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DOI
10.1515/zsr-2021-0011

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Zeitschrift für Sozialreform

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Meardi, G., Burroni, L., Keune, M., Bellini, A., Galetto, M., Mori, A., Payton, N., & Scalise, G. (2021). Opportunities and Traps for Trade Unions in European Employment Policy Initiatives: The Case of Social Dialogue on Active Inclusion. *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform*, *67*(4), 306-332. https://doi.org/10.1515/zsr-2021-0011

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Download date:17 Oct 2026

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Abstract: After some promise in the 1990s, European unions have grown increasingly disillusioned with regard to the results of EU social policy and EU social dialogue. The paper analyses the extent and reasons of this disillusion by looking at the impact on social dialogue of the Active Inclusion Recommendation launched by the European Commission at the outset of the economic crisis in 2008. The Recommendation led to a tripartite framework agreement at the EU level in 2010 (the only such agreement in a decade), which was then to be implemented at national and regional levels. With a multilevel governance approach, the paper looks at the extent to which social dialogue on Active Inclusion at the EU level, in six EU countries (France, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) and six regions (Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, Lower Silesia, Catalonia, West Sweden and Greater Manchester) within those countries was somehow revitalised. The analysis, looking at both top-down and bottom-up processes and based on documentary analysis and interviews, shows that the initiative displays ambiguities similar to those of typical composite EU principles, such as famously the case of 'flexicurity'. The multilevel governance of the EU, including the interaction between 'soft' employment policies and evolving 'hard' Eurogovernance tools, and with poor horizontal and vertical coordination, resulted in multiple distortions of the principle and, over time, to frustration. Unions' engagement varies by level, country and region, reflecting both traditional national approaches and the local perception of 'active inclusion' as an opportunity. Although trade unions were more welcoming of 'active inclusion' than they had been for flexicurity, similar related threats and opportunities led to modest achievements and a gradual fading of the idea at the European and national levels, with some more opportunities however at the regional level. The paper concludes that, if trade unions want to engage with the idea of a European Social Model and with Eurogovernance, they could develop stronger networks among regional organisations.

Keywords: European employment policies; trade unions; social dialogue; active inclusion; Europeanisation; regionalisation

1 Introduction

For trade unions, dealing with European integration has long been like walking on a tightrope, balancing between the threats of market-making and the promise of a Social Europe. The ambiguities of European integration have been extensively discussed (Hyman 1997; Hyman 2005; Erne 2008) and, after initial hopes for the European Social Dialogue and the European Social Charter in the 1990s, have become particularly prominent in the 2000s, under the pressure of EU enlargement (Meardi 2012). The experience of 'flexicurity' in the early 2000s was particularly sobering, as an apparently balanced European policy turned out to be a threat to worker protection (Keune/Jepsen 2007; Burroni/Keune 2011), and the Euro crisis increased social opposition to the European project. The developments of the past decade are, by contrast, subject to a less clear-cut assessment. On one side, some have criticised the new tools of Eurogovernance as particularly threatening for labour (Jordan et al. 2021). Others have seen, as a reaction to the crisis, a degree of re-socialisation of European policies, exemplified by the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 (Zeitlin/Vanhercke 2018; Mailand 2021).

This paper examines how trade unions engage, through social dialogue and other processes, with EU employment and social initiatives by analysing the critical but understudied case of the Active Inclusion Recommendation and the respective autonomous framework agreement of the European social partners. The case is selected for the unique combination of policy and communication effort from the Commission, and the involvement of social dialogue. At the outset of the financial crisis, in 2008, the European Commission issued a Recommendation on Active Inclusion, which led to this autonomous framework agreement between the European trade unions and employers in 2010, to be implemented by unions, employers and other social actors at national and regional levels.

'Active inclusion' (AI) was initially perceived by the European trade unions as more promising than 'flexicurity', particularly because of the implied commitment to avoid poor work. The political turmoil of the financial and Euro crisis quickly distracted attention from the AI Recommendation and the respective EU social partner framework agreement. Nonetheless, it lingered in the social policies agendas and provides a test of the degree to which trade unions engage with European policies.

The paper examines, from a multilevel perspective, the extent to which trade unions, and social partners in general, have been engaging with the EU AI Recommendation and the autonomous framework agreement and with what results. It does so at different territorial levels: EU level; national level in six EU countries (France, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK); sub-national level in six regions (Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, Lower Silesia, Catalonia, West Sweden, and Greater Manchester).

In the following section, we provide an overview of the literature on how the attitude of unions towards the EU employment policies changed over time. This is followed by a review of the relevant literature on the idea of AI and unions' role in it (section 3). We present our methods and the data collected up to 2016 in section 4 and findings at the European, national and regional levels (sections 5–7), and finally, draw some conclusions on the possible future roles for trade unions in European social policy.

2 European unions and European employment policy

Over the decades, the construction of EU employment policies has become an increasingly 'mixed-picture' field. It had started with rather 'black and white' debates on 'negative', market-making and 'positive', market-correcting processes of integration (Scharpf 1996), on functionalist spillovers and federalism. With the evolution of the European Employment Strategy since 1997, the rise of 'soft' regulations and the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (Goetschy 1999; Kröger 2009), the evaluation became more difficult because EU policymaking started to diverge from the forms typical of national employment and welfare policies. Intermediate incrementalist views gained space, seeing progress in 'soft tools', benchmarking and learning processes, which accommodate institutional diversity and are open to stakeholders' involvement (Hemerijck 2013; Heidenreich/Zeitlin 2009; Zeitlin/Vanhercke 2018).

The opportunities for labour to participate in EU employment governance remain disputed. Some see a 'new phase', different from the Maastricht Dialogue (Prosser 2011), convergence towards European social dialogue as a 'paradigm of good governance' (Weltz 2008), and a social partnership model of private interests' involvement in social policymaking (Falkner et al. 2008). Others, conversely, observe a more 'neoliberal', marketised process (Greer et al. 2017) hidden

behind the nebulous and contradictory language of supranational documents (Natali 2009; Schmidt 2009; Keune/Serrano 2014).

