

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Challenges, Strategies, Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

Right-wing populist and far-right parties, often referred to as the Radical Populist Right (RPR), have been at the centre of public debate for some time. The term “Radical Populist Right”, emphasises that these parties are primarily characterised by two features: First, a populist component that propagates an anti-elitist, anti-institutional, and anti-intellectual stance with reference to the “true people” and “common sense”, often accompanied by a pronounced moralisation and personalisation of politics (cf. Müller 2016), and second, a right-wing political agenda that includes ethnonationalist or racist orientations, the rejection of immigration and a multicultural society, a negative attitude towards supranational institutions such as the European Union, and the curtailment of democratic participation and the rule of law. The curbing of the rule of law typically includes a disregard for the non-discrimination of social groups, independence of the courts, freedom of speech, independent media reporting, protection of minorities, and so on.

The RPR parties have found support in social protest movements and, accordingly, have seen an increase in membership and considerable gains in parliamentary elections. In retrospect, the rise of right-wing populism in Europe occurred in several waves. The first wave took place in the 1970s and 1980s when so-called “progress parties” were founded in some countries, including Norway and Denmark, which — similar to the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP; Swiss Peo-

ple’s Party), the *Front National* (FN; National Front) in France, and the *Vlaams Belang* (VB; Flemish Interest) in Belgium — positioned themselves in opposition to the welfare state and social spending. The critique of the welfare state was simultaneously based on a nationalist and racist orientation. Later, in the 1990s, other right-wing populist parties — the *Lega Nord* (Lega; Northern League) in Italy, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD; Sweden Democrats), *Perussuomalaiset* (PS; The (True) Finns), and the re-oriented *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ; Freedom Party of Austria) — increasingly turned against the concepts of a multicultural society and the deepening of European integration. These two themes remained prevalent among party projects in the 2000s and 2010s, such as in Geert Wilders’ *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV; Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands, the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS; Law and Justice) party in Poland, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany), and the more recently formed VOX party in Spain and *Chega!* in Portugal (these party names translate to “voice” and “enough!” from Latin and Portuguese, respectively).

The crises of the last two decades, including in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the European migration regime, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have

strengthened EU-sceptical and ethnonationalist dispositions. In parliamentary elections, the average voting weight of right-wing populist parties rose from around 4 per cent in the 1990s to over 8 per cent in the 2000s. Notably, the voter share has risen to between 12 and 15 per cent since the 2010s. In several countries, the approval rating is significantly higher and has even resulted in some RPR parties being in government, albeit in some cases just temporarily: Countries where RPR parties have joined government include Austria (FPÖ), Finland (PS), Slovenia with the *Slovenska demokratska stranka* (SDP; Slovenian Democratic Party), Poland (PiS), Hungary with *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (Fidesz; Hungarian Civic Alliance), and, most recently, Italy with *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI, Brothers of Italy) and Lega. In other countries, the parties of the RPR have been or continue to be indirectly involved in government affairs as a majority provider: The *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF; Danish People's Party) in Denmark, the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FrP; Progress Party) in Norway, and the SD in Sweden.

In the context of the multiple crises that have taken place since the 2000s, the economic and social policy orientation of the RPR has changed. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of the RPR parties still adopted clear neoliberal positions. However, the picture has become more contradictory and complex in the years since. There are considerable differences between right-wing populist parties across Europe (Becker 2018; Biskamp 2022); some parties are neoliberal while others are more oriented towards a welfare state. There are sometimes clear tensions between these positions within the organisations themselves, which points to the fact that the “social question”, usually interpreted in a welfare-chauvinist manner, has become an important reference point in strategic and programmatic discussions (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Fenger 2018). The reasons for this reorientation are complex. However, two factors are particularly important. On the one hand, and this affects all political actors, the accumulating sequence of different overlapping crises has shaken confidence in market forces and stimulated *ad hoc* state intervention (Abels / Bieling 2022). On the other hand, the electorate of right-wing populist parties has expanded far into the predominantly male working class, so that their labour and socio-political preferences need to be also increasingly served by a corresponding programmatic offer (Afonso / Rennwald 2018).

In the academic discussion, however, opinions differ about the dynamic forces driving this programmatic reorientation. Those who regard right-wing populism primarily as an expression of racist and nationalist social milieus (Mudde 2010) see it as little more than

a tactical adaptation. For others who see right-wing populism as a reaction to a globalisation-induced threat to their own prosperity (Rodrik 2018; Manow 2018), the labour and social policy reorientation of the RPR is indicative of a fundamental shift in party policy. Between these two frames, there are other analytical perspectives that, in the mediation of culture and political economy, focus on the intersubjective experiences and interpretive struggles of problematic socio-economic situations (Bieling 2017; Gidron / Hall 2017) and try to take into account the peculiarities of the political field (Kriesi 2014; Schäfer / Zürn 2021). The diversity of analytical approaches to the phenomenon of right-wing populism demonstrates that its causes are not easy to identify.

The dispute over viable explanatory approaches is neither over nor scientifically or politically irrelevant. Nevertheless, for some time now, attention has focused increasingly on the socio-political implications of the rise of right-wing populism. Above all, the focus has shifted to the curtailment of the rule of law through political control of the judiciary and media or the impairment of science and freedom of speech (Becker 2018; Krastev 2017); the threat to democracy posed by a climate of intolerance vis-à-vis migrants and other minorities (Olschanski 2015); and the practices of welfare-chauvinist discrimination. Through the implementation of this type of discrimination, social democracy, i.e., the forms of a universalist welfare state and effective trade union representation of interests, is undermined or even eliminated. The trade unions themselves are very much aware of these processes. Firstly, they fear that the general, often universally provided social security benefits and collectively negotiated workers' rights will be restricted (Flecker et al. 2019). Secondly, they are very concerned that the authoritarian dispositive of right-wing populism, i.e., the anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic and anti-union orientations, hinder trade unions' social recognition and legitimacy. Thirdly, they fear that solidarity within the organisation will erode and an effective representation of interests will become difficult if parts of the workforce and trade union members continue to develop an affinity with right-wing populism (Peter / Brecht 2019).

Against this backdrop, the following explanations apply a comparative perspective to pursue two main objectives: First, to examine and discuss whether and in what form the threats of right-wing populist and far-right parties are relevant for the trade unions in selected European countries; and second, to analyse and reflect on the strategies, concepts, and practices employed by unions to address the threats posed by right-wing populism and the associated experiences.

This dual stocktaking of problem perceptions and reactions contributes to the cross-border exchange of trade unions, stimulates learning processes, and contributes insights that can be applicable to everyday trade union practice. The reflective explanations are based on twelve case studies from individual European countries — Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Each case study deals with these two themes and takes into account the more recent developments in its respective country. In addition, this comparative report also includes further information from the relevant academic discussion.

