. As outlined in the by now famous DG ECFIN Report 'Labour Market Developments in Europe 2012' (European Commission 2012), this not only involves labour market deregulation – for example, cutting unemployment assistance, reducing employment protection and increasing the retirement age (for a detailed overview see Myant *et al.* 2016)– but also policies aimed at the decentralisation of collective bargaining and at the 'overall reduction in the wage setting power of trade unions' (European Commission 2012: 103).

This has become the dominant narrative which has guided crisis management and the ensuing 'reform' policies in the EU countries. And the pursuit of these austerity and internal devaluation policies has not been limited to the countries subjected to Troika measures and country-specific recommendations. The more recent examples of reform initiatives in Finland, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium illustrate that these policies of cuts in social benefits and wages, decentralisation of collective bargaining and curbing trade union rights have also spread to countries that were not subject to direct European interventions (ETUI 2016: 54). This also illustrates that many national governments – irrespective of European-level interventions – have used the general political climate and the tools created in the context of the new European economic governance in order to legitimise the implementation of neoliberal policies.

What we can see as a result is the far-reaching weakening of trade union power resources at national level (for more details see the various country studies in this book and Koukiadaki *et al.* 2016; Müller and Platzer 2016). This in turn raises the question

of whether the crisis has led to any new elements in the ‘social dimension’ relevant to employment and trade union policy that could serve to offset some of the negative effects described above. Looking into the areas of social policy regulation (EU legislation), distribution (use of EU financial resources), social dialogue and the open method of coordination at the time of writing (spring 2018), the record was as follows. After a long delay, some decisions have been made at EU level of a distributive nature in response to youth unemployment (reallocation of budget and structural fund resources; EIB loans; expected total of 6 billion euros by 2020) and of a ‘normative’ nature (announcement of a ‘Youth Guarantee’). The EU has also sought to raise labour mobility, to be supported by legislation intended to ensure that job seekers have better information and support when looking for work and easier access to unemployment benefit when abroad. In other fields in which the EU has treaty competence to regulate in the employment and social policy field, there has been no further legislative activity since the onset of the crisis. The same applies to contiguous policy areas that affect, directly or indirectly, social and employment policy, such as tax policy (corporate taxation). The proposal for a financial transactions tax, which has only been possible via flexible integration for just some Member States, after years of discussion, is still ‘in the pipeline’.

The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (European Commission 2017a) at the European Social Summit in November 2017 marks a new development, however, which may have an impact on the trade unions’ power resources. After years primarily of neoliberal crisis management it is the explicit objective of the EPSR to strengthen the social dimension by setting out 20 key principles and rights in three broader policy areas: (i) equal opportunities and access to the labour market; (ii) fair working conditions; and (iii) social protection and inclusion. Even though the EPSR has been criticised for not being legally binding and for merely summarising the existing social *acquis* (Rasnača 2017; Seikel 2017) there are also new elements that go beyond the status quo. A new feature of the EPSR is its close link to follow-up and monitoring mechanisms – such as the European Semester with its country-specific recommendations and the European Social Scoreboard (European Commission 2017b), which will track performance across the EU countries and feed into the European Semester. At the time of writing (spring 2018) it is still too early to tell whether the EPSR has provided new opportunities to strengthen the trade unions’ institutional power resources. However, since the 20 key principles primarily address the EU Member States and the European institutions, and are intended to serve as a ‘compass’ guiding their future activities in the various policy areas, the EPSR can serve as an important reference point for the trade unions’ argument in pursuing their own objectives – and hence strengthen their communicative power resources vis-à-vis the European institutions and national governments.

4.2 Organisational power resources

The crisis and the new system of economic governance have put considerable strain on the European trade union federations’ personnel resources, which – as Table 3 illustrates – did not change significantly during the crisis. Reflecting the difficult situation of the national affiliates, the total membership of most European trade union federations stayed the same or even decreased during the crisis. The only two organisations with

a significant increase in membership were the ETUCE (from 5.5 million members in 2008 to 11 in 2018) and the ETF (2.5 million members in 2008 and 5 in 2018). What we can see in most cases, however, is an increase in the number of affiliates and the countries represented by the various European trade union federations. This more diverse membership makes the European trade union federations' task of aggregating and coordinating their affiliates' interests and activities even more difficult.

