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The collective representation of solo self-employed workers in Europe as an outcome of relations between traditional and new collective actors.

A focus on the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia

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Abstract

Drawing on an ethnography conducted in three European countries with different industrial relations models – the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia – this chapter examines how relations between traditional and alternative collective actors shape the frame of solo self-employed

(SSE) workers' collective representation. By using the concept of 'strategic action field', the chapter shows that traditional and alternative actors are interdependent in the development of SSE representation. Indeed, despite country-specific differences, their interactions stimulated the emergence of the field of collective representation for the SSE in all countries studied, although with different outcomes. In the Netherlands, it led to a consolidation of SSE workers' representation, distinct from the representation of employees and employers. In Italy, mutual relations and nuancing discourses and practices have recently been developed between established and emerging actors in collective representation. In Slovakia, the field of representation for SSE workers was opened, but remained at a potential level. The chapter thus emphasises the importance of interactions between traditional and new actors of industrial relations in the representation of underrepresented workers.

Keywords: *collective representation, framing, solo self-employed, strategic action field, trade unions, alternative actors.*

Introduction

Solo self-employed (SSE) workers have long been considered a category of workers that remains outside the scope of collective representation that is traditionally based on the dichotomy employees versus employers. However, in recent years, both traditional actors, such as unions and employer organisations, and alternative ones, such as freelance communities and self-employed associations, have been engaged in an increasing effort to represent SSE workers. By focusing on three European countries with different industrial relations models – the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia – this chapter aims to discuss the current situation regarding the collective representation of the SSE, a category of workers hitherto still under-represented in Europe. More specifically, our study points out that discourses and practices of SSE workers'

collective representation are created and shaped through the interactions between traditional and new collective actors rather than being the outcomes of single actors' strategic decisions. The concept of 'strategic action field' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) is used to analyse the specific 'framings' (Snow et al., 1986) that emerge as a result of the interdependence of different collective actors, thus showing that representation is not only connected to the formal institutions of industrial relations but can also transcend them. Drawing on three ethnographic case studies, this chapter discusses the relevance of using a relational approach to understand how the collective representation of poorly represented workers takes shape.

Inter-organisational relations and emerging representation of SSE workers

Studies that examine the relations of trade unions with other collective actors share a relatively narrow understanding of these relations. Indeed, these relations are understood either as a possible additional source of power through alliances with civil society organisations (see Heery, 2009; Heery et al., 2012) or as reflecting an already settled institutional environment (see Holgate, 2005; 2009; Milkman, 2006). Most of the studies therefore remain union-centric and strategy-oriented, making it difficult to interpret the needs of specific categories of workers (Alberti et al., 2013) and risking overlooking workers' bottom-up initiatives (Alberti and Però, 2018). This translated into the fact that even the development of concepts such as 'organising' is closely linked to the image of traditional trade unions, at the expense of organisational innovations brought about, for instance, by 'indie' trade unions (Però, 2020).

More recently, to understand how labour renewal comes from a variety of sources involving both established and emerging collective actors, other authors have proposed a more relational perspective (e.g., Però, 2020; Smith, 2021; Meardi, Simms and Adam, 2021; Mezihorak et al., 2022), which is also able to investigate how mutual interactions of collective actors and their

claims shape the representation of workers. This chapter focuses on the connection between framing – understood as an arrangement of both organisational discourses and practices of SSE workers' representation – and the relations between traditional and alternative actors. The concept of framing has a long and rich sociological history (Goffman, 1974). This study focuses, in particular, on the inter-organisational dimension of framing (Snow et al., 1986). In this view, collective actors 'are not conceived of engaging in collective action framing in isolation, but typically do so within "strategic action field" where they seek to influence the behaviour of others, compete for allegiance and mobilize adherents' (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013, p. 768). In this approach, framing is understood as a collective dynamic process, as a 'sociological enterprise' (Benford, 1997, p. 416), not as a 'thing', as an individual cognitive framework, or as a fully deliberate strategic choice.