The paper is structured as follows: After the introduction, the next chapter outlines the analytical framework for the comparative analysis. The analysis is based primarily on a power resources approach, which differentiates between the forms of structural, organisational, institutional, and societal trade union power, whereby the actions of the trade unions, as well as those of the right-wing populist parties, are simultaneously contextualised with reference to the systems of industrial relations and welfare states. This lens makes a more precise determination of the strategic focus of both right-wing populist parties and trade unions possible in the subsequent empirical chapters. The third chapter focuses on the respective programmatic profile and activities of the right-wing populist parties as well as on the implications this has for workers and trade unions. How these implications are perceived by the trade unions is the focus of the fourth chapter, with a view to the different resources of power, especially the forms of institutional power. The fifth chapter, in turn, discusses how the trade unions have reacted to the right-wing populist challenge and their experiences taking strategic and practical action in response. Finally, in the sixth chapter, some conclusions are derived from these findings.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

As already indicated, several sets of factors are responsible for the success of right-wing populist parties (Bieling 2017; Gidron / Hall 2017; Rodrik 2018; Manow 2018; Schäfer / Zürn 2021). Factors include:

1. the socio-economic conditions, i.e., the dynamics of capitalist development, including employment, labour policy and welfare state protection, and their (inter-)subjective perception in different social milieus;
2. the cultural predispositions and the processes of the production of meaning, which often include

the dissociation from and devaluation of social groups that do not correspond to the prevailing norms and models; and

3. the particularities of the organisation of the state and the political system that make it easier or more difficult for political actors, e.g. through electoral law, to articulate new lines of social conflict or to use gaps in representation. Within this context, it is possible to assign the RPR parties addressed in this study to different “worlds” of right-wing populism.

WORLDS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

The Northern European or Scandinavian world is dominated by RPR parties that, regardless of their origin, are socio-culturally authoritarian in orientation and tend to adopt centrist economic and distribution policy positions (Jungar / Jupskas 2014). This is less true, however, of the Norwegian FrP, a neoliberal tax-cutting and anti-immigration party that took part in a bourgeois coalition government from 2014 to 2021, and the “ultra-liberal” *Nye Borgerlige* (NB; New Right) in Denmark. All the other parties, however, present themselves as moderate in terms of distribution policy. The SD, which has been in formal government since 2022, defends the Swedish *Folkhemmet* (people’s home) with a welfare-chauvinist perspective. The Finns, which was a governing party from 2015 to 2017, has a similar position. The Danish People’s Party (DF), in the course of gaining importance in the 2000s, also developed a positive attitude towards the welfare state but repeatedly supported bourgeois minority governments (2001–2011 and 2015–2019).

The Western European world of right-wing populism is somewhat more contradictory. Nevertheless, here too socio-culturally authoritarian positions are combined with an increasingly centrist economic and distribution policy programme. In Austria, the FPÖ evolved into a strictly neoliberal-right populist force under Jörg Haider from the mid-1980s onwards before toning down its market-liberal economic and social policy orientation somewhat during Karl-Heinz Strache’s presidency, rebranding as a *soziale Heimatpartei* (social homeland party). Since its foundation in 2013, the German AfD has been supported by different currents. While neoliberal concepts were clearly in the foreground at the beginning with its criticism of the EMU, the ethnonationalist forces around Björn Höcke have actively tried to address the “social question” and have recently gained more and more importance. The development of France’s FN, renamed *Rassemblement National* (RN) in June 2018, was and continues

to be groundbreaking. After Marine Le Pen took over the party's top seat in 2011, the FN, now the RN, has increasingly tried to profile itself as a "workers' party". In contrast to the developments in Germany, the RN's racist and anti-Semitic positions have been somewhat mitigated.

Under the conditions of a crisis-ridden economic transformation and a pronounced political fluidity, i.e., weakly institutionalised political systems (Kriesi 2014: 372ff), the parties of the RPR took over government responsibility in the Eastern European world in many cases, sometimes very sustainably. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has been in power since 2010, and its neoliberal programme is now flanked by social-protectionist interventionism, while the national-conservative position has hardened further. The successes of Fidesz have spilt over into Poland, where the PiS has been in power since 2015 and has positioned itself even more strongly as a supporter of the welfare state. In other countries in Eastern Europe, authoritarian leaders who combine ethnonationalism with hard-line neoliberal concepts have been successful. In the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš governed with the *Akce nespokojených občanů* (ANO; Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) from 2017 to 2021, and in Slovenia, Janez Janša repeatedly governed with the SDS (2004–2008, 2012–2013, and 2020–2022).

Against the backdrop of the historical experience of fascism, a contemporary Southern European world of right-wing populism did not seem to exist until recently. In Italy, Lega was originally a regional party. In 2018, it expanded to the whole of Italy under the leadership of Matteo Salvini and radicalised itself in terms of migration policy. However, the post-fascist FdI of Georgia Meloni, founded in 2012, profited most from the involvement of Lega in the Draghi cabinet (2021–2022) and has led the right-wing government in coalition with Lega and Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* since 2022. The electoral successes of VOX in Spain, a neoliberal-nationalist group that split from the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP; People's Party) and has been gaining in popularity since 2018, fuelled by the Catalonia conflict, are even more recent. The Portuguese *Chega!*, which was founded in 2019 and came third in the 2022 parliamentary elections with 7.4 per cent of the vote, can be classified similarly. The *Laïkós Síndesmos – Chrysi Avgí* (Golden Dawn, GD) in Greece, which gained importance in the wake of the deep economic crisis and participated in parliament from 2012 to 2019, is on the extreme fringe of the parties discussed here with its neo-fascist orientation.

If the parties of the RPR are concerned with increasing their power in the public communication and de-

cision-making spheres, the conditions for trade union action are somewhat different. This should not be misunderstood: Socio-economic, cultural, and political-institutional dynamics are also significant factors for trade unions. The employment situation, the dominant discourse, and political majorities have a significant influence on trade unions' abilities to realise their own goals and strategies. At the same time, trade unions have certain limits when they try to actively influence the economic and socio-political conditions for action. This is not least due to the fact that they operate in a specifically defined field of action, that of labour policy.

Labour policy encompasses all processes and activities through which the production and labour process is shaped politically, i.e., through collectively binding agreements, including laws, (collective) agreements, and even conventions. In a narrower sense, this applies to the "politics in production", which encompasses the institutional and legal arrangements and political negotiation processes in companies, as well as the "politics of production", which are the labour policy implications that become effective across companies through activities in flanking policy fields. The latter includes, above all, labour market and social policy, as well as policies related to technology, industry, infrastructure, and finance. The linking of these two spheres differs between individual European countries due to the unique economic structures and institutional characteristics of the capitalist models, especially the systems of industrial relations and welfare states (Bieling / Buhr 2015; Lehdorf et al. 2017). Trade union competencies and potential for political influence, therefore, vary greatly. In some countries, their scope of action is strongly institutionalised, while in other countries, trade unions have less involvement. Depending on the location, the company level, the cross-company level, regional, or national levels can be of particular importance. Trade unions' ideological orientation also varies by country, where in some contexts, competition is key and, in others, the model of a single general trade union is dominant. These features correspond to specific relationships between trade unions and the state, government, and political parties, which are often also reflected in the considerable diversity of the operational and socio-political self-understanding of the trade unions.

TRADE UNION CONDITIONS FOR ACTION

Contextual factors play a significant role in unions' capacity for action and should be taken into account when looking at developments in individual coun-

tries. Moreover, a brief sketch of the trade union arenas of action makes it clear that the goals and priorities of the political parties, including right-wing populist parties, and the trade unions differ structurally. Both are concerned with establishing laws and agreements on labour policy that are advantageous and appropriate from their point of view. However, the right-wing populist parties do this to increase their own power in the systems of political representation, while trade unions are concerned with the direct representation of the interests of employees in companies and supra-company labour policy. Here, as the experiences of European Union member states show, the right-wing populist parties and trade unions do come into conflict, and when they do so, they clash over specific objectives.

