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Socialising the European Semester? The limited influence of Danish social partners on EU policymaking

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Abstract

Many scholars have debated the role of social policy in the new economic governance after the financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis. While some researchers argue that social policy continues to be subordinated in favour of the economic imperative, others observe a partial but progressive socialisation, both in terms of EU policy outputs (i.e. more focus on social policies) and the governance procedure (i.e. more participation of social actors). This article contributes to this debate by providing a national perspective. Specifically, it investigates whether procedural socialisation at the national level leads to output socialisation at the EU level. Based on two case studies from Denmark during the European Semester, this article finds that despite their active participation, social partners have had no noticeable influence on the Commission's Country Reports or Country-Specific Recommendations. The results indicate that procedural socialisation may not easily translate into output socialisation. The article argues for more nuanced insights into the socialisation debate.

Keywords

Socialisation; European Semester; Social partners; Social policy; Denmark

After the financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis, a new governance structure was set up in 2011 to coordinate European Union (EU) member states' social and economic policies. Known as the European Semester, this structure is a hybrid governance procedure integrating three pillars: the Stability and Growth Pact, the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, and Europe 2020. Scholars have debated the role of social policy in the European Semester since its inception. For some scholars, the new economic governance entails a continual subordination of social policy to economic policies (Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015), and they argue that economic actors continue to dominate the procedure (de la Porte and Heins 2015; Dawson 2018; Baeten and Vanhercke 2017). Other scholars, however, see a partial but progressive socialisation of the European Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015). This is manifested in two distinct dimensions, including output socialisation and procedural socialisation. The former denotes changes in terms of policy outputs, namely that there are more social policy focuses in EU guidelines and recommendations, while the latter describes improvements in terms of governance procedures, which are characterised by an increasingly active participation of EU social actors.

While these debates have generated valuable insights, they have focused primarily on the EU level with an emphasis on EU social policy actors, such as the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the Employment Committee (EMCO) (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015). However, some scholars observe increasing social actor participation at the national level as well (Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017), including efforts to influence EU policy outputs during the European Semester, such as trade unions (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020). This leads to two interrelated questions: To what extent do national social actors influence EU policy outputs? Does procedural socialisation at the national level lead to output socialisation at the EU level?

To answer these questions, this study focuses on two salient and relevant issues for Danish social partners: shortage of skilled labour and inclusion of marginalised groups in the labour market. It considers Denmark as a most likely case among the member states to see the influence of national social partners on EU policy outputs, given their high organisational capacity and active participation (i.e. a high degree of procedural socialisation). However, the results of both case studies show that Danish social partners had no apparent influence on the EU policy outputs. On the issue of shortage of skilled labour, the employers' organisations failed to shape the contents of the Country Reports or to lobby the European Commission (hereafter referred to as the Commission) for a recommendation. For the issue of labour market inclusion of marginalised groups, the trade unions did not manage to influence the Commission's analysis in the Country Reports or to get a relevant recommendation on this issue.

This article makes the following contributions. First, a national perspective on socialisation complements previous EU-level studies. In general, rather than proving a link between the two dimensions of socialisation of the European Semester, this study finds the socialisation of governance procedures at the national level has not led to the socialisation of EU policy outputs. Second, both the focus on social partners and the finding of their limited influence also fit into an emerging research agenda on the involvement, more generally, of social actors in the European Semester (for example Sabato 2018; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020; Kangas 2019; Jansson, Jansson and Ottosson 2019; Albert 2019). Methodologically, this study combines preference attainment and semi-structured interviews to measure the influence of Danish social partners, thus allowing us to gain greater clarity of the role of social partners in the European Semester.

This article is organised as follows. The next section introduces the European Semester and the debates over the role of social policy in the European Semester. Then, the research design and

the two Danish cases are briefly introduced. The bulk of the article is built around the detailed analysis of the cases, one from the employers' side (on the issue of shortage of skilled labour) and the other from the trade unions' side (on the issue of labour market inclusion of marginalised groups). The article closes with general conclusions and directions for future research.

THE SOCIALISATION OF THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER?