Several recent works on field development (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021; Zietsma et al., 2017) have conceptualised the crucial role of interactions. Specifically, intra- and inter-field networking creates distinct channels that act as 'conduits through which resources, ideas and practices can enter and circulate within a field' (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021, p. 15). This chapter uses the distinction between emerging, developing, and consolidated fields (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021) to highlight a processual understanding of the collective representation. In specific terms, as far as relations are concerned, in a consolidated field the collective actors understand themselves as belonging to a 'community of organisations' in a common field (Zietsma et al., 2017, p. 391). As a result, the interactions take place 'more frequently and fatefully' (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2021, p. 15). Regarding discourses, actors in a consolidated field 'would share a consensus as to what is going on' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 88). There exist sets of underlying common meanings, but also meanings that are contested according to power differentials between the actors (Zietsma et al., 2017). Finally, '[a]ctors understand what […] forms of action and organization are viewed as legitimate and

meaningful within the context of the field' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, pp. 88-9). Therefore, the consolidated field tends to conform (Zietsma et al., 2017).

According to this framework, in a consolidated field of SSE workers' collective representation, the collective actors that populate the arena of industrial relations have already developed a set of distinct practices towards SSE workers and converge rather than diverge in their realisation. Furthermore, organisations compete for membership, but as the field is consolidated, this competition is seen as highly complementary to cooperation. This happens because the unifying frame helps unions to contact hitherto unorganised workers, so the expansion of the field, rather than competition with other actors, is seen as an opportunity for membership growth (Heery et al., 2012; Tattersall, 2005). The development stage of the field evolution instead involves the population of new actors that are still developing distinct relational channels and organisational practices. Through the combination of intra- and inter-subfield networking mechanisms, different types of collective actors develop the field's institutional infrastructure and make it become gradually consolidated. Here, the competition between organisations for membership and influence is more intense than in the consolidated field, because the field is still small and without clearly defined rules. Finally, an emerging field can be conceptualised as an arena where common understandings have yet to be created. Such social space can be very conflictual because 'rules do not yet exist but where actors, by virtue of emerging, dependent interests and worldviews, are being forced increasingly to take one another into account in their actions' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 87). If actors cannot identify common ground (i.e., form coalitions) or if one group cannot manage to dominate the strategic action field, the field might be disorganised in this 'potential' state for a long time.

Focusing on patterns of relationships between traditional and alternative actors and identifying these mechanisms of field development thus demonstrates, in countries with different systems

of industrial relations, the common trends in the shaping of the field of collective representation for poorly represented categories of workers, such as the SSE.

Case studies and methods

This chapter is based on a broader study on the collective representation of SSE workers in Europe.[1] In particular, it focuses on three case studies conducted in the Netherlands, Italy, and Slovakia, selected because of their different institutional and regulatory contexts.

At the time of the fieldwork, in all three countries, the solo self-employment rate was above the European Union average of 10.3% (Murgia et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, where industrial relations are still based on a strong concentration of interests on both the employee and employer sides, even though they have become increasingly decentralised in recent decades (Mundlak, 2020), the SSE make up approximately 11.5% of the working population. While almost 90% of firms are organised in employer organisations, the affiliation is considerably lower in the case of the SSE (approximately 10-20%) (Jansen, 2020) and 76% of employees are covered by unions in workplaces, although the union density is reportedly much lower (16.4%) (Visser, 2019). Strong institutionalised tripartite (Economic and Social Council) and bipartite (Foundation of Labour) institutions influence political decision-making and underpin the system. The study considered the main trade unions represented in the tripartite: Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond (CNV), Vakcentrale voor professionals (VCP), and De Unie. Additionally, Platform Zelfstandige Ondernemers (PZO), a

[1] This chapter is part of the SHARE project (https://ercshare.unimi.it/), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 715950).

self-employed platform affiliated with the main employer federation VNO-NCW, which also participates in the tripartite, and ZZP Nederland and Vereniging van Zelfstandigen Zonder Personeel (VZZP), two self-employed associations operating outside of the tripartite, were also studied. Based on the recommendations of the research participants, specialists from several platforms raising awareness regarding solo self-employment were also contacted, such as ikwordzzper.nl, ZiPconomy, and Werkvereniging.

In Italy, at the time of data collection, the solo self-employment rate was 14.9%. Around 60% of firms were organised in employer organisations and 80% of employees were covered by unions at their workplaces (with a union density of 34.4%),creating a considerable gap for much less represented SSE. Industrial relations have been increasingly fragmented as the concentration of interests on both the labour and employer sides has decreased (Pulignano, Carrieri and Baccaro, 2018). The tripartite organisation is only used on rare occasions, depending on the power of the national government. This drives the Italian industrial relations system's pluralist and competitive dynamics. The study included the three confederal trade unions – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL), and Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL) – as well as the Associazione Consulenti del Terziario Avanzato (ACTA), a quasi-union SSE organisation. In addition, data was gathered from the Coordinamento Libere Associazioni Professionali (CoLAP) (the umbrella association of independent professionals), Confprofessioni (the umbrella association of SSE in regulated professions), and Confassociazioni (the umbrella association of SSE in non-regulated professions).