The motives and considerations of the trade unions are not exclusively determined by their role in the national industrial relations systems or their aim to maintain their own socio-political self-image. As representatives of the interests of employees in labour policy conflicts and negotiation processes, it is important that unions preserve and, when possible, strengthen their power resources. Based on an analytical heuristic (Brinkmann et al. 2008; Schmalz / Dörre 2014: 222ff), which attempts to determine the conditions and options of strategic choice, trade union power resources can be systematised, as follows.

First, *structural union power*, derived from the position of employees in the economic system, is a fundamental component of trade union power resources. On the one hand, this structural power is a product of *production power*, the ability of workers to disrupt the production and work process and the management's capacity to prevent such disruptions through flexible production networks and relocation, for example. On the other hand, structural power results from *market power*, the replaceability or indispensability of workers due to their particular professional skills and the existing labour market situation. High unemployment and a large labour supply signal weakened structural power for unions, while full employment and a large demand for workers with specific skill profiles correlate with a time of strengthened structural trade union power. The structural power of trade unions has eroded since the 1970s in most countries due to globalisation, transnational value chains, technological change, mass unemployment, precarious employment, and the increased power of capital. More recently, the picture seems to be changing again as many societies face de-globalisation and numerous bottlenecks in the employment system, such as a shortage of skilled workers.

Whether and to what extent trade unions are collective actors capable of asserting the interests of employees is determined not only by their structural power but, above all, by their *organisational power*. This power comes from individual workers uniting in the organisations empowered to represent collective interests. An important indicator of organisational power is the number of members a union has, or more precisely, the union density rate, which is the percentage of the total workforce that are union members. This quantitative factor should not be underestimated, especially since members also make financial contributions, and membership numbers thus contribute to a certain financial power. However, this does not tell us anything about how the trade unions use this quantitative potential or, more specifically, how they can use it politically. Qualitative aspects contributing to trade union organisational power include, above all, intra-organisational relationships. These qualitative components include the concrete, most efficient use of financial resources for staff, buildings, educational facilities, or strike activities, the involvement and participation of members in union activities, and thus also the everyday solidarity relations. In short, internal organisational cohesion also contributes to organisational power. It can be observed that, from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view, the organisational power of unions has been eroding in many countries since the 1970s; nevertheless, in recent years, this erosion appears to have been halted or at least mitigated.

Trade unions have benefited from the stabilising effect of their *institutional power*. As the term implies, this facet of union power comes from the fact that the agreements reached as the result of past conflicts and negotiations have been legally and institutionally anchored. For example, the results of union-brokered conflict resolution have taken the shape of laws that guarantee employees and the trade unions themselves protection, information, and participation rights (freedom of association, right to strike, co-determination, health, and dismissal protection, for instance) and welfare state security, as well as certain obligations and a rules-based behaviour. Moreover, union negotiations have led to the legally anchored collective bargaining arrangements, which define important conditions of employment, including payment, night and weekend bonuses, working hours and holidays, and training and further education, at the supra-company and, in part, at the company level. In addition, the conventions that provide for specific forms of trade union consultation at different levels, which are sometimes also institutionally established within neo-corporatist settings and are usually oriented towards social partnership, are grounded in le-

gal frameworks. As already indicated, the forms of institutional power for the trade unions are multifaceted. On the one hand, they are relatively durable and can stabilise the collective representation of interests even during periods of political weakness. On the other hand, they also have a behavioural control component that contains and channels class conflict so that trade unions and workers often find it difficult to articulate existing discontent and conflicts of interest in a politically visible way.

Finally, the fourth form of power held by unions is *societal power*. This consists of the trade unions' capacity to cooperate with other organisations in civil society, including social movements, the media, and different kinds of associations or parties, in order to bring their own goals and interests to public attention. In this sense, the societal power of trade unions has two main aspects. First, there is cooperation, which is understood as the formation of civil-society alliances with actors who pursue similar or at least complementary interests. In alliance with other forces, the limited societal power of the trade unions can sometimes be considerably strengthened when the chorus of pro-union voices swells during strikes and campaigns, for example. Secondly, there is discursive power. By problematising, scandalising, or politicising certain developments and — in coordination with other civil society actors — publicly articulating their views and narratives, trade unions can increase their power of interpretation, sometimes to the level of discursive hegemonic. In the struggle for union-friendly political majorities and legislation, this fourth type of power is far from meaningless. The other forms of power outlined above, particularly organisational and institutional power, can also be strengthened by the societal power of trade unions.

The rise in importance of right-wing populist organisations and discourses is not without consequences for trade union power resources. Thus, structural trade union power is weakened by the fact that the fragmentation and rivalry increasingly found within the workforce are strengthened by right-wing populist discourses of ethnonationalism, for example. This also applies to the organisational power of trade unions since ethnically motivated conflicts or the founding of rival organisations by the RPR make internal organisational solidarity fragile and impair the effective representation of interests by trade unions in companies and supra-company affairs. This is also reflected in the forms of institutional power, i.e., the negotiated welfare state and labour policy agreements. Even if they remain legally and institutionally unchanged, their social content and the practices of their everyday operation may vary. The existing la-

bour and socio-political regulations (the welfare state, collective bargaining policy, co-determination in companies, and so on) are redefined in a racialised and socially exclusionary way, especially when right-wing populist views gain influence in economic, social, and democratic political discourses and push back the societal power of trade unions.

RIGHT-WING POPULIST STRATEGIES TOWARDS TRADE UNIONS AND EMPLOYEES

General tendencies toward right-wing populism can be found in almost all European countries with varying weight and specific emphases. These tendencies unfold through a systemic diffusion as the entire structure of labour organisation and political regulation changes under the influence of right-wing populist discourses and (everyday) conflicts. However, it would be too short-sighted to focus only on the processes of systemic diffusion of right-wing populist perspectives and not also on the ways in which right-wing populist organisations conduct strategic-relational shaping through their political activities. This is especially apparent in the social and labour policy initiatives they launch. In recent years, these have been characterised by a welfare-chauvinist orientation, which, of course, differs from country to country. Depending on the concrete points of reference — the existing social security systems, public services, and labour policy agreements — they can be more socially or neoliberally accentuated.

In essence, welfare-chauvinist programmes are characterised by a nativist or ethnonationalist attitude. This can be seen, for example, in a positive reference to a dominant national culture, which is typically exaggerated and interpreted in an essentialist way. Often, the name of the RPR parties — such as the Sweden Democrats (SD), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and True Finns (now only The Finns) — is an indication of its ethnonationalist orientation. The ethnic component is particularly central and pronounced in the parties of the RPR, which as neo- or post-fascist organisations have broken with the tradition of fascism only half-heartedly, as illustrated by the Golden Dawn in Greece, the very cumbersome RN in France, the FdI in Italy, or the SD in Sweden. For other parties, such as the Progress Parties in Norway and Denmark and The Finns in Finland, ethnic considerations played no or only a subordinate role for a long time; in more recent years, however, these parties too took up such concepts and radicalised themselves toward the right. Meanwhile, ethnonationalist positions have become dominant within the core themes of right-wing popu-

list programmes: The rejection of refugees and migrants, especially from “foreign” cultural spheres; the criticism of the multicultural society, especially if this is characterised by a significant role of Islam; a law-and-order position in order to harshly reject violations of the valid legal order by migrants; a simultaneous rejection of liberal-cosmopolitan arrangements that presumably curtail national sovereignty and strengthen the rights of migrants, but also of women, LGBTQ, and socially disadvantaged groups; and a sceptical or even hostile attitude towards the EU, even if it becomes active in labour and social policy and advocates for minimum social standards, national minimum wage regimes, or the coordination of economic, financial, and labour market policies, for example.