Within the European Employment Strategy, the Commission recommended social dialogue as a favoured instrument for labour market governance in its Employment Guidelines. At the national level, employment was a key topic in the wave of 'social pacts' in the preparatory phase of the European Monetary Union in countries like Italy, Ireland, Spain and Belgium. Léonard (2001) then argued that employment was a 'positive-sum' issue with potential for social dialogue. Those expectations, however, were rarely met. Ten years after its launch, the European Employment Strategy was already seen as taking a 'technocratic' turn at the cost of social dialogue (Gold et al. 2007). Moreover, after the outbreak of the 'Euro crisis', the European Central Bank and the Commission promoted labour reforms in crisis-hit countries that were hardly acceptable for organised labour. Soon, facing social delegitimisation, from 2014 the new Commission President Juncker explicitly relaunched social dialogue, with the institution of regular 'Tripartite Social Summits' since 2015 and the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017.

The Juncker agenda re-proposes, for unions and for industrial relations scholars, the question of the utility of social dialogue. The literature has pointed to its potential legitimacy and implementation functions, under the assumption that industrial relations actors would be interested in the 'quest for employment' (Léonard/Reman 2004). Whereas liberal approaches see social dialogue as a negative constraint, with established interests holding veto powers, industrial relations research has shown both instrumental and expressive functions (Traxler 2010). The instrumental potential to improve labour market governance is indicated by cases (mostly in Scandinavia) where union participation in labour market institutions has had positive effects on employment rates, equality, and a balance between flexibility and security (Crouch 2017). The expressive function consists instead in the provision of legitimacy, which is increasingly needed by national governments and, even more so, by the EU due to its lack of proper democratic foundations. Whether social partners are still able to compensate for the legitimacy crisis of liberal democracy in the EU is, however, debatable (Culpepper/Regan 2014). The role of unions and social dialogue needs therefore to be seen in relation to national variation in industrial relations traditions, but also, when looking at EU initiatives, in 'cultures of compliance' (Falkner et al. 2008) and policy fit (Graziano 2011).

The EU Treaty (articles 154 and 155) provides an institutional route for social partners' contribution to social regulations at EU level through autonomous framework agreements. The 2010 agreement on 'inclusive labour markets', responding

to the AI Recommendation, was the fourth autonomous agreement, after agreements on telework (2002), work-related stress (2004), and harassment and violence at work (2007), and two more were signed afterwards, on active ageing (2017) and on digitalisation (2020). Research on the implementation of the first three EU-level autonomous agreements suggests that the overall substantive effects have been piecemeal, calling into question the effectiveness of this type of soft governance (Prosser 2011; Ertel et al. 2010). The impact has been uneven largely because implementation follows national industrial relations traditions (Ramos Martín/Visser 2008).

Subsequently, however, Zeitlin and Vanhercke (2018) saw a growing strategic capacity of social partners in creatively contributing to European social and economic policies, and a recent study for Eurofound supported a more sanguine view of the articulation between EU and national-level social dialogue, although more in a top-down than bottom-up direction (Voss et al. 2018). To address the complexity of EU policymaking, a multilevel governance approach has established itself as appropriate (Hooghe/Marks 2001; Jessop 2004), and it has informed debates on EU social policy and industrial relations (Scharpf 2009; Marginson/Sisson 2004; Keune/Marginson 2013). Still, very few studies on employment policies have included not only the EU and the national levels but also the regional one in a multilevel approach, despite the growing importance of the latter having been discussed in cases such as flexicurity (Burroni/Keune 2011) and active inclusion (Heidenreich/Zeitlin 2009; Künzel 2012).

In particular, the attention to the regional level of analysis in the policy field analysed in this paper is relevant for the fast-growing process of political devolution to local-level regulation that has been ongoing in many EU countries. This process has been promoted by European institutions as well as by national governments. For example, some measures of the European Social Fund reinforced the role of urban and regional governance, or more specific measures such as the so-called Territorial Employment Pact promoted social concentration on employment policies at the regional level. At the same time, countries experienced a process of profound administrative decentralisation in many policy fields – and especially in labour market and welfare policy – that promoted a role of local and regional government in the planning and implementation of public policies (Burroni 2014). This combined process of Europeanisation and regionalisation has implications for social partners and trade unions, reducing the importance of the national level as their sphere of influence compared to the European and regional/local ones (Santiago López/Tatham 2018).

Moreover, despite the scarcity of their direct cross-pollination, there is a degree of elective affinity between studies of governance and studies of employment

relations, which consistently point to varieties of forms of regulation, power sources, and levels (Meardi/Marginson 2014). The industrial relations scholarship on 'articulation' of collective bargaining, for example, offers, through concepts of demarcation, derogation, and organised/disorganised decentralisation, analytical tools that can be applied to EU social policies (Crouch/Traxler 1995).

To summarise, the extensive literatures on EU employment policies, on industrial relations and on multilevel governance have still rarely been combined. In particular, the literature has not investigated how, in multilevel processes, supranational and national economic constraints interplay with the agency of transnational, national and regional actors, failing to explain whether this interplay reproduces some national characteristics, such as national compliance cultures, or not. A power-relation sensitive multilevel approach (Keune/Marginson 2013) indicates a way to integrate actors, and their power relations, with multilevel processes, bringing industrial relations and political economy considerations into the study of governance.

3 A case for studying the Active Inclusion Recommendation

The launch of AI policies since the high point of the financial crisis marked a step forward from the previous timid talk of 'inclusion' in the Lisbon strategy (Daly 2008) and a novel opportunity for labour. While relatively understudied and less debated than policies such as 'flexicurity' and 'structural labour market reforms', AI has been the unifying thread of EU social policies since the crisis and has inspired a number of hard and soft initiatives leading up to the EU social pillar of 2017. It's very 'soft' nature, and therefore the absence of a clear, concentrated source of authority, makes it a suitable test ground for the identification of multilevel processes and the study of coordination issues, at vertical and horizontal (among actors) levels, as also shown by Halvorsen and Hvinden (2016), though with a specific focus on anti-poverty.