However, it is not only the sheer quantitative increase in the number of affiliates and countries represented by the European trade union federations that affected this dimension of their organisational power resources. Even more important was the fact that the crisis (management) prompted a renationalisation of union policies and activities – despite a short-lived increase in 'European' mobilisation through European action days and demonstrations called for by the ETUC between 2009 and 2012 (Hofmann 2015: 219). This European-wide mobilisation was not sustainable and has since ebbed away.

As regards trade union responses to the crisis two paths can be distinguished. The first can be found in countries of Nordic corporatism or continental European social partnership such as Germany, Austria and the Nordic countries. Here the dominant approach was to engage in 'crisis corporatism' as a temporary emergency alliance with the state and employers in order to fend off the worst effects of the crisis (Urban 2015: 278). As a rule these 'crisis corporatist' arrangements involved the conclusion of tripartite national pacts to protect employment in exchange for trade unions' concessions on pay, working time and working conditions (Müller and Platzer 2016: 35). In countries on the European periphery, the 'crisis or programme' countries, as well as a number of central and eastern European countries (Glassner 2013), such 'crisis corporatism' was blocked as the impact of the crisis has been so great that established mechanisms for institutional exchange have been either weakened or, in some instances, broken down completely.

In some countries, in particular in southern Europe, with a more conflictual tradition of industrial relations, attempts to engage in corporatist arrangements was supplemented by political strikes and demonstrations in order 'to limit (or stop) ... anti-labour policies and austerity plans, and enhance their capacity to participate in longer-term negotiations' (Campos Lima and Artiles 2011: 399). However, regardless of the country-specific mix of conflictual and cooperative forms of action chosen by national trade unions, the crucial point with respect to the European trade union federations' organisational power resources is that the key focus of their policies and activities was almost exclusively on the national level.

As second-order organisations, the European trade union federations' organisational power resources are essentially 'borrowed resources' (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 189); in other words, their capacity to aggregate and coordinate their affiliates' interests and activities depends in two respects on their affiliates' willingness to endow them with the necessary competences: first, their willingness to use their own (in most cases shrinking) national power resources in a coordinated manner in the European context; and second, their willingness to provide the European trade union federations with a political mandate to perform these coordination tasks. On both accounts the

crisis-induced renationalisation of union policies and activities negatively affected the European trade union federations' organisational power resources.

Collective bargaining coordination illustrates the various crisis-related factors that have impacted on the European trade union federations' capacity to coordinate and aggregate their affiliates' interests. The first key factor is the already mentioned focus on national solutions, which has negatively affected the affiliates' willingness to commit themselves to the coordination approach of the European trade union federations. The second important factor is the affiliates' divergent needs and expectations with regard to the coordination approach as a result of the fact that the crisis and the crisis management have affected the various countries in different ways. For the trade unions in Greece, Portugal and Spain, which were hardest hit by the crisis and the ensuing crisis measures, the key priority was no longer wage increases but the defence of the existing system of multi-employer collective bargaining and job creation.

The increasing decentralisation of collective bargaining as a consequence of EU reform policies has, furthermore, undermined the trade unions' capacity to coordinate wages and collective bargaining at national level – which in turn is one important prerequisite for successful coordination at European level. As a consequence, many national affiliates were no longer in a position to push through the joint European coordination strategies vis-à-vis the employers even if they wanted to. Even before the crisis many affiliates found it difficult to comply with the European trade union federations' coordination rule that wage increases should at least cover inflation and productivity increases; under the new crisis-induced regime of austerity and internal devaluation, however, this became even more difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

Despite all the practical problems related to its implementation, the European trade union federations still stick to the wage coordination guideline. In view of the crisis, this holding on to the concept of an expansive and solidaristic wage policy is also an important political message. In doing so, the trade unions highlight that there is an alternative to the currently dominant narrative of 'improving cost competitiveness' through policies of 'internal devaluation'.

There is, however, an increasing awareness of the need to adapt the existing coordination rules in order to take into account the different needs and circumstances of the various national affiliates in light of the new economic, political and institutional environment that emerged as a result of the crisis (Hofmann 2014: 312). The ETUC for instance reacted with a flexible adaption of its coordination approach, which was formally adopted in 2013. This new coordination approach consists of three central elements: (i) the adoption of joint collective bargaining guidelines while at the same time allowing for enough flexibility to take into account country- and sector-specific circumstances; (ii) seeking to influence the decision-making processes of the European Semester; and (iii) the development of a structured and continuous exchange of information as an essential prerequisite for the formulation of joint positions and strategies (ETUC 2013a).