The welfare-chauvinist orientation and neoliberal welfare-state reforms are by no means mutually exclusive. The positions of the AfD in Germany, *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD; Forum for Democracy) in the Netherlands, FrP in Norway, NB in Denmark, Lega in Italy, SDS in Slovenia, VOX in Spain, and *Chega!* in Portugal all point in this direction. Other parties have positioned themselves more cautiously, including the FPÖ, which now considers itself a “social homeland party”, or the ethnonationalist wing of the AfD, which has discovered for itself a “new social question” that refers to a conflict between insiders and outsiders, between the German and non-German population, while also taking part in protests against factory closures in the eastern German states. Still other RPR parties have long seen themselves as socially oriented organisations, such as PiS in Poland, which increased child benefits and lowered the retirement age before the 2015 parliamentary elections (Becker 2018: 97) and the SD in Sweden, which presents itself as “socially conservative” and argues for the defence of workers’ social rights, not least family, health, and pension insurance. The same applies to the PVV in the Netherlands (Erben / Bieling 2021). Like The Finns in Finland, the RN in France claims to defend the welfare state for the “ordinary people” through opposition to immigration.

Though they all have different starting points, all parties on the RPR have positioned themselves as welfare-chauvinists. They push to privilege the so-called autochthonous population according to ethnonationalist or nativist ideas. The non-universalist, specifically conditionalised elements of the welfare state form an important point of reference. Such elements are present in all welfare states, even in the more universalist Scandinavian models. They can be strengthened and re-arranged by means of ethnic accentuation via “exclusionary solidarities” (Score et al. 2022). Accordingly, the parties of the RPR do not

advocate a dismantling of the welfare state but rather a restructuring of it. This means that, in most countries, they defend, at least superficially, the national models of the welfare state and labour relations in order to tailor them more closely to the presumed needs of the autochthonous population. The focus here is on distributive welfare state benefits. Typical examples of this are the increase in child benefits and the lowering of the retirement age, as practised by the PiS in Poland (Becker 2018: 97), or the defence of family, health, and pension insurance by the SD in Sweden and the PVV in the Netherlands (Erben / Bieling 2021).

The socio-political developments taking place in the countries considered here correspond to the following pattern: In general, the RPR parties are careful to discuss the level of welfare state benefits in a diffuse, often contradictory manner for electoral reasons, so as not to scare off any voter groups. At the same time, the social policy programmes of the RPR parties have a relatively clear profile. Most RPR parties tend to strengthen the distributional aspects of the welfare state in order to implement a nativist, migrant-excluding practice that instead benefits their own clientele. In return, the social investment welfare state services that are accessible to all and have egalitarian effects, such as active labour market policies, education, and other social infrastructures, are neglected or cut (Enggist / Pinggera 2022).

The welfare-chauvinist restructuring of the welfare state is not without consequences for trade unions, not least because of the implications for labour policy. However, the impacts are largely indirect. Directly, the RPR parties target the trade unions with their labour policy activities. Thus, the right-wing populist parties strive to push back against the influence of trade unions, as they represent a (potential) bifold counterweight against the political agenda of the RPR parties: On the one hand, they do not fit into the concept of an ethnically determined people’s community, with elements of paternalistic social care, because the very structure of the union expresses a class-based, inclusive solidarity for all workers, regardless of origin, gender, religious conviction, and so on; and on the other hand, as intermediary organisations with their own power resources, they oppose all efforts to co-opt workers in an authoritarian manner. In the confrontation between RPR parties and the trade unions, populist considerations come to the fore insofar as trade unions represent intermediary organisations — between the workers and labour politics — which oppose the direct, immediate relationship between the people and the political leadership.

A central point of attack for the RPR parties is, therefore, to target the trade union's institutional power. This is particularly pronounced in the neo-corporatist models in Northern and Western Europe, where trade unions and employers' associations are systematically involved in political negotiation and decision-making processes. An important element of institutionalisation in the Scandinavian countries is the Ghent system, which is a system of state support for unemployment insurance administered by the trade unions that supports high levels of trade union organisation. In Denmark, the DF worked with the bourgeois parties to allow competing cross-industry insurance schemes (Bandau 2018: 102f), while in Sweden, the SD is now pushing to replace the Ghent system with a compulsory state insurance scheme (Erben / Bieling 2020: 97). Other proposals to undermine institutional trade union power include abolishing tax-subsidised union membership fees and questioning the forms of effective trade union representation in companies, supported by industrial action (ibid.: 89). In Austria, too, the FPÖ is striving to weaken institutional trade union power. As a governing party, it has not only often bypassed the trade unions on labour and social policy issues, in contrast to the usual practice, but has also launched an attack on the Chambers of Labour, which, as the embodiment of an institutionalised social partnership, were to have their funding cut.

In France and in the southern European societies, the situation is similar, although the forms of neo-corporatist institutionalisation are rather weakly anchored. In many cases, they only emerged in the 1990s when new social pacts were introduced to adjust national models of capitalism and social welfare to EMU requirements (Hassel 1998). In Italy, this was done through concerted action, which, since 1993, has included an annual protocol on income policy and planned inflation, a practice that became non-binding after 2009. In other countries, too, the RPR parties have pushed for the erosion of such arrangements. In Spain, VOX has not only challenged state support for collective bargaining and the social dialogue but, as the governing party in the region of Castile and León, it has also suspended it. In France, the RN has repeatedly pushed to override the legal modalities of trade union representation in workplaces, which among other things, require trade unions' independence. This has not been limited to France; other countries have witnessed numerous expressions of programmatic anti-unionism. These can be understood as an outcome of the RPR parties' desire to develop direct relationships with workers in order to strengthen the national community and ward off industrial disputes that weaken the national economy. The pronouncements of VOX in Spain, *Chega!* in Portugal, and

Golden Dawn in Greece are all quite similar; they can be interpreted as an "open declaration of war" against the trade unions, with GD's attacks extending beyond the verbal to the physical.

In Eastern European societies, the curtailment of institutional trade union power is less prominent. This is mainly due to the fact that, in contexts where it was possible to establish forms of social dialogue, cooperation with trade unions has often only been symbolic in character. Slovenia is somewhat of an exception; neo-corporatist structures prevailed against the vagaries and crisis dynamics of the transformation period in this country. However, they were undermined by Janša's SDS to the extent that the trade unions were no longer included, and often not even consulted, in labour and social policy decision-making processes.

The activities of the RPR parties not only aim to weaken institutional trade union power, they are equally concerned with curtailing trade union organising power. In almost all countries, they have tried to build right-wing trade union parallel structures. However, they have not been very successful so far. In Sweden, *Löntagarna* (The Workers) was not able to recruit more than 200 members after its founding. In Austria, the *Freiheitliche Arbeitnehmer* (FA; Liberal Workers) had a share of about 10 per cent of the vote in the elections to the Chamber of Labour and was thus far from being able to exploit its potential. The "alternative" trade unions founded in Germany — *Arbeitnehmer in der AfD* (AiDA; Workers in the AfD), *Alternative Vereinigung der Arbeiter* (AVA; Alternative Association of Workers), *Alternative Öffentlicher Dienst* (AÖD; Alternative Civil Service), *Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschland* (ALARM; Alternative Worker's Association of Central Germany) — play essentially no role in German companies. Even the right-wing candidate lists for works councils, most of which call themselves *Zentrum* (Centre), had only sporadic success. In other European societies, the situation is similar but contextual. The right-wing trade unions founded in France in the 1990s in the areas of police, public transport, postal services, and the penal system have all been banned because of their lack of political independence, whereas in Italy, the nationalist *Unione Generale del Lavoro* (UGL; General Labour Union), with its 1.8 million members, has a certain political weight. At the same time, however, Italy's other big unions — *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL), *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL), and *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL) — have been relatively stable, so far.