The European Council adopted the Recommendation on 'Active Inclusion of people excluded from the labour market' (2008/867/EC) during the worst days of the global financial crisis. Overshadowed by the emerging economic and monetary crisis and related policy responses, it has received limited attention. Still, the Recommendation inaugurated a gradual attempt to reframe 'social Europe', with attention to segmentation, favouring 'recalibration' rather than mere 'retrenchment' of the welfare state (Häusermann 2010). It includes three policy areas:

adequate income support, inclusive labour markets, and access to quality employment services. Importantly for trade unions, the Recommendation called for

> the direct involvement of all relevant actors [...], social partners, NGOs and service providers at European, national, regional and local level in the development, implementation and evaluation of the strategy (par 2.d).

This call resulted in the above-mentioned 2010 bipartite European Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets, which led to a European social partners' Work Programme for 2012-14 and called for the participation of national-level member organisations (employer organisations and trade unions) in its implementation.

Under the Juncker Commission (2015-20), the use of the concept of AI became less prominent, in fact actively discouraged by the Commission (interview Social Policy Committee) as part of the move towards new concepts like 'social investment'. At the same time, the idea of employment as the most effective way to achieve social inclusion remains at the core of EU policy. Junker's main social initiative, the development of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), includes a strong AI dimension even without mentioning the concept as such, and the Annual Convention for Inclusive Growth 2016 included a specific workshop on 'active inclusion and inclusive labour market policies'. Hence, AI remained a core policy concept at the EU level, even if not always branded as such.

AI has not established itself however in the new 'Eurogovernance' that arose after the Euro crisis. In the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) it is hardly present. In the CSRs issued between 2011 and 2015 to the six member states studied here, budgetary discipline has precedence over any other considerations, with the partial exception of Sweden, which has never been subject to an Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP). In addition, the CSRs confirms the primacy of competitiveness in the Commission's thinking about employment and labour markets: the range of recommendations addresses barriers to competitiveness, including high labour costs, high wages relative to productivity, slow and cumbersome administrative and legal procedures, regulated sectors and professions, and, in some cases, poor physical infrastructure.

In line with what is found in the AI Recommendation, women, youth, persons on temporary contracts, and generic 'other vulnerable groups' are identified by the CSRs of that period as categories of people for whom employment will lead to social inclusion. The first type of remedy suggested is to limit labour costs: decentralising collective bargaining, aligning wages to productivity and limiting minimum wage growth. These are directed mainly at France, Italy, and Spain. The second group of recommendations is about increasing individuals' value on

the labour market by improving skills in general or aligning skills with business needs. All countries have received such recommendations at one point or another, except Sweden, which is described as already implementing such measures. The third group of measures addresses incentives and disincentives for work. Although limiting social transfers, somewhat surprisingly, does not feature prominently as a means to encourage labour market participation, other incentives (or disincentives) are mentioned: fiscal incentives for dual earners, provision of better and affordable childcare, and increasing the retirement age. Finally, there are recommendations calling for better public employment services. The social perspective is present in the CSRs to a lesser extent.

Poverty and social exclusion are mentioned in conjunction with high unemployment (Italy 2015, par. 19) and the problematisation of people and especially children living in jobless households (UK 2011, par. 9 and 2015, par. 10), implicitly assuming employment to be the solution. The Commission's own evaluation of the Recommendation did not pay much attention to either social dialogue or multilevel implementation (Frazer/Marlier 2013). This underlines the need to fill the gap through an analysis of how labour has engaged with, and assessed, AI policies, to which this paper now turns.

4 Methods

The paper is based on research conducted in 2015-16 at the EU level, in six countries and six regions. The six countries (UK, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Sweden) are chosen to allow maximum variation in terms of welfare models, 'cultures of compliance' (Falkner et al. 2008), as well as employment relations and collective bargaining articulation, as defined by the ICTWSS database (Visser 2016). The regions (Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, Lower Silesia, Catalonia, West Sweden, and Greater Manchester) were chosen as 'best cases' within the selected six countries, as economically sound and industrialised regions with relatively strong social dialogue traditions but not including capital cities. The six regional cases refer to different models of territorial organisation. Rhône-Alpes, Lombardy, Catalonia, and Lower Silesia show comparable features and are characterised by the presence of a relatively large urban centre, surrounded by a metropolitan area, in turn embedded into a broader regional context, which is the basic administrative unit for the application of regional policies. In the British case, the process of institutionalisation of a 'city region' as an autonomous level of government, namely Greater Manchester, has led to the creation of a 'combined authority' – that is, a statutory body with its powers and responsibilities. In the Swedish

case, the municipality is the main sub-national administrative unit, which is why we concentrated the analysis on the city of Gothenburg. The research focus was on two pillars of the AI Recommendation, adequate income support and inclusive labour markets, as the most likely to interest trade unions and involve social dialogue. The third pillar, employment services, is less interesting in this respect.
The methods combined document analysis for the relevant policy documents and a total of 137 semi-structured interviews. At the EU level, eleven interviews were conducted: four with the European social partners (one from BusinessEurope, two from the ETUC, one from ETUI), four with members of advisory committees to the Commission, two with experts on European social and employment policy (at the Observatoire Social Européen), and one Member of European Parliament. At the national level, 64 interviews were collected with social partners and government bodies in the six countries. At the regional level, 62 interviews were conducted with social partners, local government officials, and experts. In conducting the research at each of these levels, we aimed at gauging the influence of the AI Recommendation and the respective Framework Agreement on national and regional policymaking, in particular in the eyes of trade unions and in consideration of their involvement. The findings are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Unions and Active Inclusion relevance and results at different levels