In Slovakia, the solo self-employment rate reached 12%. A centralised tripartite structure is present, but it has been described as 'illusory' (Ost, 2000) or a 'political shell' (Pollert, 1999) by various authors, with low concentrations of interests on both the labour and employer sides, resulting in the decentralisation of the Slovak industrial relations system. Indeed, employer

organisations density was 37.5% of firms and union coverage was 30% with union density around 10%. The SSE are organised at an even lower level. Slovak industrial relations thus may be described as legalistic or 'statist' (Kohl and Platzer, 2007), relying on labour regulations and depending on a national government. The biggest trade union confederation, Konfederácia Odborovch Zväzov Slovenskej republiky (KOZ), which represents the labour side in the tripartite, was studied. With sole-traders being the legal status of the majority of SSE in Slovakia, the Union of Sole-traders and Chamber of Sole-traders, both represented in the tripartite through umbrella employer organisations, were also followed. Finally, the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders, the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, and the semi-public Slovak Business Agency were contacted for information.

Research included six months of data collection within the headquarters and some local branches of unions, employer organisations and SSE associations. The fieldwork took place in Italy and Slovakia between July and December 2018, and in the Netherlands between March and August 2019. The researchers later maintained contact with the studied organisations and continued to gather data in preparation for the second ethnographic fieldwork, which was postponed due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

In all countries, researchers were permitted to attend public and, in some cases, private meetings. They were also provided with a variety of materials, such as annual reports and internal studies. Interviews with members in various managerial and organisers' roles were conducted – 14 interviews were conducted in the Netherlands, 14 in Italy, and 21 in Slovakia. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and followed a common interview guide created before the fieldwork and adjusted during the study. The guide was organised into three sections: organisational discourses on SSE, member characteristics, and SSE representation practices. During the investigation, it became clear that the organisations studied understood their SSE representation discourses and practices in reference to other collective actors, so we adjusted

the interview guide in this direction. As a result, the study concentrated on inter-organisational relationships. Data collected in the three countries was then subjected to a thematic analysis by using Atlas.ti, iteratively reviewing each set of texts, organised by country, to find significant themes (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). The analysed data for the Netherlands, Italy and Slovakia were finally compared to identify patterns of similarities and variations among countries.

Findings

Case study 1: The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the first SSE union – FNV Zelfstandigen – was founded in 1999. From the beginning, the union was affiliated to the main trade union federation, FNV. In the interviews, FNV representatives claimed their ambition was to recruit both 'entrepreneurs' – such as SSE workers in the construction sector working independently for private clients – and SSE workers resembling rather employees, such as those working for construction companies, who were usually closer to dependent self-employment. Indeed, the representative of the trade union branch focused specifically on SSE workers – FNV Zelfstandigen – explained in an interview the ambition of FNV to represent all SSE workers and to take into account their subjective experience:

> You can choose, you can be a member of us when you feel more like self-employed. But you can be also a member of a specific sector in the FNV, this is by choice now, this is actually the best way to organise it.

In other words, FNV Zelfstandigen claimed that it represented those self-employed whose identity of being self-employed was more important than their specific work activity.

Statistically, this related to 10,000 SSE workers, while in the other sectoral branches of the union there were a further 15,000 SSE members.

On the employers' side, in 2002, a group of IT experts founded the platform PZO, which was supported from the beginning by the main employers' organisations VNO-NCW and MKB Nederland. As explained by a representative of PZO, employer organisations wanted to strengthen their position by representing the SSE. PZO had predominantly collective members, which meant associations organising SSE workers, that could be defined mainly as 'independent professionals' (around 20,000 individuals). A PZO representative explained their goal to create social protection for all the workers, including the self-employed:

> Our utopia, so to speak, would be to organise minimum level for all workers. You know, not thinking about the system we have right now. On top of this, employers and employees can organise something more, but we would organise our social security system in a different way.