The new elements in this approach are the strong emphasis on influencing decision-making processes of the European Semester and increased flexibility in applying the

coordination rule, which highlights the overall objective of moving from standardised ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions to more tailor-made approaches that can better accommodate the specific needs of the affiliates. A crucial prerequisite for such an approach is, however, that the strategies to implement the common objectives are made transparent and understandable for the affiliates from other countries. A voluntaristic approach, such as the coordination of collective bargaining, is essentially based on mutual trust. The newly introduced structures aiming at an improved and more continuous exchange of information have created at least the formal institutional conditions for more transparency and trust. This, however, also means that in the field of collective bargaining the crisis led to a change in the functional profile of many European trade union federations. While before the crisis, the majority extended their functional profile towards that of a coordination platform, it was difficult to uphold this role under the changed framework conditions of the crisis. Under the new conditions their role as forum for the formalised exchange of information and for the continuous agreement of positions came to the forefront again.

4.3 Institutional and communicative power resources

The European trade union federations’ institutional power resources are determined by two central factors: first, access to European arenas of political decision-making and second, their power position within these arenas. The later relies on their organisational power resources and their capacity to mobilise public support for their interests and alternative policy approaches – which in turn is a central element of their communicative power resources.

Concerning the European trade union federations’ access to European arenas of decision-making, there have been no significant changes in the more traditional arenas which already existed before the crisis, such as the (Cross-) Sectoral Social Dialogue, industrial policy or European works councils (EWCs) at the European company level. In the field of social dialogue, for instance, there have been no procedural changes and concerning the output of the various sectoral social dialogue committees Degryse notes that the crisis ‘had no more than a limited impact’ (Degryse 2015: 44). If anything, there are some worrying trends with respect to the regulatory capacity of social dialogue: first, eight of the nine framework agreements that have been concluded in the context of sectoral social dialogue committees since the outbreak of the crisis were signed between 2009 and 2012 – the only exception is the framework agreement on information and consultation rights of workers and civil servants in central government administration signed in December 2015. Second, there have been some considerable problems in the implementation of framework agreements. Twice, the EU Commission refused to transpose via a directive a framework agreement concluded at sectoral level. This happened in April 2012 to the agreement on the protection of occupational health and safety signed in the hairdressing sector and in March 2018 to the aforementioned framework agreement in central government administration. Another example is the very sluggish implementation by some member states of the inland waterways’ working time agreement concluded in February 2012. All in all, one can conclude that the crisis did not change or even increase the potential of the social dialogue as an institutional

power resource and that the European trade union federations' functional profiles are therefore characterised by a status quo ante.⁴

The establishment of the new system of economic governance should have had a more significant impact on the European trade union federations' institutional power resources. We have already pointed out that, in principle, the shift of decision-making powers from the national to the European level in the context of crisis management should have created more favourable framework conditions for the European trade union federations' capacity to influence European policies. In practice, however, this did not happen because of the specific architecture of the new European economic governance.

One important aspect is the fact that many of the new instruments that constitute the new system of economic governance have been set up on the basis of intergovernmental treaties (such as the ESM Treaty or the Fiscal Compact). This, however, means that all the relevant decisions 'bypass the usual legislative procedure' (von Oндarza 2013: 28) and are thus not subject to the usual co-decision and consultative procedures involving the European Parliament and the social partners. Becoming aware of these glaring democratic deficits, the heads of the European institutions recently started an initiative to improve the 'democratic accountability' of the European Economic and Monetary Union – which they outlined in the so-called *Five Presidents' Report* (Juncker *et al.* 2015).

This plan also involves integrating intergovernmental solutions into the EU legal framework – thereby improving the social partners' possibilities to influence decision-making processes. In a similar vein, an initiative to revive the European social dialogue was launched in March 2015, aimed in particular at closer involvement of the social partners in the new system of economic governance more generally and the European Semester more specifically (European Commission 2016). The establishment of the EPSR at the end of 2017 can be seen as a further attempt to redress the neoliberal bias of the previous, primarily supply side-oriented policy approach. This chimes with the more recent shift in the European institutions' narrative on wages, which includes elements of an alternative, more strongly demand side-oriented perspective. The European Commission, for instance, has stated that 'for the upswing to be sustained investment and wages need to rise more strongly' (European Commission 2017c: 1). A similar case for higher wages has been made by Mario Draghi, President of the ECB, who declared that 'the case for higher wages is unquestionable' (Draghi 2016). However, at the time of writing (spring 2018), no concrete policy changes have taken place as a consequence of these initiatives. Only time will tell whether these are serious proposals, mere window-dressing or even poisoned chalices in the sense that the trade unions are to be involved merely in order to confer legitimacy on the neoliberal policies currently pursued.