Level						
Supranational	**European Union**					
Relevance	Important: Framework Agreement					
Social dialogue functions	Legitimation only: restoration of EU social partners' visibility, prelude to Juncker initiatives					
Results	Trumped by Eurozone governance; some continuation in Pillar of Social Rights					
Country ***IR/welfare model 'world of compliance'***	**UK** ***Liberal Domestic politics***	**France** ***Statist Neglect***	**Italy** ***Hybrid Dead letters***	**Spain** ***Hybrid Domestic politics***	**Poland** ***Liberal Dead letters***	**Sweden** ***Social democratic Obedience***
Relevance	None	Minor	Minor	Minor	Substantial	Minor
Social dialogue functions	None	Temporary: legitimation and instrumental	Declining: legitimation	Declining: legitimation	Temporary: instrumental	Continuous: instrumental
Results	National model reinforcement	National model prevails	Austerity, liberalisation	Austerity, liberalisation	ALMP promotion	National model reinforcement
Region	***Greater Manchester***	***Rhône-Alpes***	***Lombardy***	***Catalonia***	***Lower Silesia***	***West-Sweden Gothenburg***
Models of regional governance of AI-related policies	Hierarchical and centralised model	Hierarchical and centralised model	Cooperative model through Social Dialogue	Decentralised and disorganised model of governance	Hierarchical and centralised model	Cooperative model through Social Dialogue
Relevance	Minor (campaigning)	Strong	Strong	Minor	Strong	Strong
Social dialogue functions	None	Minor: legitimation	Instrumental and legitimation	Discontinuous: instrumental	Minor: legitimation	Instrumental
Results	PPP, 3rd sector involvement	Substantial, e.g. training	Substantial on implementation	3rd sector involvement	Trainingfunds, 3rd sector involvement	Priority setting and implementation

Source: own analysis

5 The EU Level

The impact of the Active Inclusion Recommendation was severely hampered by the depth of the economic and financial crisis, which reduced the focus on vulnerable groups to prioritise the maintenance of existing jobs and austerity policies. Still, AI did find its way into EU policymaking. For example, it is included in the Commission's *Guidance for beneficiaries of European Structural and Investment Funds and related EU instruments* (2014) document as a prime strategy for achieving the overarching objectives of employment and social inclusion under the ESF, which is in turn reflected in some national-level operational programmes either explicitly (e.g. Spain) or implicitly. By requiring the involvement of local-level actors, including the third sector, the ESF is used to draw more actors into the EU multilevel governance processes, opening up additional opportunities for trade unions.

The channel of European policy implementation that is most directly relevant for trade unions is social dialogue. European-level social partners have very little hierarchical power over their members, but multilevel governance can be observed in European industrial relations, based largely on soft governance methods (Keune/Marginson 2013). One way European social partners try to mobilise their members around key policy issues is through autonomous framework agreements on specific policy areas whose implementation relies largely on their national members. The effectiveness of an Autonomous Framework Agreement as a policy instrument is thus largely dependent on national social partners' willingness and ability.

The Autonomous Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets was signed in March 2010 by the ETUC, BusinessEurope, UEAPME and CEEP after ten months of intense negotiations. It was their response to the respective EU Recommendation. In the Agreement, the social partners outline their commitment and joint approach to an inclusive labour market and propose solutions including better recruitment strategies, better labour market information, a better match between education and training and labour market needs, and cooperation with the 'third sector'. As for actions expected of national members, the Agreement does not contain specific commitments but rather aims to raise awareness and provide the national social partners with a framework within which they can develop their actions. The vagueness of the Agreement results, on the one hand, from the fact that it wants to respect national differences, both in problems faced and national traditions of industrial relations. However, the underlying reason appears to be that the two sides simply disagree on many questions related to AI. From interviews with persons involved in drafting the Agreement, it further

emerged that for both European employer organisations and unions, one of the motives behind the Agreement was merely to demonstrate to the European institutions their ability to reach consensus and conclude such agreements. In other words, the Agreement serves to legitimise their existence and position within the EU political scenery as active and effective European social partners. From this perspective, the content and outcomes of the Agreement can be considered secondary.

In 2014 the European social partners published a joint evaluation report on the implementation of the Framework Agreement based on national members' self-reporting. The overall evaluation was positively framed, although national members had reported mostly on policies related to AI implemented by their governments. The extent to which governments' actions had been the result of the Framework Agreement is, however, not demonstrated and therefore questionable. Our research conducted at the national and regional levels confirmed a somewhat limited knowledge of the Framework Agreement among social partners themselves. Indeed, the promotion of the agreement has been weak, and implementation largely relied on the voluntary implementation by national and local/regional social partners.

6 The national level

AI, as presented in the 2008 Recommendation, has rarely known a literal transposition within the member states under scrutiny. In fact, the Recommendation was sometimes unknown to our interviewees. However, the extent to which this is the case differs between the six countries. In Spain and Italy, the AI discourse developed in a fragmented and patchy way. Active inclusion as a strategy is mentioned in the respective National Reform Programmes. However, in both cases a gap between rhetoric and actual policy, as well as a prevalence of activation over inclusion, is what emerged as most prominent from our interviews.

In Spain, where unemployment reached very high levels, income support conditionality is reported by unions, as well as by NGOs, as clashing with the logic of social protection. The enhanced emphasis on conditionality found in labour reforms coincided with labour market flexibilisation and collective bargaining decentralisation, all devised under the pressure of the Troika's austerity policies. All these policies were implemented unilaterally without union involvement in contrast with the, however unstable, social concertation practice of the previous two decades and came to be radically opposed by the trade unions. What emerged from the interviews is that this weakening of social dialogue

indirectly contributed to the emerging of new social actors. Reactions from civil society to the effects of austerity were strong in Spain, coming from social movements and a renewed prominence of the third sector organisations (e.g. Red Cross), whose role in labour market inclusion was institutionalised in 2015 by the Social Third Sector Act (Law 43/2015). In Italy, the crisis led to a much smaller increase in unemployment, but in a context of a much lower activity rate, especially for women. The labour reforms of 2012 and 2015, reducing employment protection, did little to promote AI, despite some financial incentives to recruitment and timid experimental income support schemes (ASpI and NASpI benefits). Also, they were introduced unilaterally and under influence of the Troika's austerity pressures.

