

ECONOMIC POLICIES PROMOTING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

A strong social Europe requires strong social partnerships. In Western Europe, social partnerships, along with their institutions and processes, have promoted successful economic reforms. Social dialogue, collective bargaining are principal factors for promoting innovation, productivity and competition. Social dialogue is a core ingredient of the social market economy and a driving force for successful economic reforms. Strong collective bargaining systems also strengthen the resilience of Member States during economic crises. Over recent years, social dialogue has become more important within the framework of the European Semester. This has led to several country-specific recommendations emphasizing the involvement of national social partners in shaping economic policies. However, the degree and quality of social partners involvement in economic policy-making vary significantly among Member States. These variations are attributed to different institutional frameworks, procedures and practices.

The article aims to analyze the role of social partnerships in economic policy -making at both EU and national levels, focusing on case studies of the German and Swedish models.

Keywords: Corporatism; Interest Groups; Labour Market; Neo-corporatism; Social partnership; Trade Unions.

JEL Classification: E60, E61, E65, E69, F16, J50, J51, J52

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the role of social partnership in economic policy-making as an alternative to corporatism. Empirical evidence from various countries suggests that, in many respects, the countries in which social partners have a strong involvement in the policy-making process and are able to develop innovative solutions to address economic and social challenges – tend to excel in building economic and technological capacities, as well as achieving high levels of employment and quality of life for their citizens.

Social partners can raise awareness of the consequences of economic change on social systems and labour markets. They play a key role in creating conditions conducive to job creation, particularly by facilitating economic recovery and promoting labour market and social inclusion (European commission, 2023).

(Falkner, 1998) remarks that existing forms of social partnership in member states have undergone Europeanization with sectoral and multilateral dialogue processes becoming institutionalized, leading to the “legalization of negotiations”.

Greer and Ficher (2004) argue that social partnership arrangements are most effective in advancing union revitalization when they meet the following three criteria: they need to be institutionally embedded, integrated into a proactive union strategy, and aimed at broader societal objectives rather than focusing on narrow union-specific issues alone.

The term ‘social partners’ is commonly used in Europe to refer to representatives of management and labour, including employer organizations and trade unions, and in some contexts, public authorities engaged in social dialogue. The term ‘European social partners’ specifically refers to those organizations at the EU level which are engaged in European social dialogue, as outlined in Articles 154 and 155 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Social partners play a key role in governing employment relationships and are central actors in industrial relations systems (Eurofound, 2019).

Engaging social partners in the development and implementation of policies affecting directly or indirectly employment and labour markets throughout the various phases of the European Semester is essential with the view of taking into account their position. Social partner consultations should be timely and meaningful, enabling thorough analysis and proposals while integrating seamlessly into decision making processes.

The macro-economic dialogue serves as an appropriate platform to involve European and relevant national social partners in addressing macro-economic excessive imbalances (BusinessEurope, 2013).

The EU actively promotes the role of social partners and emphasizes the importance of fostering-effective social dialogue. Promoting social dialogue is a common objective of the EU and its Member States, taking into account the diversity of national systems and respecting the autonomy of social partners.

In the 2023 Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, the European Commission underscores the significance of an inclusive process and the timely involvement of social partners in economic and employment policy coordination and implementation at both European and national level (European commission, 2023).

II. SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP AT THE EU LEVEL

There are three distinct forms of European-level actions carried out by social partners: tripartite concentration, consultation and social dialogue (Bir, J.2019).

The main platforms for tripartite concentration include the Tripartite Social Summit (when the social partners have the opportunity to meet directly with the Presidents of the European Council and of the European Commission), the macroeconomic dialogue and the European employment strategy (European council, 2024).

The Tripartite Social Summit serves as a forum for high-level dialogue between the EU institutions and the European social partners at the executive level. The summit is co-chaired by the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission.

The European-level social partners participating in this dialogue are:

- BusinessEurope
- The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
- SGI Europe (association of enterprises providing services of general interest)
- SMEunited (association of crafts and SMEs in Europe)
- Eurocadres

At the latest Tripartite Social Summit held in Brussels on March 20, 2024, EU leaders and social partners focused on the theme: *'An economically and socially strong Europe to play its role in the world'*.