4 The same can be said with regard to company policy, where the crisis has left no significant mark on the already existing roles of EWCs and patterns of interaction with the European trade union federations (Rüb and Platzer 2015: 219ff), and the field of industrial policy. Following the neoliberal goal of cutting down the role of the state, industrial policy played no significant role in the broader context of the European institutions' crisis management. It is only recently that the Commission has rediscovered the importance of industrial policy and is now striving for 'a European industrial renaissance' – as the title of its communication of 22 January 2014 promises (European Commission 2014b).

The specific institutional architecture of the new European economic governance also negatively affected the European trade union federations' capacity to mobilise their affiliates and the wider public in support of alternative policy approaches (that is, their communicative power resources). This is in turn the second key factor mentioned above that determines their capacity to exert influence in European arenas of political decision-making (that is, their institutional power resources). According to Erne, this is due to the inherently competitive nature of the new economic governance which by operating 'through coercive comparisons based on centrally chosen key performance indicators' (Erne 2015: 353) puts the Member States in competition with one another. In doing so the new regime 'nationalises social conflicts' and complicates the European-wide mobilisation for alternative policies.

This 'methodological nationalism' (Erne 2015: 355) of the new system of economic governance has coincided with several other factors that have made attempts at cross-country mobilisation more difficult. There is, first, the fact that the various countries were affected to varying degrees by the crisis. This led to different explanations and interpretations of it, so that it was difficult to identify a common opponent. For example, whereas for Greek, Portuguese and Spanish unionists the EU, the Troika and possibly also the German Chancellor, along with their own governments, represented an identifiable opponent towards which they could direct their demands, the matter was not so simple for trade unionists in Germany. The Troika did not constitute an immediate threat and the efforts on the part of German policy towards Europe to ensure that the burdens placed on the 'German tax payer' were kept as low as possible, were widely agreed with (Dribbusch 2014: 342).

The second factor is that the national trade unions and their members were so absorbed in dealing with the more immediate economic and social consequences of the crisis for people's day-to-day lives that there were few resources left to engage in transnational strategic activities (Erne 2015: 357). Thus, the national trade unions were caught in a dilemma between the short-term imperatives of fending off the worst effects of the crisis in their respective countries and the long-term objectives of changing the overall socio-economic order both at European and national level (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 124). And in many cases the former took priority over the latter.

The third key factor that made transnational mobilisation more difficult was the fact that the different national forms of mobilisation were not compatible and transferrable to the European level (Rieger 2016: 223). In many – in particular southern European – countries, but also France and Belgium general and political strikes are a popular means of social protest. In other countries, by contrast, these forms of collective action are not part of the trade unions' repertoire of action or simply forbidden by law – as this is for instance the case in Germany. Against this background, any successful European mobilisation would have to follow a 'variable geometry' (Rieger 2016: 223) of different forms of action. This was the case with the most successful mass mobilisation against the crisis and austerity measures on 14 November 2012 when the ETUC called for a 'European day of action'. This resulted in more than one million people out on the streets, combining different forms of action in different European countries: strikes in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Belgium, demonstrations in Italy and more selective forms of ad hoc mobilisation in many other countries.

5. Conclusions

What is the state of play of the European trade union movement roughly a decade after the outbreak of the crisis and how have the trade union power resources and capacity to act in the EU multi-level system changed as a result of the crisis? The aim of this contribution was to answer this complex question for the European-level organisations and the transnational policy of trade unions. In doing so, we have linked two analytical perspectives – a power resource approach and a typology of the functional profiles of the European trade union federations – and compared developments before and after 2008, the year in which the crisis started.

If we consider that this is the deepest global crisis since the world economic crisis of the 1920s and at the same time – as the ‘euro crisis’ – the deepest crisis in the EU since its inception, it may be surprising at first that two conceivable extreme scenarios have not materialised: neither was there a development in which transnational cooperation had been completely blocked by national sovereignty reflexes and centrifugal tendencies; nor was there a development in which the new quality of reciprocal vulnerability and the related transnational solidarity requirements had led to a new level of trade unionisation. What we can observe instead is a differentiated picture of gradual changes over time.