However, at the time of the fieldwork, the biggest association representing SSE workers was ZZP Nederland, created in 2005. In 2019, it had a membership of 45,000 workers, but it lacked access to the corporatist institutions, such as the Economic and Social Council. ZZP Nederland considered itself to be an entrepreneurial organisation, but also openly defended the interests of low-income SSE workers, because, in their view, this should help their principal target group. Its representative explained how different SSE workers can have different needs:

> We have to create the system not only for employees and employers. You know, CBS [*Dutch statistical office*], they make it quite easy for themselves that everybody who is not small or middle enterprise, big enterprise or employee, is solo self-employed. But the group consists of people working two days, and you have people pushed into entrepreneurship, so we cannot have one judgement if people are so different.

The fact that all organisations made efforts to represent all SSE workers contributed to the nuanced discursive framing interconnected with the development of tailor-made practices for SSE workers also from the organisations traditionally adapted to different target groups, such as trade unions and employer organisations. As mentioned above, the main trade union federation FNV, as well as the main employer organisation VNO-NCW, created special organisational structures to represent them: FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO. All the actors were active in lobbying, even when they were not part of corporatist institutions (such as ZZP Nederland). Nevertheless, to be recognised in a field already occupied by other actors, and also to gain access to information about often very technical issues, the advocacy was always accompanied with approaching and recruiting SSE workers. Therefore, the different collective actors attracted SSE workers with individualised services, which were very similar across the organisations studied. Within the broad variety of practices, ranging from advocating to recruiting, discounts were also offered on health and disability insurance, as well as legal and fiscal advice to members and individual support and training.

Moreover, ZZP Nederland and PZO had a particularly close collaboration, due mainly to the fact that they both had access to the Economic and Social Council, which was not the case for ZZP Nederland, despite being the biggest association representing SSE workers. The representative of PZO described this situation as follows:

> What do we do? We have a tradition, the polder model. What we are trying to do is to enter the polder system as solo self-employed organisations. And the system of the polder is that we listen to each other, what are everyone's interests and what is the middle way, that is why we have a good relationship with the unions, and we try to have good relationships.

Therefore, although not all organisations were part of the institutional structures and often had divergent opinions – especially visible in the case of relations with the trade unions

confederation – the interactions between all three organisations were frequent, as expressed in the interview with a ZZP Nederland representative:

> That's one of the most important things, that you can battle on the content, but not on your relationship. It's a different way of looking at things, we need each other, but we don't have to agree.

Consolidated industrial relations thus helped to overcome differences and construct a new field of representation for the SSE. However, this does not mean that these relationships were not evolving dynamically, as can be seen in the case of new actors, such as ZZP Nederland. Before becoming independent, it was created initially as a platform supporting SSE workers within the second main trade union federation CNV. While conducting the fieldwork, ZZP Nederland cooperated with traditional actors, especially PZO, but at the same time had ambitions to become the key voice for SSE workers in the future. Indeed, in October 2020 it initiated the creation of a new collective actor – Vereniging Zelfstandigen Nederland (VZN, United Self-Employed Netherlands) – composed of ZZP Nederland, Zelfstandigen Bouw, the business association ONL, and SoloPartners, the SSE association in the healthcare sector. The number of VZN members reached 100,000 SSE, as explicitly stated in their manifesto, which was seen as a threshold to enter the 'polder'. Hence, next to FNV Zelfstandigen and PZO, situated within corporatist institutions, VZN became the third main collective actor involved in representing SSE workers and aiming to enter these institutions or to create new specific ones for the SSE.

Case study 2: Italy

At the end of the 1990s, the Italian confederal unions created special units – NIdiL within CGIL, FELSA within CISL, and UIL-Temp within UIL – to contain the increase in non-standard work and to represent workers (including the SSE) mostly framed as 'atypical'. In fact, the issue of non-standard work was in general framed by Italian trade unions as precarious work, and the

SSE were considered to be in need of representation, therefore addressing mainly bogus SSE workers. The separate units of 'atypical' workers within unions had difficulties in developing distinct strategies for approaching these workers (Semenza and Mori, 2018).

In this context, to highlight the existence of the distinct category of SSE workers, ACTA – the first national association of freelancers – was founded in 2004 and openly self-identified as a quasi-union to emphasise the need for collective representation of the SSE. From the beginning, the main aim of the association was the improvement of the welfare system for 'freelancers', which is the term ACTA used most often to describe their target group. In the view of one of the members who joined the association shortly before the start of our fieldwork, in 15 years ACTA successfully managed 'to make the freelancer problem appear on the map of the political agenda in Italy'.