„We are at a moment of transition. The EU project is based on two pillars: security and competitiveness. We are now building a new paradigm to tackle our double transformation – climate and digital. We need to deepen the internal market in energy, services and capital. We must also address labour and skills shortages that hinder our businesses and the competitiveness of our single market, while recognizing the fundamental role of SMEs. Our social partners play a crucial role in helping us achieve these objectives.” (Charles Michel, President of the European Council).

The Tripartite Social Summit (TSS): With its high-level composition and close connection to the European Council's decision-making process, the TSS serves as the main political forum for consulting social partners. Held prior to the European Council's March and October meetings, the TSS provides a vital opportunity to discuss the economic and social policies before they are deliberated by Heads of State and Government (European council, 2024).

Key Forums for European Social Dialogue:

- Macroeconomic Dialogue (MED): This high level forum (ministerial level) involves the Council, Commission, European Central Bank and social partners to exchange views. Established by the Cologne European Council in June 1999, its objective is to contribute to the growth and stability in the EU's macroeconomic framework.
- Social Dialogue Committee (cross-industry) (SDC): The SDC is the main forum for the EU bipartite social dialogue at the cross-industry level.
- Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees (SSDCs): SSDCs provide a forum for discussing and consulting on employment and social policy proposals within specific sectors.
- Liaison Forum: This forum enables information exchange between all EU social partner organizations and the Commission.
- Advisory committees
- Seminars and joint projects by the social partners (European Council, 2016).

Consultation under Article 154 is restricted to representative organizations of the social partners. These consultations of EU social partners can lead to negotiations and potentially agreements, which can become EU legislation (Bir, J.2019).

European social dialogue refers to the bipartite interactions between social partners which may stem from the official consultations organized by the Commission under Articles 153 and 154 TFEU. Bipartite social dialogue occurs at inter-sectoral level between the European Trade Union Confederation and employers' (Bir, J.2019). The issues discussed can affect either industry as whole or specific sectors of the economy (European Council, 2016).

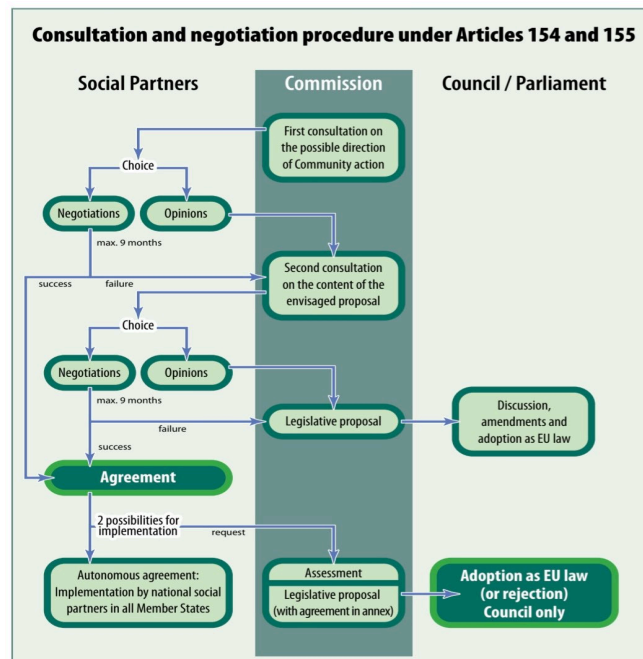


Figure 1. Consultation and negotiation procedure under Articles 154 and 155

Source: https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/ardb/evt/1_avrupa_birligi/1_9_politikalar/1_9_7_sosyal_politika/consulting_european_social_partners.pdf

In January, European social partners reached a significant milestone with the adoption of the joint ‘Declaration on a new start for a strong Social Dialogue’. This declaration outlines recommendations to enhance social dialogue in four areas: capacity building, EU policy-making, the European economic governance process (European Semester) and the Better Regulation Agenda (European Commission, 2023).