Trade unions reacted to their marginalisation by allying with civil society and Catholic organisations in initiatives to tackle poverty. On the other hand, in France, Sweden, and the UK the AI narrative developed in an independent, national fashion, reflecting particular features of their social and employment relations models. In all three countries, country-specific concepts predating the EU Recommendation are preferred to AI to define similar policies. In France, the concepts of *insertion* (integration) and *accompagnement* (support) date back to the 1970s and have since remained central references, alongside a conception of the fight against unemployment as a political and social imperative. A number of tripartite agreements on the labour market were signed between 2008 and 2015, in an apparent renaissance of social dialogue, especially in the early years of the Hollande presidency. Since 2007, French social dialogue has undergone a process of institutionalisation, starting from the Law 130/2007 on the Modernisation of Social Dialogue. When an agreement is reached, the government commits to considering what is agreed by social partners. Several national inter-professional agreements about ALMPs followed in the direction of a negotiated employment regime (Freyssinet 2010).

Social partners are, therefore, directly involved in institutionalised national bodies and committees that the government regularly convenes and consults. However, as a union representative confirms, the outcome is not necessarily always concerted policy. The 2016 El Kohmri reform was highly contested, and the subsequent Macron presidency started with a limited and conditional approach to social dialogue on employment, which soon shifted to open confrontation. The French social partners interviewed recognise their role in implementing ALMPs, which are directly "dictated by European logics" (union official). However, such a role is played out according to national policy priorities and orientations and translated "not into a single AI agreement, but into several agreements negotiated on unemployment, education and poverty" (union official). The result is a

mixed record of negotiated and non-negotiated policies, where the expressive, legitimation role for social partners since 2008 has at least secured a clear public policy concern with labour market outsiders (Caune/Theodoropoulou 2018).

In Sweden, the traditional Rehn-Meidner model rests on full employment – together with low inflation and high growth – and "every person has an obligation to work" (union official). The idea of social exclusion in Sweden is, in fact, strictly intertwined with detachment from the labour market. Trade unions continue to assume their role and responsibility on both the elaboration and the implementation of employment policies, but without reference to European Union initiatives towards which they maintain a strong scepticism and, in the case of binding regulations, opposition.

In Sweden, social partners are formally consulted in the design and implementation of ALMPs. Various initiatives originate in bipartite agreements between trade unions and employers' associations, like in the case of short-time working and temporary layoff schemes. Initiatives like the 'Fast-track' for migrant workers and the 'vocational induction' scheme were launched thanks to the cooperation of the State, trade unions and employer organisations. Trade unions are also involved in the management of unemployment insurance funds (Ghent system). Social dialogue on ALMPs received a stimulus from the EU Recommendation and the Framework Agreement, constructively regarded by Swedish social partners as an additional platform for meetings and proposals. However, most EU-promoted policies had already been adopted by Sweden: "it was a very good initiative from the Commission [...] but our measures, either taken by the government or by the social partners, have been often more far-reaching than the EU policies" (union official).

Activation is a key principle driving British labour market policies. However, we found virtually no reference to the Recommendation or the Framework Agreement in documents and interviews. Activation initiatives have been issued at the national level under the labels of 'make work pay' and 'workfare' and are promoted as ways to reduce 'benefit dependency'. Inclusion is less apparent in UK policies. In the UK, with very few exceptions, such as the Low Pay Commission, social partners are not included in policymaking. The design of labour market strategies, and precisely activation policies, represents an exclusive competence of the central government, which decides the degree of consultation with stakeholders and social partners. Social partners do not constitute veto points (Wright 2011) and have played only a marginal role in recent employment policy, limited to formal but rarely meaningful consultations on government's proposals and rare occasions of informal consultation. Trade unions openly express frustration and discontent:

> we don't have the preferential voice that you would expect for social partners in other countries, even though we're a lot weaker than we used to be, we still have 5.5m members (Union official).

By contrast, employers would be reluctant to engage in dialogue: "we do not believe in a language of social partnership in that sort of way" (employers' organisation official).

As a new member state, Poland paid great political attention to all EU discourses, especially during the membership negotiations when it had to demonstrate the full implementation of the *acquis communautaire*. AI, like all EU policies, has been zealously popularised in Poland. Until 2015, government and social partners keenly referred to EU documents, and AI was an example. For instance, the documents of the last congress of Solidarity refer extensively to the Europe 2020 targets. In our interview, a Solidarity official stresses how AI is better than "mere activation" as it involves attention to poverty and the risk of low-paid and precarious work. Its implementation however suffers from limited public investment. Moreover, other recent social policies, such as a lower retirement age and generous child benefits, have gone in the opposite direction to AI by lowering activity rates for older workers and women.

Social dialogue in Poland has been politicised and fragmented since 1989. A bilateral anti-crisis agreement was signed in 2009 but was only selectively implemented by the liberal government, leading (combined with unilateral pension reforms) to union protest and, in 2013, the collapse of the tripartite commission, first established in 1994. In 2015, however, social dialogue saw a government-led revival with the creation of the Social Dialogue Council and the support of the conservative government elected in 2015 in which two labour vice-ministers are former Solidarity officials. Both unions and the leading employers' association confirm the revival of social dialogue, although they complain about the government tendency to bypass social dialogue by having bills presented by individual MPs rather than the government, as only government initiatives are subject to consultation in the Social Dialogue Council.