In Spain, VOX founded a right-wing union, which, as the name *Solidaridad* suggests, is modelled after the

anti-communist *Solidarność* in Poland. In Portugal, *Chega!* intends to realise a similar project with *Solidariedade*. As anti-system union, *Solidaridad* propagate a patriotic project directed equally against the “corrupt class unions” and “illegal immigration”. The target groups are considered to be workers in public administration, schools (teachers), health services, and especially the police. Faced with difficulties in gaining a foothold in the workplace, *VOX* turns to Spain’s civil servants’ union, *La Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios* (CSIF; Central Independent and Public Employees’ Trade Union). The police forces are also the target of the GD’s activities in Greece. Despite all their efforts — not to mention the deep social crisis and the sometimes-heated political atmosphere — the GD in Greece has not succeeded in anchoring itself in the trade unions.

These difficulties indicate that there is a wide gap, at least an ideological distance, between the positions of the right-wing populists and those of the trade unions. At the same time, large groups of employees, and even unionised employees, are prepared to vote for RPR parties and candidates in elections. As evidenced by election results, the activities of the right-wing populists attract these social groups. In some countries (i.e., Hungary and Poland), RPR parties have become a hegemonic force. In Italy, they are on their way to becoming one. So, it fits the picture that significant parts of the labour force, especially blue-collar workers, have turned to right-wing populist parties. If the statistical data is reliable — information is not always measured and attributed in the same way — about 60 per cent of blue-collar voters voted for the FPÖ in Austria (2017) and 27.2 per cent for the SD in Sweden (2022). In Italy, blue-collar voters cast ballots for two RPR parties, with 34.6 per cent voting for the FdI and 13.4 for the Lega (2022). In Germany, the AfD also has an above-average share of the vote among workers. In Finland, The Finns, as a “worker’s party without socialism”, has a lower approval rating among trade union members, but the level is still remarkably high. Employees and trade union members are, therefore, not ideologically immune. Apparently, many trade union members hold similar views on many political issues, such as migration, distributive justice, gender (in)equality, and hostility to science. If, in Norway, the FrP has dropped from its high of 23 per cent of the electorate (2009) to 11.6 per cent (2021), it is not due to trade union members, of whom about 10 per cent form a relatively stable base, but rather to the growing acceptance of the multicultural society in other social milieus.

In France, where Marine Le Pen won more than 40 per cent of the vote in the last run-off election for president, the RN is mainly anchored in the structur-

ally weak regions. Given France’s Roman majority voting system, receiving 17 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary elections (2022) is a very reasonable outcome for the FN/RN. A more detailed breakdown of past elections since 2002 shows that the right-wing populists are also disproportionately supported by members of some trade unions, especially the Catholic reformist *La Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC; French Confederation of Christian Workers) and the *Force Ouvrière* (FO; Worker’s Force). The support of workers for the GD in Greece is much weaker. Here, a relatively large number of young people, mainly low-skilled, unemployed, or precariously employed young men, voted for the GD, with a strong presence in Athens’ harbour district Piraeus standing out.

The right-wing attempts to weaken institutional and organisational trade union power are hard to miss, but the limits of these activities cannot be ignored. The RPR parties often present themselves in the public sphere as powerful in discourse and thereby also, at least partially, impair the societal power of trade unions. At the same time, the right-wing populist criticism of the trade unions remains highly contradictory. On the one hand, the trade unions are criticised for fuelling “class struggle” and affecting the performance of the national economy through a consistent interest representation, including through strikes; on the other hand, the social partnership orientation is repeatedly the focus of criticism. This is particularly the case when the trade unions come to an agreement with the political elites — governments and employers’ associations — in the neo-corporatist arrangements or when their representatives act as co-managers in committees of company co-determination.

Directed against established trade union practice, the RPR parties are mostly oriented, often implicitly, towards forms of nationalist-authoritarian corporatism that adhere to the ideal of a homogenous and simultaneously internationally competitive national community. The understanding of the social interests of the workers is not very substantial. Everyday practices of the RPR parties, however, point in the opposite direction: They usually vote with the bourgeois parties, as seen with the PVV in the Netherlands, for example. They enter into an open or covert government coalition with them, e.g. the SD in Sweden, in order to criticise the minimum wage or to push for the abolition of tax concessions for trade union membership fees. Like the FPÖ, they work in close cooperation with the conservatives (ÖVP) to implement a neoliberal economic and social policy agenda. As seen by the Lega in Italy, they advocate for a socially regressive “flat tax”, or, in the case of the Spanish *VOX*, they

oppose progressive labour and social policy government initiatives, such as short-time working benefits, the minimum wage, the regulation of telework, or a framework agreement on pension reform. They refrain from supporting trade unions when they try to fend off the employers' attacks about employment conditions, as seen in Finland. Moreover, they sometimes organise strike-breakers in cooperation with the big companies to keep the economy going, as the GD in Greece did. All of this shows that the social base of the RPR parties lies only partly and often only very superficially in the worker milieus. In the end, the interests of companies and the self-employed are usually given greater importance.

PROBLEM PERCEPTION OF THE TRADE UNIONS

The programmatic statements and activities of the RPR parties, not least the initiatives concerning welfare arrangements and labour relations, and thus also the trade unions, aim at a reconfiguration of social relations of solidarity. This is obvious insofar as the forms of solidarity are not simply given but are continuously reproduced and changed in everyday communication and negotiation processes. Solidarity is to be understood as a specific social relationship in which the actors involved coordinate their own interests to achieve common goals through the mediation of shared values and mutual obligations (Bayertz 1998). How this happens is decisively structured and relatively consolidated by social institutions and arrangements, not least by the welfare state and industrial relations. This means that the (competing) social ideas of solidarity (Altreiter et al. 2019) are inscribed in given institutional arrangements. Conversely, this also means that the change in the mode of operation of the welfare state and labour relations is accompanied by a transformation of solidarity.

The activities of the RPR parties and the networks and movements that support them can be interpreted in this sense. Their welfare-chauvinist orientation opposes the institutionalisation of a comprehensive and inclusive or "universalistic" solidarity and, in return, promotes forms of an "exclusionary" solidarity that excludes or degrades social groups beyond the autochthonous majority community, i.e., discriminates against them and puts them in a worse position. The trade unions mostly view the initiatives that point toward an often conservative-traditionalist justified ethnonationalist defined closure or segmentation with great concern: Firstly, because the privileging of the autochthonous population, and especially the autochthonous male population, runs counter to their

own objectives and values of non-discrimination; secondly, because such initiatives promote the erosion of class-based solidarity, i.e., undermine the everyday practices of an effective union representation of interests; and thirdly, because these processes are flanked in all countries by attacks on institutional and organisational trade union power.