The initiative was introduced at a high-level conference in March 2015, where social partners and the Commission agreed on a need for:

- Closer involvement of social partners in the European Semester,
- Strengthening the capacity-building efforts for national social partners,
- Expanding the role of social partners in EU policy and law-making,
- Establishing a clearer relation between social partners’ agreements and the Better Regulation Agenda (European commission, 2016).

According to Molina and Rhodes (2002), collective bargaining is a mechanism for facilitating the effective implementation of government policies, but it does not grant social partners policy-making authority. Consultation simply provides social partners with access to information, whereas integration gives them real influence over policy design.

III.SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL: THE GERMAN AND SWEDISH MODELS

As a union of states the EU allows interest groups to exert influence through national governments. Therefore, the European Commission relies on national governments’ legislation and collaboration with partner interest groups in order to monitor member states’ policies and regulations. This approach ensures compliance with EU requirements (Hague and Harrop, 2010).

The German model

Germany stands out as the largest European country with the strongest tradition of social partnership.

(Fichter and Greer, 2015) describe social partnership in Germany as both part of and an extension of collective bargaining; it has been institutionalized at the national level – distinct from the Anglo-Saxon approach it operates across various dimensions of employment regulation and labour relations. This includes tripartite policy-making in the apprenticeship system, bipartite sectoral bargaining between unions and employers’ associations, or company-level codetermination involving works councils, union representatives and management. Social partnership thus encompasses both political and economic dimensions.

Bargaining among social partners continues to influence policy direction, incorporating neoliberal elements

deemed necessary by policymakers. At the same time, it defends and modernizes critical aspects of the welfare state and social market economy (Iankova and Turner 2004).

Despite the changes over the last decade, the German model proved instrumental in enabling the economy to weather the great recession of 2009 with relative stability. Faced with falling GDP, firms, unions and the government relied on established policy instruments inherent in the 'old' German model to combat the crisis (Hassel and Schelkle, 2012).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Whittall, Trinczek et al. (2020) argue that the German economy faced recession risks. In response, the government and social partners swiftly implemented short-term measures to provide financial security for employees and stabilize companies. On March 13, 2020 the DGB (German Trade Union Confederation) General Secretary Reiner Hoffmann and the BDA (Confederation of German Employers' Associations) president, Ingo Kramer issued a joint press statement affirming their commitment to collaborative efforts. Referring to the blueprint developed during the 2008 and 2009 financial crisis, the DGB and BDA noted, *"Although conflict and opposing interests remain, in special situations these are pushed into the background."*

The success of the German social partnership model is widely attributed to a foundational consensus on shared interests between employers and employees, centered on robust economic development and an export-driven economy. Both employer organizations and trade unions possess strong institutional capacities, supported by dedicated research centres and a solid understanding of economic trends (European Commission 2016).

As with the unification of Germany and more recently the financial crisis, the corona virus pandemic, has highlighted the corporatist strength of German industrial relations. In such times, the social partners come to the country's rescue.

Although tripartite governance is not formally institutionalized in Germany, consultation with social partners on social and labour market issues is a common practice. The Bismarckian social welfare state model implies that both workers and employers have representation on the boards of social security system institutions, including pension funds, the Federal Employment Agency, and the health insurance system. As a result, consultation of peak-level trade union and employer organizations by government on social policy issues is a typical feature of German neo-corporatism. The social partners are asked to comment on draft legislation in writing and to give statements in parliament. For example, since 2017 they have been consulted on the act for promoting occupational pensions, the Flexi Pension Scheme and the Wage Transparency Act. The consultation process is regarded as valuable but not timely in all cases, according to the social partners and the trade unions in particular. Apart from formal and informal meetings with the federal ministries, discussions with members of parliament and political party representatives are also commonplace (Eurofound 2019).