The Polish social partners, uniquely in the EU, spent two years negotiating the implementation of the 2010 framework agreement on inclusive labour markets. Although the negotiations eventually ended without agreement and the social partners now share their western counterparts' opinion of the framework agreement as too vague to be of any real use, social dialogue did produce some results, notably the National Training Fund in 2015. A first observation that follows the overview of the national cases is that the Recommendation has had modest effects on national debates and policies, except, partly, for Poland. National paradigms continue to prevail in three of the countries analysed. Even with

changes of government and their political orientation, the respective welfare models remain robust in France, the UK, and Sweden. More 'peripheral' countries in the EU, on the other hand, have seen their discretion somehow limited either by financial constraints (Spain and Italy) or by EU conditionality (Poland). Similarly, social partners' involvement follows national frameworks of participation in social dialogue on employment topics and has suffered the most in countries whose competitiveness was more closely scrutinised after the 2008 crisis.

7 The regional level

The analysis conducted at the regional level revealed the significance of this regulation level for the development and implementation of AI measures. Furthermore, it showed other forms of involvement by social partners in policymaking. Especially in hard economic times, with pressing constraints on public social expenditure, the European Structural Funds incentivised a 'sub-national activism' with the effect of enhancing the autonomy of regional and local governments, although to different extents. These adopted different strategies to mobilise trade unions, employers, and third-sector organisations and promote AI measures, income support programmes, and the delivery of labour demand-supply matching services. The forms of interaction between these actors have shaped the local implementation of AI.

The decentralisation and subsidiarisation of competences in the field of AI – which have taken place since the 1990s in many EU countries, together with the devolution of public employment services to municipalities (Kazepov 2011; OECD 2003) – multiplied the local actors involved in its management. Among them are not only private providers but also third-sector organisations. The latter, in some contexts, play a fundamental role in promoting AI, with the effect of sometimes marginalising trade unions. At the same time, ample room for manoeuvre allowed local governments to design their own activation and inclusion policies. Even in those contexts where labour policies are centralised and the state maintains a substantial role in steering policies, such as France and Sweden, the local level plays a crucial role in renegotiating and reshaping the contents and targeting of national measures.

This means that the translation of EU or national AI policies into regional and local policies further reflects specific features of the regional social model, historical legacies, and the choices of regional actors involved in the governance of AI. The interplay between the institutional context and the agency of political and social actors shapes a process of local interpretation of EU and national policies

and guidelines (Scalise 2021). Sub-national activism is often independent of the European AI strategy and, in some cases, such as Catalonia, also from the national regulatory framework.

This implicates significant differences between regions and municipalities within the same country. In this context, a variety of AI governance modes can be recognised in the six cases investigated, in which social partners play different roles and trade unions have different opportunities. We identified three models. First, a cooperative model characterises the Gothenburg and Lombardy cases. Here, social partners play a key role as economic institutions taking part in industrial relations, with a high degree of autonomy by means of self-regulation through social dialogue. In the Gothenburg case, the local government is engaged in network building with the social partners and the representatives of the business community. Trade unions thus contribute to setting policy priorities, together with the employers, public employment services, and local public authorities. This model of governance is not a reproduction of the national system of concertation. The degree of inclusion of organised interests in urban governance reflects the local institutional context and benefits from the high autonomy of local governments, which allows municipal public employment services to operate independently of the national system: "Gothenburg's style means that decisions in the city are made in agreement with social partners [...] who cooperate in creating a consensual dominant coalition" (Gothenburg city official). Such a high degree of local autonomy allows the local actors to develop their own practices of cooperative dialogue with the unions, which affect the implementation of the AI strategy.

> The responsibility that unions have [...] make us central actors in the political debate related to labour market policies [...] and in defending the encompassing income security and universalistic model of activation (Union official).

In the Lombardy case, too, social partners are involved in the governance of AI. In this context, trade unions have played a critical role. As an interviewed trade unionist pointed out,

> at an early stage, active policies were promoted by trade unions [...] paradoxically, employers were only interested in the *Cassa Integrazione Guadagni* (wage guarantee schemes for temporary suspensions of work or reductions in working time) (Union official).

As another interviewee clarified,

> in 2013, the regional government of Lombardy started a concertation process with the social partners [...] Lombardy has a commission, the Regional Commission for Labour Policies and Vocational Training, [...] with a broad representation, including employers, trade unions,

> INPS, and social actors. [...] There, we jointly decided to start our policy programme, *Dote Unica Lavoro* (Union official).

> It was not simply an advisory body, but a body that supported choices (Regional government officer).

Beyond social dialogue, various forms of cooperation between public authorities and social partners can be found, e.g. in the Labour Market Councils and the Coordination Union in Gothenburg, and in the Fondazione Welfare Ambrosiano (FWA), a not-for-profit organisation owned by local authorities and trade unions which provides social financing, in Lombardy. In addition, other initiatives can be found that were promoted by or involved trade unions. The anti-crisis packages adopted by the Municipality of Milan, for instance, were negotiated by the Department of Labour and Welfare with the unions (Milan city councillor).

Second, a centralised and hierarchical model characterises Rhône-Alpes, Lower Silesia, and Greater Manchester. In the French case, indeed, policymaking is centralised, with few competences that are transferred to local authorities. Vertical coordination is realised through mechanisms of coordination between central and regional governments, i.e. the *Contrats de Plan État-Régions*. In the Polish case, policymaking has a markedly hierarchical character, and resource allocation is a top-down process. In the British case, then, the state has devolved powers and resources to city regions – see the *Greater Manchester Devolution Agreement* – but policymaking is still centralised, and funding relies on mechanisms of control (rather than coordination), e.g. *Growth Deals* and *City Deals*. In the first two cases, Rhône-Alpes and Lower Silesia, the role of social partners is limited by narrow intervention margins. In these contexts, trade unions' involvement in policymaking occurs in a formal and ritualistic manner through institutional bodies and social dialogue committees. In Rhône-Alpes, the '*dirigisme* style' of regulation is reproduced at the local level. An asymmetrical relationship persists, with the power of decision-making being in the hand of public actors.