A few years later, in 2009, CGIL, the main trade union confederation in Italy, supported the formation of the so-called 'Council of Professions', created as a communication platform with existing organisations representing SSE workers, such as ACTA, Conprofessioni, Confassociazioni, and CoLAP. Indeed, CGIL was aware of its lack of knowledge in the field of self-employment, but it was at the same time sceptical about potential collaborations with other organisations, as explained by one of the representatives during the meeting in the CGIL headquarters recorded in the fieldnotes:

> Trade unionists stated that the other organisations focused on self-employed professionals have knowledge, which the trade union does not completely have. That is why it was decided to interact with them despite some doubts about the way these organisations worked. Specifically, in the eyes of trade unionists, some of these associations claim to represent SSE workers, but also provide professional certifications, which could lead to a potential conflict of interest, for instance in

lobbying for regulatory changes, which would increase the number of workers needing these certifications.

Participation in the Council had always been voluntary, and without the need for membership the organisations involved in it changed over time, eventually meeting by meeting. In other words, the participation of associations had not always been constant. Regarding ACTA, it participated in some meetings that symbolically culminated in 2017 with the approval of the law on solo self-employment, which was a delicate compromise between several actors, and formalised the status of non-regulated SSE workers and their rights in Italy, including maternity, paternity, and sickness benefits. Hence, despite the limits, the Council of professions was an example of the attempt to strengthen relations between trade unions and other collective actors, thus contributing to the acknowledgement of the SSE as a specific category of workers. The trade unions were in fact more and more stimulated in the development of strategies and organisational structures with the purpose of making them better adapted to this emerging category of workers. Moreover, this process of re-framing the vision they had of SSE workers led them to develop original practices in the trade union environment, such as organising freelancers in coworking spaces. CGIL also replaced Agenquadri, the unit focused on managers and executives, with the new branch Apiqa, focused on both dependent and self-employed 'professionals', and inherited the work done by the 'Council of Professions', although at the time of the fieldwork it was not yet clear how the union wanted to reactivate the network built in 2009. The second main trade union confederation, CISL, decided to invest considerably in what was previously an online community – vIVAce! – to transform it into physical local contact points, especially in big cities, to support the local initiatives of SSE workers. Similarly, UIL extended their online services to SSE workers, including provision of legal and taxation advice. Therefore, it was mainly in the last decade that trade unions started to address the SSE as a category of workers per se.

This framing also enabled inter-organisational connections to be built, which were initially dictated mainly by pragmatic needs, as explained by a vIVAce! representative:

> When there is a common position, it is therefore possible to lobby in a coordinated way. In other situations, instead, each organisation simply chooses to support its own point of view, also lobbying.

More recently, an evolution of connections was finally observed, and it was also visible in the development of joint campaigns, as the common online petition related to non-paid consultation services solicited by public authorities created in 2019 by CGIL, CISL, Confprofessioni, and ACTA. In addition, the National Economic and Labour Council established a Council on self-employment and independent professions, to which all actors interested in SSE representation were encouraged to participate. In particular, in 2019, this new committee asked the Ministry of Labour to activate the permanent technical table on self-employment, which was envisioned under Law 81/2017 but never implemented. A proposal for legislation on the protection of the SSE was also offered to Parliament in 2020, but the Council's operations were then halted and never restarted after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Case study 3: Slovakia

In Slovakia, at the time of the fieldwork, the trade unions tended to typically homogenise the SSE as 'entrepreneurs'. Specifically, most of the research participants from the main trade union confederation KOZ framed SSE workers as potential employers. Only one of the high-ranking interviewees in the confederation could give a local example of a trade union in a specific sector – forestry – which had started to organise sole-traders. The trade union officer presented this activity as a very exceptional case caused by the high number of employees, with trade union members forced to become self-employed in the forestry industry. Nevertheless, during the fieldwork, the process was still at the early stages. In general, the main trade union

confederation KOZ focused almost completely on the representation of employees. However, some of the research participants, especially those working on the confederal level, were aware of the possibility for trade unions to also represent self-employed people and some of the interviewees expressed an interest in promoting this issue, especially concerning the representation of bogus self-employed workers. This resulted mainly from the fact that these representatives attended international meetings, especially those organised by ETUC.