In line with Article 19(3), point (b), and Annex V, criterion 2.2 of Regulation (EU) 2021/241, the German recovery and resilience plan includes an extensive set of mutually reinforcing reforms and investments to be completed by 2026. Within this tight timeframe, proceeding swiftly with the effective implementation of the plan is essential to enhancing Germany's long-term competitiveness through the green and digital transition, while ensuring social fairness. The rapid integration of a REPowerEU chapter into the recovery and resilience plan will enable additional reforms and investments that align with Germany's and EU strategic goals in the field of energy and the green transition. The systematic involvement of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society and other relevant stakeholders remains vital to fostering widespread ownership for the successful implementation of the recovery and resilience plan (European Commission, 2024).

The Swedish Model

Sweden is a relatively small, but highly open economy which is strongly connected to international markets. The company structure consists of many small enterprises with fewer than ten employees (88.1 percent), some medium-sized companies with 10-249 employees (11.3 percent) and a small proportion of large enterprises with 250 and more employees (0.6 percent) (OECD, 2018) (www.etuc.org).

The Swedish welfare state remained surprisingly stable during the great financial crisis (Schnyder, 2012). This success is attributed to the country's well-developed system of social dialogue and to the active involvement of social partners in policy-making. Social dialogue in Sweden is both institutionalized and well developed (Anxo, 2017).

According to Pestoff, (2002) after more than a decade of intensive employer campaigns against centralized collective bargaining during the 1980s, and mixed results of decentralization efforts, in the 1990s Swedish collective bargaining experienced both decentralization and recentralization simultaneously.

Another noteworthy aspect of Sweden's governance approach is policy coordination. In some instances, policy development and implementation have been largely delegated to organizations. This collaborative model, often referred to as "corporatism," has earned Sweden a reputation as one of the most corporatist nations in Europe (Fulcher, 2002).

One of the fundamental features of the Swedish industrial relations system is a strong contractual tradition based on the existence of powerful social partners who maintain considerable autonomy from public authorities

(Anxo, 2017).

According to Bergström and Styhre (2022) the transformation of Swedish economy was marked not only by a decentralization of collective bargaining, but also by a shift in policy making during economic crises from the state to social partners, reducing the burden on government expenses during times of economic turmoil, and therefore also reducing the need for major structural reforms.

According to Gvelesiani (2021) in terms of analysis and evaluation, decentralization means that, for example, ministries, parliamentary committees, research institutes, associations, companies and private individuals try to solve the same problem. It is implied that they consider this problem according to their experience and interests and seek appropriate solutions. Therefore, their efforts are different from each other. At the same time, they assess analyses and proposals made by others to accept or reject them. They draw appropriate conclusions about the benefits and harms of change in their own interests. It must be said that the information obtained on the basis of such actions is always better than that collected and evaluated by a single planning authority.

No changes in the Swedish industrial relations system or collective bargaining mechanism were triggered by the 2008 Great Recession and the Swedish model of industrial relations has not only shown strong resilience during the crisis but has also, in our view, contributed to Sweden's relatively swift economic recovery. In fact, the well-established and developed social dialogue and the proactive involvement of social partners during the crisis played a crucial role in addressing macroeconomic imbalances and significantly contributed to Swedish recovery. The recession had no negative impact on industrial relations and the period 2008–2011 was marked by industrial peace in contrast with the situation during the previous deep recession of the early 1990s (Dominique, 2017).

Social partners successfully mobilized short-time work agreements to tackle the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis head-on, successfully avoiding mass lay-offs. High levels of trust between social partners and social dialogue have demonstrated the ability to deliver rapid and effective responses during periods of turmoil. Social partners in Sweden had already developed a mechanism to deal with sudden major employment shocks in response to the 2008 financial crisis (<https://flagship-report.theglobaldeal.com/>).

The Swedish collective agreement model is based on regulation of wages and various working conditions through agreement between the social partners (trade union organizations and employer organizations) and the management of enforcement and settlement of disputes by the parties themselves. There are three trade union confederations in the Swedish labour market: The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), the Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO) and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO). Together, these organizations comprise 50 affiliated trade unions across both the private and public sectors, representing more than 3, 4 million members.