The European Semester began in 2011 as an annual cycle to coordinate member states' social and economic policies. It integrated three pillars into one hybrid governance system (van den Brink 2018): the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, both of which contain binding obligations; and the non-binding Europe 2020. Each cycle begins in November with the Commission's Annual Growth Survey (AGS) (renamed Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy in 2020), which sets out the EU's general economic and social priorities for the following year.¹ In February, the Commission publishes a Country Report (CR) evaluation of each member state's progress during the European Semester. In April, the member states submit their structural and fiscal reform agendas to the Commission in the form of National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes, respectively. Accordingly, the Commission proposes Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for each member state, which are revised and adopted by the Council of the European Union in July. Member states are obliged to implement these CSRs. AGS, CR and CSRs are policy outputs at the EU level, while National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes are policy outputs at the national level (Sabato 2018).²

Since its inception, scholars have debated the role of social policy during the European Semester. Many scholars argue that there is a continual subordination of social policies to economic policies (for example Dawson 2018; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015). This subordination is manifested in two dimensions, namely the outputs of the European Semester and its governance procedure. First, EU policy outputs of the European Semester are often not socially-oriented. The political focus of the European Semester is on stringent economic policy and fiscal stability, thus the role of social policy is marginalised (Crespy and Menz 2015) or displaced (Dawson 2018). In general, structural reforms promoted in the European Semester consist of 'typically neoliberal policy recipes such as the liberalisation of products and services markets, the deregulation of labour markets, and public administration reform' (Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019: 92). In addition, despite the increasing number of CSRs on social policy, they are more of a nature of market-making, rather than market-correcting (Copeland and Daly 2018). Social policies are largely dependent on economic policies and are bound by the straitjacket of promoting sound public finance (Copeland and Daly 2015). For instance, health CSRs 'tend to be framed in the discourse on sustainability of public finances rather than that of social inclusion with a predominant focus on the policy objective of sustainability' (Azzopardi-Muscat, Clemens, Stoner, et al. 2015: 375; see Baeten and Vanhercke 2017 for a similar finding).

Second, economic actors dominate the European Semester's governance procedure (Dawson 2018). The Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) are endowed with more competences originated from the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, while DG EMPL and the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) have a weaker legal basis from the non-binding Europe 2020 (de la Porte and Heins 2015). In addition, despite the increasing involvement of social actors, they are required to operate within the hierarchical and ideological confines of promoting fiscal stability and sustainability (Copeland and Daly 2018). Finally, economic actors have gained influence in some new sectors, such as the health sector (Földes 2016; Baeten and Vanhercke 2017).

In contrast to these views, however, other scholars propose that there has been a partial but gradual socialisation of the European Semester, both in terms of its policy outputs and its governance procedure (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015). More specifically, this socialisation comprises:

(1) a growing emphasis on social objectives in the Semester's policy orientations and messages, embodied in the AGS and especially the CSRs; (2) intensified monitoring, surveillance, and review of national reforms by EU social and employment policy actors and (3) an enhanced role for these actors relative to their economic policy counterparts in drafting, reviewing, and amending the CSRs (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 152).

In terms of policy outputs, policy orientations from 2012 and 2014 already saw an increasing focus on social policy, both in terms of incorporating social policy priorities in the AGS and in terms of the increasing number of CSRs on social policy (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Bekker 2014). In addition, this trend continued after the Juncker Commission, during which 'inclusive social and employment policy objectives figured even more prominently' in the AGS, and a stable proportion of CSRs continued to focus on social policy (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 163-164). Indeed, employment and wage policies are equally frequently addressed in CSRs and constitute the primary focus of the reforms promoted during the European Semester, just like budgetary policies (D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019).

In terms of the governance procedure, EU social actors play an increasingly important role. For instance, DG EMPL is able to play a bigger role in drafting the CR and proposing social CSRs. Indeed, it has greatly enhanced its analytical capacity to be able to provide evidence-based arguments to promote social policy (Savage and Verdun 2016). Similarly, the two advisory committees of the EPSCO Council, namely SPC and EMCO, are able to intensify multilateral surveillance and peer review in employment and social policies during the European Semester, provide more inputs to the adoption of social CSRs, and amend a few social CSRs despite the high threshold of Reversed Qualified Majority Voting and the 'comply or explain' rule (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014).

It seems that the disagreement over 'socialisation' arises partly from taking a macro (for example the overarching structure of the European Semester) or a micro (for example the CSRs, the actors) perspective. Studies with a macro perspective tend to find limited socialisation (for example de la Porte and Heins 2015; Dawson 2018; Copeland and Daly 2015), while research with a micro perspective is more likely to see a gradual development of socialisation (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019; Bekker 2014), or at least to take a more balanced view (for example Haas, D'Erman, Schulz, et al. 2020). Moreover, some studies focus on output socialisation (for example Haas, D'Erman, Schulz, et al. 2020; D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019; Bekker 2014; Azzopardi-Muscat, Clemens, Stoner, et al. 2015); some studies primarily investigate procedural socialisation (for example de la Porte and Heins 2015; Copeland and Daly 2015); while other studies look into both of them (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Copeland and Daly 2018). An investigation of both output and procedural socialisation seems to produce a more nuanced view. Indeed, the findings suggest that procedural socialisation is related to output socialisation. For Zeitlin and Vanhercke (2018: 168), the gradual output socialisation could partly 'be understood as the product of strategic agency, reflexive learning and creative adaptation by EU social and employment actors of their own organisation and practices in response to the new institutional conditions of the Semester'. Copeland and Daly (2018: 1014) hold a similar view, namely that:

[S]ocial actors have been able to advance EU social policy under relatively unfavourable conditions. The achievements have included the development of a stronger governance process for social policy, some strengthening of market-correcting CSRs and a greater mixing of market-correcting and market-making orientations in the CSRs.

However, most debates over the socialisation of the European Semester focus on the EU level (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015), examining the role of the main EU social actors, most prominently DG EMPL, SPC and EMCO. The increasing participation of social actors at the national level into the European Semester (Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017) implies that national social actors may now be in a better position to influence the European Semester policy outputs at the EU level. This article investigates this potential influence in great depth.

Indeed, an emerging stream of research is starting to look into the role of national social partners during the European Semester. For example, the INVOTUNES project (Sabato 2018) looks into the role of national trade unions in the European Semester and their potential influence at the EU level across eight countries (Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020; Kangas 2019; Albert 2019). They have shown that due to the extremely limited chance for trade unions to influence national policymaking during the European Semester (i.e. National Reform Programmes or legislation), they have increasingly turned to the EU, where they try to shape EU outputs such as CRs and CSRs (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020).

This study follows this emerging research agenda and tries to complement previous studies in three ways. First, while they focus on trade unions, there is a need to investigate employers' organisations, as others have suggested that they have more ownership of the European Semester (Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018). Second, previous studies have had difficulty establishing a convincing link between social partners and their influence on the EU outputs (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Albert 2019). This study combines preference attainment and semi-structured interviews to investigate the social partners' influence. Third, previous studies have omitted the case of Denmark, which is a most-likely case to test the influence of social partners on the EU policy outputs, as will be argued in the following section.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, among EU member states, Denmark is considered a most-likely case at the country level for gauging the influence of national social partners on EU policy outputs (i.e. CRs and CSRs) for two reasons.³ First, Danish social partners have the capacity to participate and exert influence during the European Semester. In general, Denmark belongs to the Northern industrial relations cluster (together with Sweden, Finland and Norway), with both high employer organisation density and high trade union density. Many important labour market issues are governed by collective agreements. For instance, social partners exert strong influence over wage setting in Denmark, while many other EU countries have experienced a decline, including Finland and Sweden (Eurofound 2015: 16-17). As Table 1 shows, 68.5 per cent of the total Danish workforce are union members, and the trade union density in Denmark is the highest in the EU despite a decrease since the late 1990s. On the employees' side, specialised trade unions combine into confederations, with Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (FH; previously called LO), the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark (FTF), and the Danish Confederation of Professional Associations (AC) being the largest three. The largest single trade union, the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), represented 272,628 members in 2019. On the employers'

side in the private sector, the three main employers' confederations are the Confederation of Danish Employers (DA), the Danish Employers' Association for the Financial Sector (FA), and the Danish Confederation of Employers' Association in Agriculture (SALA) (Jensen 2012). The biggest single employers' organisation is Dansk Industri (DI) with 11,000 member companies.

Table 1: Employer organisations and trade union density since the late 1990s

	Employer organisation density (%)			Trade union density (%)		
	1997–1999	2011–2013	Trend	1997–1999	2011–2013	Trend
Austria	100	100	Stable	39.8	27.8	Decline
Belgium	82	82	Stable	55.6	50.4	Decline
Bulgaria	(---)	55	---	39.2	19.8	Decline (>50%)
Cyprus	60	62.5	Increase	70	49	Decline
Czech Republic	---	35%	---	36.9	17.3	Decline (>50%)
Denmark	58	65	Increase	75.6	68.5	Decline
Estonia	> 35	23.8	Decline	>20	8.1	Decline (>50%)
Germany	> 60	< 60	Decline	27	18	Decline
Greece	---	43.7	---	29.8	25.4	Decline
Finland	---	72.7	---	79.4	69	Decline
France	74	75	Stable	8.4	7.9	Decline
Hungary	---	40	---	35.3	16.8	Decline (>50%)
Ireland	---	60	---	45.2	36.1	Decline
Italy	> 62	58	Decline	36.2	35.2	Stable
Latvia	---	35	---	>25	14.8	Decline
Lithuania	---	< 14	---	30	10	---
Luxembourg	80	80	Stable	42.4	37.3	Decline
Malta	---	60	---	62.8	48.6	Decline
Netherlands	85	85	Stable	24.4	19	Decline
Norway	55	65	Increase	55.5	54.6	Stable
Poland	---	20	---	20.5	14.1	Decline (>40%)
Portugal	< 60	65	Increase	25.2	19.3	Decline
Romania	> 80	< 60	Decline	>45	32.8	Decline
Slovakia	> 33	< 29	Decline	42	16.7	Decline (>40%)
Slovenia	100	55	Decline	44.1	24.4	Decline (>40%)
Spain	72	75	Increase	15.6	15.6	Stable
Sweden	> 83	< 83	Decline	82	68	Decline
UK	> 40	<35	Decline	31.9	27.1	Decline