In Lower Silesia, the relaunch of regional social dialogue in recent years – with the reform of Regional and District Labour Market Councils as advisory bodies, and the creation of Regional Social Dialogue Councils as mediating bodies – is not likely to produce substantial effects. On the contrary, it still seems to be a practical tool for legitimising what appears as a neoliberal version of labour policies. Indeed, Labour Market Councils are the principal means for trade unions to influence labour policies, but their opinions are not binding: "it is not social *dialogue*, but social *consultation*" (University of Wrocław researcher and autonomous trade unionist).

Quite differently, in the UK, social partners are not involved in policymaking nor in forms of dialogue with local authorities. As for trade unions, their core business is conflict, and their focus is on the company level. As an interviewee noticed, British unions influence policies through the Labour Party, although in the context of a centralised system of policymaking: "they are lobbying all the time", he said, "but their influence capacity has diminished" (University of Manchester professor). Manchester, in many respects, represents an exception. The City Council holds regular meetings with a Trade Union Forum to discuss budget issues, although in the context of broader public consultations.

Trade unions also tried to influence policymaking from the outside by campaigning against public sector cuts and supporting the call for a referendum on devolution. In these cases, too, public authorities and social partners give rise to voluntarist and pragmatic practices of cooperation, which reflect an unexpected vitality of industrial relations at the sub-national level. In Rhône-Alpes, important forms of cooperation can be found in the fields of training and *alternance école-entreprise*. In Lower Silesia, a Partnership Agreement between the Regional Labour Office and trade unions was signed in 2014 for the use of training funds. In Greater Manchester, instead, private actors are included in the set-up of AI programmes at the regional level, where the spreading of contracting out triggered partnerships between public and private actors and the rise of *quangos* (*quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations*), covering social partners' prerogatives (Burroni 2014).

Third, Catalonia has a decentralised and disorganised model of governance. The low vertical coordination between the national and regional levels is due to a process of 'disorganised decentralisation': the state and autonomous communities are in competition, both in fields of passive policies (e.g. minimum income schemes) and active policies (e.g. public employment services). This arrangement means that labour market programmes are fragmented and often overlapping, generating confusion among recipients and showing a low capacity to combat exclusion. In this case, the local government decided to reduce the room for traditional tripartite negotiation, diminishing the participation of social partners in policymaking while opening the political space to other actors from civil society and the private sector:

> Barcelona has an extensive network of third-sector associations that perform basic tasks to promote social inclusion. They participate in public consultation processes and manage most of the social and labour integration projects directed at the unemployed and the poor [...] collaborating with the unions (Social Services official, Barcelona).

Furthermore, in the context of austerity, the room for manoeuvre for redistribution was subordinate to the macroeconomic objective of deficit reduction. This was a constraint for trade unions' claims, which lost much of their legitimacy and membership during the crisis. For these reasons, social partners have become marginal actors, with little capacity to intervene on the political agenda and a minor role in implementing the AI strategy in the region.

The case studies also show that, in the regional political space, different actors contribute to developing AI policies in terms of pragmatic support, e.g. third-sector and Catholic organisations in Catalonia, Lombardy, and Lower Silesia – and political legitimacy, e.g. local partnerships in Rhône-Alpes. In Catalonia, actors such as Caritas and Cruz Roja (the Red Cross) play an active role in social policy. In Barcelona, an extensive network of organisations – whose activity was essential during the crisis – is involved in public consultations and the management of projects aimed at the occupational and social integration of the most vulnerable people. In Lombardy, Caritas Ambrosiana plays a subsidiary role, addressing extreme poverty and marginality. In Lower Silesia, third-sector organisations play a growing role in delivering services, so that they have become the main applicants for the European Social Fund and, for this purpose, often give rise to formal partnerships with the municipalities.

In Rhône-Alpes, in contrast, we observed the institutionalisation of interest groups as fundamental elements of local governance, which include social partner representatives among their members but with a weak, merely formal role of advisors (e.g. the *Agence Rhône-Alpes pour la valorisation de l'innovation sociale et l'amélioration des conditions de travail,* ARAVIS) or developers of services (e.g. the *Pôle Rhône-Alpes de l'orientation*, PRAO), without a real capacity to influence political decisions.

In this regard, two cases stand apart: those of Gothenburg and Greater Manchester, for opposite reasons. In Gothenburg, cooperation is prominent with social partners, while it is less significant with other actors. The municipality has some forms of cooperation and coordination with the voluntary sector – especially in fields like homelessness, disability, the elderly, and youth – but they are rarely institutionalised. As for Greater Manchester, agencies and (public-private) partnerships are crucial elements of local governance, which support the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in policymaking. Finally, other actors, primarily social businesses and charities, play the role of delivering services as concessionaires within regional programmes, e.g. *Working Well* and *Complex Dependency* – jointly designed and funded by the GMCA and the Department of Welfare Policies.

These results show that the regional AI governance models, which emerged from the case studies, reflect the national models, except for Lombardy. That said, focusing on the sub-national levels of regulation, we found more complex 'ecosystems' of actors who form alliances with variable geometries and give rise to a wide range of cooperative practices, primarily aimed at delivering services. This also reflects the complexity of labour policies when explicitly linked to poverty and social exclusion. The presence of third-sector, Catholic, and charity organisations, indeed, is prominent in the everyday implementation of AI measures. From this point of view, the regional and local levels of regulation play a key role in translating the principles of AI into practice, with the outcomes of this process being variable, depending on the specific configuration of the political space. In some cases, such as Gothenburg and Lombardy, they anticipated the debate developed at the higher levels and proactively contributed to building the discourse on AI from the bottom up. As an Italian interviewee explained,

> the people at the local level do it not because European social partners have asked them to, but, probably, because they have a sensitivity and a culture of policymaking that is consistent with those principles (Milan city councillor).