Hypothetically, sole-traders in Slovakia could be represented by the Slovak Association of Sole-traders and the Slovak Chamber of Sole-traders. However, both these organisations actually focused mainly on a specific category of craftworkers, such as painters or plumbers. This narrow approach complicated their communication with public authorities or other actors because they were considered to speak only for a specific segment of SSE workers. The representative of the third relevant organisation – the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders – instead framed SSE workers as entrepreneurs with the 'same agenda' as employers, as recorded in the fieldnotes taken in their headquarters in Bratislava:

> The president of the association explained to me that SSE do not have special needs. According to him, the difference between SSE and self-employed with employees is that the latter have more administrative tasks with administration of salaries, safety regulations, plainly bureaucratic issues, but 'their agenda is the same'.

The notion of SSE workers as 'entrepreneurs' was also promoted by the Association of Young Slovak Entrepreneurs close to employer organisations.

To summarise the discursive framing of SSE workers, on the one hand, there were two associations focused on a specific segment of craftworkers. On the other hand, there were instead organisations framing SSE workers as 'entrepreneurs', which in the case of the trade unions led to their non-willingness to represent them. This discursive framing also delimited the range of organisational practices towards SSE workers. All the organisations were very

small, numbering only tens of members (in the case of collective membership the number reached no more than hundreds of individual members) and focused mainly on advocacy in the form of lobbying.

The weakness and fragmentation of the field in the case of SSE workers' collective representation was the outcome of rare and often antagonistic relations between the organisations studied. The main arena where the organisations representing workers and employers could interact was the 'tripartite', the regular meeting between trade unions, employers, and state representatives. Employees were represented by the trade union confederation KOZ while on the employers' side there were three umbrella associations of employers.

All three sole-traders' organisations had long criticised employer organisations as representing only the interests of big employers. The representative of the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders even argued that they were complicit together with the state in creating obstacles to 'entrepreneurship', to such an extent that it even created obstacles to SMEs, as shown in the following fieldnotes:

> The representative increased the volume of his voice and said that the employers and the state actually do not have any knowledge about SMEs because they don't need autonomous independent people. They need people who wait every 15th of the month to get a salary, they need employees. In his view, that is why they make proposals to limit entrepreneurship and to implement the bureaucratic procedures.

At the same time, the Slovak Association of Sole-traders, the Slovak Chamber of Sole-traders, and the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders did not interact to join forces, mainly because of previous disagreements. In fact, the Slovak Association of Small and Middle Enterprises and Sole-traders emerged after several members of the Slovak Association of Sole-traders decided to leave and create their own organisation.

The Slovak Association of Sole-traders was the only organisation that at least partially found themselves in a different situation. This association was a member of one of the umbrella employer organisations until 2016. This membership permitted its representatives to attend the tripartite meetings and interact with representatives from trade unions. Although the association acted as if it represented employers rather than sole-traders, the trade union representatives explained that during the few interactions they had, they were able to find some common ground, which helped to improve the position of sole-traders at least gradually, particularly in the construction sector. The interviewed representatives used bogus self-employment, safety rules, and public procurement conditions as examples. However, after a conflict in 2016, the association ceased to be a member of the umbrella employer organisation and so ceased to participate in the tripartite. Individual connections with the union also vanished, which revealed why trade unionists portrayed relationships with the association as something that happened in the past. The association, on the other hand, continued to promote the regulatory framework for self-employment. In 2017, it was the sole industrial relations actor to help taxi drivers in Bratislava in their efforts to restrict Uber. In 2018, it successfully pushed to return the painting trade from a free to a regulated trade, as it had been before deregulation in 2000. In addition, the Slovak Association of Sole-Traders was successful in joining the newest umbrella employer organisation in 2019, after significant efforts and discussions with two other employer organisations. Then, in 2020, the willingness to collaborate with the government and the association's attempts to advocate for a clearer regulatory framework for the SSE weakened the exclusively entrepreneurship- and deregulation-based framing of SSE workers. This was also linked to new organisational methods, such as daily online engagement with sole traders. At the same time, it should be noted that the trade union confederation abandoned the tripartite once the new liberal-conservative administration came to power in 2020, reducing the prospect of creating a space between employee and employer representation once more.

Discussion and conclusions

In the Netherlands, by the early 2000s, traditional actors in the field of collective representation were reacting to the increase of the SSE and had created specific organisations, such as FNV Zelfstandigen, on the trade union side, and PZO, on the employer side. However, very soon alternative organisations also emerged, which, although not located in corporate institutions, gained influence due to their number of members, such as ZZP Nederland. The frequent interactions between traditional and new actors were facilitated by the centralised Dutch industrial relations system and led to a gradual convergence of discourses and practices and to a consolidation of SSE workers' representation. However, the field also continues to evolve as alternative actors, such as ZZP Nederland or Zelfstandigen Bouw, seek to gain more influence in corporatist institutions. The emergence of the VZN coalition and, in effect, of a third actor alongside unions and employers, demonstrates the ongoing dynamics of SSE representation in the Netherlands, which are challenging the system of industrial relations.