The above-mentioned dimensions of concern are seen differently by the individual trade unions. Nevertheless, there is unanimous concern that the institutional and organisational power of the trade unions will be further weakened by right-wing populist activities. Since these two forms of power largely determine the conditions for action in labour policy, such attempts by the RPR parties are opposed by the trade unions — especially since they had already been curtailed in many countries in the previous phase of neo-liberal modernisation. On the one hand, the trade unions try to defend the systems of neo-corporatist participation and negotiation of interests at the national or central government level: This can be seen in the Ghent system in Scandinavian countries, or the role of the Chambers of Labour and the self-administration of social insurance in Austria. In Southern and Eastern European countries, however, it is much more difficult to maintain institutionalised social pacts in view of the low level of trade union organisation found in Italy, Spain, and Slovenia. On the other hand, they try to defend institutional trade union power at the workplace level, often in alliance with other political parties or civil society actors. Attention is mostly focused on limiting or containing right-wing influences in companies. The FA in Austria and the various Zentrum organisations in Germany are relatively isolated, and in France, the right-wing trade unions have often failed to reach the 10 per cent threshold in elections for workers' representation or have now even been banned by the courts.

Defending institutional and organisational power is essential for trade unions. However, it is not systematically linked to the other two concerns, non-discrimination and class-based solidarity. This is already evident from the fact that there are very different ideas among workers, trade union members, and trade union officials about what contemporary relations of solidarity should look like and whether and how trade unions should act on them. The heterogeneity reflects the competing socio-political preferences as well as the organisational policy orientation of the trade unions. This is evident within the individual unions, but even more so between them, as their self-image sometimes diverges considerably. The differences between the ideologically oriented trade unions and the general trade union organisations are not insignificant. However, the difference between

unions that position and engage themselves socio-politically and those that see their primary task as providing services for their members seems to be more significant.

The trade union confrontation with the RPR parties is part of the broader social struggle for cultural or ideological hegemony. These struggles are mainly fought in the public sphere. The activities of the RPR parties are often supported directly or indirectly by social protest movements. Examples of direct support include *Pegida* in Germany and *Movimento Zero* in Portugal. More indirect interactions between protest and party can be found in the example of the *Querdenker* movement in Germany, the protests against pandemic management in Italy, and the “Yellow vests” in France. Demonstrations and protests do not always proceed without violence. In Greece, numerous migrants and trade unionists were the target of right-wing attacks, and in Italy, after the attack on the CGIL headquarters, other offices and Chambers of Labour were targeted as well.

Such an escalation of public confrontation contributes to the trade unions’ highly politicised perception of the rise and increased significance of the RPR parties. Thus, the CGT and the CFDT in France, the CGIL in Italy, the unions of the GSEE and the ADEDY in Greece, the ÖGB in Austria, and the DGB unions in Germany are not only very sensitised, but they also see the confrontation with the forces of the RPR as a primarily political question. In contrast, trade unions in other countries often react more cautiously. In the Netherlands, there is, at best, moderate to weak politicisation. Similarly, the interactions in Finland, on the part of the *Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö* (SAK; Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, the *Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö* (STTK; Finnish Confederation of Professionals), and the *Korkeakoulutettujen työmarkkinakeskusjärjestö Akava*; (AKAVA; Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland), and in Denmark, can even be characterised as having political restraint. Although the trade union leadership stands for a policy of anti-discrimination, it does not give much weight to this aspect. Under the growing influence of right-wing discourse, concern about political escalation (and the threat of losing members) often results in avoiding “sensitive issues”.

All this suggests that the political culture of the country and the activities of the RPR have a decisive influence on trade union perceptions. However, it is not enough to let these two aspects carry the full explanatory burden. At least as important seems to be the development of the aforementioned self-image on the

basis of which the trade unions operate. After all, quite different political perceptions and reactions can be identified even in countries where public conflicts are more moderated (Erben / Bieling 2019). A typical example of these can be found in Sweden. Here, the perception of the SD by the *Landsorganisationen i Sverige* (LO; Swedish Trade Union Confederation) is clearly politicised, to the point that the LO is very active in the election campaign, while the *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (TCO; Sweden’s Confederation of Professional Employees) and the *Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation* (SACO; Sweden’s academics’ union known as the Confederation of Professional Associations) see themselves as party-politically “neutral” and keep a low profile in the debate with the right-wing populists. A similar picture can be seen in the Netherlands, where the *Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging* (FNV; Federation of Dutch Trade Unions) takes a clear position, while the *Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond* (CNV; Christian Trade Union) and the *Vakcentrale voor Professionals* (VCP; Academic Staff Union) are very hesitant. Similar differences, even if not quite as pronounced, can also be seen in Austria within the ÖGB and in Germany within the DGB.

The rather passive and reserved, in a certain sense “depoliticised”, view of the right-wing populist challenge thus stems from several root causes. It results partly from the political culture of the country as well as from the operational self-image of the trade unions. The Danish example is instructive in that it shows how these two aspects can intertwine and mutually reinforce each other. Thus, in Denmark, and to a certain extent also in Austria and Finland, processes of “normalisation” can be observed. Such processes show the adaptation to a welfare-chauvinist reform agenda, but above all right-wing interpretations and narratives that come to be considered a “normal” part of public discourse and are adopted in some respects by the conservative, liberal, and sometimes even social democratic parties. Such shifts are not without consequences for trade unions. They contribute to the fact that the trade unions increasingly see the RPR parties, in this case, the DF — regardless of their ethnonationalist orientation — as an “acceptable” and “suitable” interlocutor. However, such a perspective is neither self-evident nor inevitable but instead is presupposed by a certain depoliticisation of the trade unions. This seems to be the case for trade unions that see themselves primarily as service providers. Not infrequently, depoliticisation has also been promoted by the fact that the established left parties and the trade unions have decoupled from each other financially, organisationally, and programmatically, and this is only insufficiently compensated for by personal networks.

TRADE UNION STRATEGIES AND EXPERIENCES

Just as the contexts of right-wing populism and the forms of trade union perception of the problem differ, so do the reactions of the trade unions. These also reflect the specific national conditions for action and the traditional self-understandings of trade union organisations. In addition, there is also the dimension of a “strategic choice”, i.e., the political reflections, consultations, and, ultimately, decisions that have produced specific strategies and practices in dealing with RPR parties. The strategies and practices of the countries discussed can be categorised as follows:

- First of all, it is noticeable that, in some countries, trade unions have hardly any experience with right-wing populism. Although founded in 2013, the Spanish VOX has only been a political player since 2018. The electoral successes of *Chega!* in Portugal, founded in 2019, are even more recent. In both countries, the recent fascist past — the transition to democracy occurred only in the mid-1970s — probably still acts as an inhibitive factor. In addition, trade unions committed to labour and socio-political issues in both countries helped limit the establishment of the newly founded right-wing populist trade unions (*Solidaridad* in Spain and *Solidariedade* in Portugal). The position of the trade unions in Greece, where the neo-fascist GD is, in some ways, a special case, was even more consistent. In Greece, through consistent criticism and cooperation with civil society organisations, i.e., with internationalist-oriented (anti-fascist) initiatives, it was possible to strengthen socially inclusive, community-based solidarity relations and to push back the GD.
- In other countries, trade unions also follow a “hard line” in dealing with right-wing populist-affiliated trade union members who expose themselves publicly and, for example, run for RPR parties. In France, about 50 RN activists have left the CGT in recent years, either through formal expulsion or political pressure. The central criteria for justification were always the rejection of the “priority for natives” policy propagated by the RN and the maintenance of the principle of trade union independence. The other unions, the CFDT and FO, basically take a similar position. Despite some differences, the unions are working together on this issue. This means that they publicly stand up for the goals of a workers’ movement in solidarity and against all forms of discrimination. They have again taken a very clear position against the RN, also in the context of

presidential or parliamentary elections, although the FO has sometimes been somewhat reticent.