Then again, the case of Catalonia acts as an inhibiting warning about the problematic implementation of EU and national policies.

8 Conclusion

The analysis indicates that AI shares the same kind of ambiguities for trade unions as European social policies in general, similar to flexicurity for instance, although this is at a different scale given its lower relevance. Just as in flexicurity, where flexibility was more prominent than security, in AI, in unions' views, activation prevails over inclusion, especially at the European and national level. The paper's multilevel governance approach combined with the consideration of power relations (Keune/Marginson 2013), provides some explanations both of this general finding and of its variation by country and level, which, as Table 1 indicates, does not fit the main theories of EU law compliance and of IR systems.

The multilevel governance of the EU, including the interaction between 'soft' employment policies and evolving 'hard' Eurogovernance tools, and with poor horizontal and vertical coordination, resulted in the multiple distortions of the principle and, over time, to disappointment within trade unions despite their initial interest. In multi-layered European governance, vertical processes entail that local, national, and supranational actors interact and discuss, share

guidelines and objectives. This interaction leads to changing meanings, especially when the role of vertical coordination is low: thus, in the national and local contexts, a process of interpretation of active inclusion takes place, which results from the interplay between structure and agency (Scalise 2021).

In terms of variation, unions' engagement varies by level, country and region. Yet, this does not automatically reflect IR traditions or 'worlds of compliance' (Falkner et al. 2008). Rather, what matters is unions' perception of AI as an opportunity, which was strongest, at the time, at the EU level, in France and Poland, and in some regions. By contrast, structural constraints resulted in the most unsatisfactory outcomes in Italy (but not in Lombardy) and Spain, while neglect prevailed in the UK and Sweden. Over time, also at the EU level, in France and in Poland, the unions' initial expectations were mostly disappointed. If 'active inclusion' was received better by the labour side than flexicurity had been, it similarly resulted in both threats and opportunities for trade unions, leading to modest achievements and a gradual fading of the idea.

What does vary considerably across case studies is the weight of economic constraints and agency exerted by competing actors. Domestic policies do act as major interpretative filters to top-down coordination, but not in a uniform way as suggested by the cultures of compliance literature. In fact, precisely in countries with poor state obedience to EU initiatives and with traditional marginalisation of unions from policymaking, such as France and Poland, unions can try to use EU initiatives to break out of their weak position, whereas in cases of perceived decline (Sweden, Italy, Spain) unions prefer to neglect or oppose EU initiatives seen as threats.

It is at the regional level where the research has displayed the most activism by unions and other actors, in ways that do not mechanically reproduce national models. Local-level tripartite and bipartite bodies are quite regularly informed of, and sometimes directly involved in, EU initiatives and provide pragmatic arenas for policy innovation where trade unions can find allies and space for input at a time where such space is restricted at the EU and national levels. These arenas are institutionalised to different degrees, but trade union inputs are visible not only in the more highly institutionalised arenas such as Gothenburg but also in the more voluntaristic ones such as Lombardy and to some extent Lower Silesia. While member states have decentralised employment policies to different degrees, in all of them there is a growing regional political space, with lower barriers to participation from different actors such as charities. While this may appear to 'water down' social partners' roles, it also creates opportunities for policy coalitions.

Such activism does not correspond to functional multilevel logics, as the link to EU rules remains loose and not always well informed. The thread that should connect the various levels is not very tight, allowing inconsistency between different levels within the same countries, especially when less institutionalised, as in the Italian case. Activism comes rather from a combination of parallel top-down and bottom-up processes at a level where issues of active inclusion are pragmatically perceived in their immediate material urgency rather than as policy or ideological paradigms. Resource mobilisation for both activation and inclusion makes actors attentive to resources, both material and discursive, from the EU. The opportunities for unions are tangible in the fact that the 'inclusion' side is paid more attention in the regions than at the EU and national levels.

Overall, the architecture of European governance frustrates unions' aspirations, given the 'soft' nature of European social regulations in concomitance with 'harder' economic governance rules. The multilevel system in itself tends to favour 'hard' and 'market' policies over the softer social ones that require more complicated translation when they move from one level to another. EU policies that appear as delicately balanced and 'composite' at EU level, may appear much more unbalanced at the national level, where therefore social dialogue appears very fragile, uneven and conditional on domestic policies. Dissatisfaction with the outcomes of these processes increases tensions and delegitimisation, as is visible in many of our cases, from the UK to Poland and the countries in Southern Europe. However, we find that this is much less the case at the regional level, even if still in experimental ways (Murray et al. 2020).

Our research, while limited to one policy and selected cases at a time of turbulence, has implications for the engagement of trade unions with the idea of a European Social Model and with Eurogovernance. First of all, trade unions should maintain a healthily sceptical view about ever-new EU catchphrases that accompany new policy initiatives to avoid the misplaced hopes that occurred in the case of active inclusion at the EU level and in countries like Poland. In particular, attention should be paid to the governance limitations of EU social initiatives. At the same time, though, if trade unions do want to engage with EU initiatives, then new efforts should be directed to the regional rather than EU and national levels: this is where unions' inputs meet less resistance and can find more allies, and where building transnational networks of regional organisations could increase capabilities and political leverage through the sharing of 'best practices'. So far, trade union research on the European Union has neglected the regional level, with rare exceptions such as research on Regional Trade Union Councils in border regions (Hammer 2010). Transnational networks of trade union regional organisations could have many more positive results in terms of

employment policy, given how Europeanisation and regional decentralisation have been going hand in hand (Burroni 2014; Santiago López/Tatham 2018). After 25 years of prevailing disappointment with the EU policy level, trade unions can gain from a more articulated action that 'actively includes' the regional level.

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Acknowledgments

The research was funded by a grant (DGVS/2014/0546) from the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission (AIR-MULP project - any more details?) and benefited from important contributions

from Antonio Martin, Oscar Molina and Alejandro Godino of Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona.

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