Unlike the Netherlands, in Italy, the collective actors representing SSE workers operated in a more isolated and at times conflictual way. Unions long persisted in framing the SSE only through precarity and it was mainly an alternative actor, ACTA, self-declared as a 'quasi-union' (Heckscher and Carré, 2006), together with the initiatives thereafter promoted by the union, that triggered a change in the national industrial relations system, still based on the employer-employee dichotomy. Specifically, the aim to change the welfare system for the SSE fundamentally expanded the previous framing determined primarily by traditional trade union discourses and practices. Indeed, trade unions also started to look for their own strategies to reach SSE workers, such as providing online services, entering coworking spaces, or supporting their initiatives. What at first glance appeared to be parallel trajectories were therefore the result

of the fact that the organisations had only recently begun to develop mutual relations (Mori, 2019). Then, the Italian industrial relations system did not support the emergence of SSE workers' collective representation to the same extent as in the Netherlands, but still ensured that with respect to an alternative actor that had emerged in the field of SSE workers' representation, the other more established ones were flexible enough to initiate interaction. Correspondingly, although the interactions were less frequent and more complicated than in the Netherlands, at the time of the data collection, the field of SSE workers' representation was rapidly developing, which corresponded to the shift from ad hoc framing and practices to more consolidated discourses, knowledge, and activities focused on the SSE. In this process, the government acted as an external factor, which, however, did not always trigger fruitful relations. During the preparation of the law on self-employment 4/2013, the consultation did not lead to the consolidation of relations. After a few years, the call to trade unions and SSE associations to discuss what was to become law 81/2017 led instead to the intensification of interactions between trade unions and other collective actors and also stimulated the development of the field in a more general way.

In comparison to the Netherlands and Italy, in Slovakia, actors remained largely isolated from each other. The main trade union confederation was not able to develop a consistent cross-sectoral strategy focusing on SSE workers. The study, however, identified the willingness of a few individuals to integrate individual initiatives on SSE workers' representation, and of the main trade unions confederation to deal with SSE workers, which in the future could lead to innovative union practices (Kahancová, 2017). The trade unions confederation and main employer organisations did not interact frequently, which led to very divergent positions. This main axis of employees versus big firms' representation controlled the Slovak industrial relations to a large extent. The associations of sole-traders neither interacted with each other nor stimulated the creation of an autonomous field of SSE workers' representation distinct from

the representation of employees and employers (Fulton, 2018), with the relative exception of the Slovak Association of Sole-traders, which in the past interacted both with trade unions and employer organisations and at the time of the fieldwork was making an effort to move between these two poles of Slovak industrial relations. The representation of the SSE thus largely merged with the representation of employers or entrepreneurs, and although the topic of bogus self-employment did not give rise to stable alliances of organisations it still succeeded in opening up the field of collective representation for the SSE, creating an opportunity for its further development.

This study analysed the representation of SSE workers in three European countries belonging to different industrial relations systems. First, it shows the importance of focusing not only on traditional actors in the collective representation of workers, such as trade unions and employer organisations, but also on alternative ones (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). In particular, it is suggested that the influence of alternative actors, such as SSE associations, cannot be narrowed to the strategic choice of established social partners (typically trade unions) to cooperate or compete with them (Heery, 2009; Heery et al., 2012). Second, this study offers a way of approaching the complexity of the collective representation of emerging and underrepresented categories of workers by exploring the relations between different collective actors and the development of collective framings as the result of inter-organisational interactions (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013). Indeed, differences in national industrial relations systems certainly influenced the formation of SSE workers' collective representation, but we also found that interactions between traditional and alternative actors challenged the traditional system of representation (based on the employee-employer dichotomy) in all countries studied, albeit to different extents. Therefore, this analysis highlights the interdependence of old and new actors in the representation of hitherto underrepresented workers. In particular, we argue that the strengthening relations between traditional and alternative actors representing SSE

workers leads to framing them as a category of workers in itself – independent from both employees and employers – which nevertheless has a high degree of internal heterogeneity.

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