- In the remaining countries, unions likewise take a clear stand against the RPR parties. However, their approach has been somewhat more differentiated in some respects. On the one hand, they accept that a considerable part of their membership is also a member of a party of the RPR; on the other hand, they become active when exponents of right-wing populism aspire to fulfil important tasks, for example, as shop stewards, or even to get a leadership role in the union. In Sweden, for example, the LO’s Metalworkers’ Union has strictly forbidden this, and in the DGB and ÖGB, too, there is a clear anti-fascist basic consensus that constitutes a “red line”, despite the unions’ non-partisan stance. If human rights and democracy are endangered and anti-union positions are taken, then these incompatibility resolutions take effect. In this respect, there is a clear defence against racism and discrimination, but also a willingness to engage in dialogue with workers with right-wing populist affinities to ensure a high quality of everyday representation of interests.
- Another reaction is to deny or disregard right-wing populist activities. This reaction is most common in countries where there has been a “normalisation”, i.e., adaptation of public discourses and political agendas to the positions of RPR parties, and where trade unions see themselves less as an organised solidaristic community of all employees but primarily as service providers. Therefore, very pragmatically oriented trade unions that think in terms of political “neutrality” tend to be more tolerant of right-wing positions and activities. This tendency is particularly common among Danish unions but can also be found in Finland, where the academic union STTK has entered a dialogue with The Finns. In the Netherlands, it can be seen how different trade union self-conceptions lead to divergent strategies (Erben / Bieling 2020): While the social democratic-oriented FNV takes a clear public position, the Christian CNV keeps a ‘neutral’ distance, and the academic union VCP avoids confrontation. A similar differentiation can be seen in Sweden, where both the white-collar union TACO and the academic union TCO publicly distance themselves from the SD.

The differentiation of reactions and strategies in dealing with right-wing populist activities made here is relatively rough and not much more than a first ap-

proximation. To better understand and determine the trade union options and restrictions more precisely, the different arenas in which the trade unions operate must also be included in the consideration as well. In the country studies, the focus was, on the one hand, on organisational policy concepts with right-wing trade unions and right-wing populist-affiliated employees and trade union members, and, on the other hand, on the public sphere, i.e., the arena of socio-political disputes. Here, trade unions generally present themselves as organisations that claim to represent the interests of all workers effectively and in solidarity and to counteract the various forms of discrimination. Differences become apparent when it comes to compromising on issues of solidarity and non-discrimination or rejecting such compromises and engaging in socio-political discussions in a publicly visible way. Examples of this second option were clearly visible in trade union involvement in election campaigns, such as in Sweden or France; participation in political campaigns in Spain and Norway, for instance, in defence of universal rights and cultural diversity; and involvement in civil society protests and alliances against the activities of the RPR parties, e.g., against the Janša government in Slovenia, against the GD and the neo-fascist attacks in Greece, or in the attempt to stymie the formation of the RPR in Italy.

In addition to the socio-political and organisational dimensions, the country studies repeatedly, but not consistently, focused on the different areas of labour policy in the narrower and broader sense, i.e., the “politics in production” and “politics of production” mentioned in the beginning. The implementation of trade union strategies is closely linked to the forms of institutional trade union power, which are understandably the subject of fierce struggle. In many cases, the trade unions have taken a defensive stance — not only as a result of the RPR parties but in response to the neoliberal reorganisation taking place since the 1980s. This defensive position makes it difficult for unions to openly address the continuing problems of institutional arrangements: For example, the concessions in the social pacts, the restraint in collective bargaining policy or the limits and ambivalences of workplace co-determination. The Danish trade unions have gone one step further and have defended not only Danish competitive corporatism and the flexicurity concept but also its welfare-chauvinist accentuation and have attacked the EU from a nationalist position. The trade unions in other countries are far removed from this, but even so, they still find it difficult to autonomously adopt positions critical of society and capitalism. Often, criticism is left to right-wing actors. These actors increasingly take up the flexibilisation and precarisation of the world of work,

as well as the deregulation and privatisation of social security, and try to capitalise on the situation politically.

Accordingly, the challenge is to defend the forms of institutional trade union power while simultaneously presenting themselves as an autonomous force critical of capitalism and society. It may be instructive to adopt a perspective inspired by Karl Polanyi (1977; Bieling et al. 2021: 158), which sees trade unions as organisations that oppose the unleashing of the market and the social inequality and insecurity it increases, and advocate for forms of social protection and participation. By focussing on this, they can counter the conceptions of the RPR parties, which propagate ethnonationalist forms of protection, by ideas and concrete projects of a universalist solidarity, which are consistently implemented and practised by trade unions in everyday life.

However, this also means that labour and social policy undoubtedly remain the primary field of action of trade union practice and strategy building. In the countries studied, there are numerous indications of how a “contemporary class solidarity” can be developed and strengthened from this basis in order to enable progressive (socio-ecological and universalist) reform concepts. In a narrower sense, this includes educational and reflexive work on important issues such as conflict management, anti-fascism, and anti-racism. Such programmes exist in Austria, Germany, Spain, France, and many other countries. The Italian CGIL is very active, as is the ETUC, of course, in establishing transnational networks, training programmes, and information campaigns to counter right-wing populist activities intellectually and discursively. Confronting the RPR is effective when it is accompanied and underpinned by concrete economic and labour policy struggles, such as demonstrations and strikes against neoliberal initiatives, as in Norway, where social dumping strategies were fought off by binding collective agreements and minimum social standards. In combination with initiatives for the integration and equal rights of migrant workers, trade unions in other countries are also working to reflexively renegotiate the content of a “contemporary class solidarity” that has a transnational character and addresses questions of ecology and intersectionality.

However, it would be too one-sided and positive to consider trade unions a consistently important factor in the socio-political struggles for cultural hegemony. Not only do trade union positions point in different directions, but experiences in individual countries also diverge. The divergence has both a spatial and tem-

poral dimension since the political cycles of right-wing populism and the struggles against it are asynchronous, i.e., do not take place at the same time. The resulting lack of clarity is further reinforced by numerous contingencies, which may include, for example, the role of charismatic figures, the public discussion of scandals, or a consistent counter-mobilisation by social movements with the participation of the trade unions. These contingencies and particularities must be kept in mind.

Nevertheless, there is also a structural feature of political conflicts that gives trade unions a very central role in the confrontation with right-wing populism. The structural feature is that whenever RPR parties become significant and gain influence — a rise to prominence fuelled by numerous everyday problems, crises, and discontents — this takes place primarily in the public sphere, i.e., in the areas of political debate. It is only from here that right-wing activities and discourses spill over into workplace relations, where so far they remain comparatively well contained. There's no evidence of a “long-term anchoring” of right-wing populist actors in the workplace. In Spain, VOX's open declaration of war on the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) and the *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO; Workers' Commissions) was not backed up by a right-wing alternative trade union. In other countries, including Portugal, France, Italy, Slovenia, and the Scandinavian countries, right-wing populist organisations do not have a strong workplace base either. Critically distinct from Antonio Gramsci's Fordism theory, it cannot be assumed that a “right-wing hegemony”, if European societies are on the way to such a hegemony, “springs from the factory” (1991–1999: 2601ff).