In the pre-crisis period since the late 1990s the European trade union federations underwent a period of organisational consolidation in which they managed to improve their organisational power resources. Not so much in terms of increased financial and personnel resources, but rather developing more efficient internal working structures as the precondition for an enhanced role in coordinating the activities of their affiliates. This was possible, however, only because of the affiliates’ increased openness to actually engage in activities at European level and provide the European trade union federations with a political mandate to coordinate activities at European level. This increase of their organisational power resources enabled the European trade union federations also to improve their institutional power resources by using the favourable framework conditions that presented themselves with the emergence of new arenas for an institutionalised interaction with political decision-makers and employers, in particular in the fields of industrial policy, social dialogue and EWCs at European company level. This is reflected in the change of their functional profiles in the pre-crisis period from mere information provider and forum to coordination platform and in some instances even to exhibiting characteristics of associative governance, in particular in the fields of collective bargaining coordination and company policy.

However, the crisis changed the rules of the game and the windows of opportunity slowly started to close, for several reasons. The first reason is the negative impact of the crisis and crisis management on the power resources of national trade unions in many EU Member States. This had an immediate impact on the European trade union federations’ power resources because the national affiliates directed their shrinking power resources increasingly to the national level and were – as a consequence of the renationalisation of union policies – less prepared to engage in European activities.

The second reason is the less supportive political environment both at national level with national governments and at European level with the European Council and the European Commission under Barroso. As a consequence, policy arenas such as social dialogue and industrial policy, which in the pre-crisis period fostered the European trade union federations' institutional power resources, took a back seat during the crisis in comparison to the incremental establishment of a system of economic governance in response to the prevailing situation. Because, in its regulatory approach, the new economic governance reinforces the asymmetry between 'negative' and 'positive' integration at the expense of the latter, this means that for the trade unions the restraining elements predominate over the elements that potentially support the institutional and communicative power resources of national and European trade union organisation.

What does this mean for the European trade union federations' future role and what are the preconditions to enable them to recuperate from the impact of the crisis (and its management) in order to be in a position to push through alternative policies as a way out of the crisis? One possible answer, which applies irrespective of economic sector, is that national trade unions need to overcome their tendency to retreat to the national level to cope with the impact of the crisis. They need to grant a higher priority to 'Europe' and all that this implies in terms of specific activities, in terms of both strategies and organisation, and reflect this in the allocation of scarce staff and material resources.

The second precondition is to continue to play the game of 'labour diplomacy' by lobbying European institutions for a more demand-side oriented and more social re-orientation of crisis management, even in this adverse political framework. This also includes lobbying for a reform of the institutional set-up of the new economic governance to improve access to decision-making processes. In this respect it is not enough to just be against the current approach. The European trade union federations have to come up with plausible alternative policy proposals. There are some encouraging signs, such as the ETUC's European 'investment plan' which aims at increased public and private investment in infrastructure projects (ETUC 2013b) or the proposals put forward by industriAll (industriAll 2014) and UNI Europa (UNI Europa 2014) calling for new European-level initiatives to reinvigorate growth and quality jobs in manufacturing and services.

However, one condition for the success of these lobbying activities is the simultaneous development of the European trade union federations' communicative power resources in mobilising their affiliates and the wider public for alternative policies and a counter-narrative that supports the trade union strategies. In order to increase the political pressure on European and national policy-makers trade unions also need to be open to forging political alliances with other civil society organisations. And here once again there are some encouraging examples to build on. These include European campaigns, successfully tested in the conflicts over the 'Bolkestein Directive' and the legislative proposals 'Port Package I and II', where unions were able to thwart further liberalisation that would have damaged employee protection. It also includes using the new means of the European Citizens' Initiative, as seen in EPSU's successful petition on 'Water Is a Human Right' (EPSU 2012) and more recently ETF's citizen initiative against social dumping in the transport sector (ETF 2015).

Against this background, it is all the more important that the most recent ETUC action programme, which was adopted at the last Congress in Paris in autumn 2015, embraces this idea of simultaneously developing its institutional and communicative power resources. The key priorities of the action programme are to strengthen traditional arenas such as the social dialogue and industrial policies and to improve trade union involvement in the European Semester both at national and European level. However, these activities will be complemented by mobilising activities in the context of two major campaigns: 'Europe needs a pay rise' in order to promote a demand-side oriented wage-led model of growth and a campaign to strengthen trade union rights called 'Trade union rights are human rights' (ETUC 2015 and Visentini 2016). The jury is still out on whether this dual approach will be successful, but it is a promising start and one whose chances of success have potentially improved, if the current change in the European institutions' discourse on wages and the establishment of the EPSR is anything to go by.

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