The success of this collective agreement eventually spurred legislative changes, including government subsidies to support short-time work initiatives. Hence, when COVID-19 struck, the short-time work system was already operational, enabling swift negotiations and immediate remedial actions in workplaces. High levels of trust between social partners and effective social dialogue played a pivotal role facilitating these rapid responses in times of turmoil (<https://flagship-report.theglobaldeal.com/>).

In January 2021, the Swedish government launched three further collaborative investigations involving government experts and representatives from social partners. These investigations focused on exploring ways to implement the demands from social partners, emphasizing their unique role in shaping policies for state implementation rather than vice versa (Bergström, O., and Styhre, A. 2022).

The social dialogue is built on mutual trust and deliberate pacing, allowing social partners to conduct independent negotiations free from state influence (Micko, L. 2017).

IV.CONCLUSION

According to Chérèque (2012), the future of Europe will hinge on its ability to balance economic development while creating both wealth and solidarity. It will also need to take into account the environmental issues and the new geopolitical realities born from global governance. The challenges are numerous, and envisioning the future of Europe necessitates addressing these challenges and formulating effective solutions.

Building on existing national practices, and in order to achieve more effective social dialogue and better socio-economic outcomes, Member States should strive for the timely and meaningful inclusion of social partners in the design and implementation of employment, social and, where applicable, economic reforms and policies. Strengthening the capacity of social partners is also essential (Council of the European Union, 2018).

According to Bir (2019) the social partners are uniquely positioned to guide the transformation of the economy by devising balanced measures and solutions that foster economic and social progress. In countries with robust social dialogue and strong industrial relations institutions, the economic, social and workplace environments are notably more resilient during crises. Across Europe, trade unions have demonstrated that Social Dialogue negotiated solutions to respond to COVID-19 are the most effective and sustainable measures to

save lives, jobs and incomes. Countries with strong social dialogue are often the most competitive ones in Europe (www.etuc.org).

Social dialogue is crucial to promoting both competitiveness and fairness in Europe. Countries with a long tradition of social dialogue tend to have stronger, more stable economies and are often Europe's most competitive. Recognizing its crucial role and economic benefits, the challenge today lies in enhancing social dialogue across all EU Member States (European commission, 2016).

Europe should continue to support this social model as an example for other countries in the world (www.etuc.org).

Iankova and Turner (2004) argue that Europe's longstanding relations of social partnership, in which organized interests, especially business and labour, engage in regularized bargaining processes to craft economic and social policy compromises, positions Europe as a forerunner in today's global economy. All studies conducted in recent years universally highlight one of the main achievements of this process: the active involvement of the European social partners in decision-making processes at the EU level.

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that European social dialogue is merely a tool and, by its very nature, is not an end in itself. A great deal therefore depends on what the social and institutional actors are doing and plan to do with it. Nevertheless, it seems fundamental to consider that this tool is unique and is regarded by some with extreme jealousy. It is also a symbol to be taken seriously, that of democracy at work: a democracy that must be safeguarded and promoted (European commission, 2023).

Social partners know the reality of Europe's workplaces. They understand the needs of workers and businesses and defend their interests. Involving them at the EU level helps ensure that EU level initiatives address these concerns effectively. Consequently, social partners play a key role in shaping EU social policy and defining European social standards. This dialogue between social partners not only influences how labour markets and work are organized, but also drives economic growth, job creation, and workplace equity. The European Commission therefore plays a critical role in supporting and promoting social dialogue (European commission, 2016).

Experience has shown that social partners can leverage Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) to pursue their national agendas within the framework of social dialogue. Their interaction should integrate both EU and national approaches, participating in the preparation of National Reform Programs (NRPs) and remaining actively involved in policies and reforms (www.eurofound.europa.eu).

Analyzing and formulating economic policy strategies remains challenging due to the dynamic nature of the problem-solving process. This requires adapting the rules of conduct (e.g., in cases of limited rational expectations) and reevaluating assessments over time. The accumulation of new experiences underscores the importance of continuously revising estimates and adapting policy strategies accordingly (Gvelesiani, 2021).

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