This should not be interpreted to mean that there is no “breeding ground in the world of work” (Sauer et al. 2018: 184) for right-wing populism; after all, in the course of deregulation and flexibilisation of labour relations, segmentary inequalities in the workplace, above all, atypical, often precarious employment and the associated insecurities, have also been reinforced. Specific ideologies that can be used by right-wing populist actors also unfold in the workplace arenas by linking power relations and the discursive processes of the production of meaning. Where this happens, however, these ideologies have primarily a populist component directed against the co-management of works councils and trade unions rather than an ethnonationalist component, which is hardly surprising given the composition of most workforces. The multicultural character of the practical solidarity relations in workplaces thus represents the

first important impediment and limitation of right-wing populist activities. A second limitation results from the forms of “workplace universalism”, which, partly in contrast to the different legal standards in public life, is fed by the equal workplace rights of all employees regardless of origin, religion, gender, or citizenship (Schmidt 2020: 19ff). These rights are implemented in practice by the trade unions, which negotiate collective agreements and implement the collective rights of representation and co-determination at the workplace.

The forms of workplace universalism and the solidarity relations nurtured by these values vary from country to country and have been partially eroded because of the weakened institutional and organisational power of the trade unions. However, they have by no means disappeared and are still an important anchor and starting point for trade union activities against the right. In the workplace arena, trade unions have certain structural advantages: Firstly, they can confront right-wing populist actors offensively, and it is difficult or impossible for them to use ethnonationalist or welfare-chauvinist arguments, as they discriminate against large sections of the workforce. Secondly, the trade unions not only rely on the multicultural composition of the workforce but also on their legal equality in collective agreements and legal foundations, i.e., they can use legally institutionalised anchors to defend themselves against discriminatory practices and discourses. Thirdly, there are numerous examples and experiences conveyed by trade unionists wherein it was, above all, the union members themselves that fought for these labour rights and made them usable in the interest of all workers.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of the RPR parties sometimes shows a certain fluidity in the individual countries. Despite all fluctuations, however, the approval ratings for the RPR parties are generally rising or remain high. Since no country has yet succeeded in pushing back the RPR parties in the long term, it is difficult to identify any tried-and-true “best practices” for successful trade union dealings with the RPR parties. Moreover, in view of the very different national conditions for action, caution seems appropriate in trying to generalise the practices in individual countries. Learning processes can, at best, be identified with certain reservations. Accordingly, the conclusions outlined here should rather be interpreted as suggestions for reflection and further development of the respective trade union strategies and practices, not as an agenda that simply must be implemented:

- 1) First, it is noticeable that structural trade union power is hardly ever addressed in the country studies. When it is addressed, it is mostly only implicitly. This is hardly surprising for two reasons: Firstly, the competencies and instruments of monetary, economic, cyclical, and thus also employment policy are mainly in the hands of other actors, i.e., the central banks, the European Commission and the national governments; and secondly, structural trade union power is not at the centre of the arguments with the parties of the RPR. It is, therefore, clear that this is not the sphere in which to delve deeper. Nevertheless, it could be helpful to include the forms of structural power more in the development of trade union strategy. In the context of a Keynesian-oriented economic policy, i.e., active monetary, financial, industrial, and structural policies, the conditions for trade union action should generally improve. Moreover, insofar as such a policy helps to absorb and reduce social inequalities and insecurities and to actively shape the future of European societies, it also functions to dry up the socio-economic “breeding ground” for right-wing populist attitudes.
- 2) As far as institutional and organisational trade union power is concerned, the findings of the country studies are empirically rich and differentiated. In some areas, trade union activities against the RPR have been relatively successful and in others, they have achieved less or the results have been rather ambivalent. The focus is often on the defence of institutional trade union power, such as social pacts and corporatist arrangements, collective bargaining agreements or workplace representation. The institutional and legal provisions in all these arenas have been challenged by the RPR parties. At the same time, they function as important reference points for the trade unions to promote and defend the ideas of universalist-oriented solidarity. At the national or supra-company level, the results are mixed. On the one hand, the trade unions have mostly succeeded in defending important aspects of institutional power; in Austria, for example, they’ve done so by retaining the Chambers of Labour and maintaining a high rate of collective bargaining coverage and self-administration in social insurance. In many other countries, unions have also largely been able to defend the social pacts against the attacks of the RPR parties, sometimes in cooperation with the employers, as in Spain. On the other hand, they have often not succeeded in moderating the national-competitive-corporatist character of these arrangements. On the contrary, under the influence of the RPR parties, welfare-chauvinist discourses have gained prominence and have partly guided the reform of the welfare state regimes.
- 3) In the workplace, as an arena of action, trade unions have had to defend their institutional power. In some countries, such as France, Spain, Portugal, and even Germany, there were numerous attacks by the RPR and attempts to establish alternative right-wing unions. All these efforts have been repelled or contained. Apparently, it is not only the multicultural composition of the workforce that comes into play here but also a workplace universalism based on the equal workplace rights of all workers regardless of origin, religion, or gender. Although this universalism has become somewhat fragile, it often still contributes to the fact that the experience of “inclusive workplace solidarity” in the everyday business of trade unions can act as an important anchor against the nationalist and racist exclusion discourses of the RPR parties.
- 4) The basis for the durability of this solidarity is a credible, i.e., consistent and effective, trade union representation of interests that includes all dependent employees. However, this is exactly what is endangered in almost all countries by the fact that a large faction of the employees and even a growing part of the trade union membership is turning away from their previously preferred parties and towards right-wing populist positions. This points to an erosion of the organisational power of trade unions. In addition to declining levels of organisational strength, internal cohesion also seems to be waning. This can be understood as a diminishing solidarity among union members themselves. The loss of members and the poor presence in many workplaces are, in turn, a gateway for right-wing populist positions and activities. In many cases, for example, in Germany, Austria, and France, the trade unions are trying to counter this with educational and training activities in combination with making greater efforts, as seen in Norway, to organise migrant workers and to actively involve them in trade union practice.
- 5) Their success in these endeavours often corresponds to the societal power of the trade unions and a socio-political “climate” that is shaped by ideas of “inclusive” or “universalist” solidarity. Trade unions are not alone in creating such a climate. But they can — in cooperation with other civil society actors — actively contribute to the

creation of such a climate through public events, demonstrations, and campaigns. The conflicts with the RPR provide numerous examples of this in the countries studied in this report.

The above points make it clear that the different forms of trade union power are complementary, not substitutive. A union's weakened institutional and organisational power cannot simply be compensated for with strengthened societal power. This also applies to the confrontation with the RPR. Here, it is advisable for the trade unions to operate from their original areas of labour policy action. This requires, firstly, that they act consistently and authentically in everyday activities, i.e., collective bargaining and workplace representation, in order to win the trust of all employees — and not only the trust of the so-called autochthonous employees — since the crisis of confidence in the institutional political system has also affected the trade unions to some extent. Secondly, this positioning is easier if the trade unions do not confine themselves to pure service tasks. An effective policy of labour interests in relation to employers always presupposes a capacity for conflict both within and across companies. This implies that the relationship between labour and socio-political activities must be intensively discussed and, if necessary, redefined. Thirdly, it is important to use a broader concept of interests, not only focused on “social class” in the narrow sense but a concept that understands and reflects class in relation to or intersection with other nodes of tension or conflict such as gender and ethnicity. Only in this broader understanding can a contemporary understanding of an “inclusive” and “transnational” solidarity be discursively developed and made practically usable.

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