Source: ICTWSS 4.0, April 2013, from Eurofound (2015: 67).

Second, during a round of exploratory interviews conducted in 2018, almost all interviewees – from employer and employee groups as well as the Commission itself – have described social partners as actively engaged with the Commission and interested in the European Semester (interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10). This is in sharp contrast to, for instance, Swedish social partners, who have been found to be much less active and interested in the European Semester (Jansson, Jansson and Ottosson 2019). Still, this attitude is more similar to the one held by the Finnish trade unions, which frequently use the 'Brussels way' to get their voices heard in the European Semester and even established their own lobbying organisation (FinUnions) in Brussels (Kangas 2019: 15). Moreover, since 2015 Denmark has received most recommendations on its

productivity issue and no social recommendations (at least until 2019), while Finland has continued to receive recommendations on social policies. This situation has created a window of opportunity for the social partners to lobby for their preferred social CSRs for Denmark (see Appendix 1 for all the CSRs for Denmark from 2015 to 2019). Indeed, as one interviewee put it, ‘because of the lack of recommendations on the labour market issue, we think we can use it in our lobbying activities’ (interview 7). While CSRs face significant implementation challenges across the EU, Denmark had the highest average implementation score (67) between 2011 and 2017 (Efsthathiou and Wolff 2018: 6). This might have made social partners believe that even non-binding CSRs from the EU could generate significant influence in Denmark.

In order to investigate the role of social partners in Denmark, this article selects two cases from the period of 2015 to 2019.⁴ The two cases are selected based on its salience and relevance for the social partners.⁵ An issue is considered as salient if the CR highlights it as a challenge. The relevance of the issue to a social partner was identified during the exploratory interviews. Based on those two criteria, two issues have been selected. One is the shortage of skilled labour, which CRs repeatedly highlight as a challenge. This issue is of special concern to employers, as it affects companies that need skilled labour. The other issue is the labour market inclusion of marginalised groups, which many CRs have also mentioned as a challenge. The trade unions have a focus on this issue, as it concerns vulnerable groups in the labour market. The Danish economy recovered relatively fast from the crises, and Denmark was out of the Excessive Deficit Procedure in 2014. In fact, the Danish economic situation was so good that, together with Sweden, it has received the least number of CSRs among the member states since 2015. Therefore, due to the favourable economic conditions, neither issue was considered a political priority in Denmark. Still, the Danish government has made several active labour market policy reforms to address them. For the issue of shortage of skilled labour, the Danish government has made an effort to improve the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training and ensure that workers have the right composition of skills to meet demand. In order to help marginalised group in the labour market, the Danish government has provided more individual support for the unemployed and the vulnerable, combined with stronger economic incentives to work. Table 2 shows all the issues highlighted for Denmark from 2015 to 2019. It is clear that those two were the most frequently mentioned social policy issues for Denmark.

Table 2: Challenges for Denmark identified in the Country Report from 2015 to 2019

Challenges identified in CRs
Productivity growth and competition (2015-2019).
Labour market inclusion of marginalised groups (2015-2019).
Shortage of skilled labour (2017-2019).
Housing market and household debt (2017-2019).
Vocational education (2015-2016).
Cooperation between universities and business (2015-2016).
Educational outcome of students with a migrant background (2017).
Scaling up of start-ups (2017).

Source: European Commission, Country Report Denmark from 2015-2019

To analyse the shortage of skilled labour issue, this study looked into the activities of DA, the largest employer’s confederation, and DI, the largest employers’ organisation. For the second case, i.e. marginalised groups in the labour market, it focused on FH, the biggest trade union confederation, and 3F, the biggest trade union in Denmark. In general, DA and DI work closely together during the European Semester. This is also the case for FH and 3F.

In this article, influence is understood as ‘the ability of an actor to shape a political decision in line with his preferences’ (Dür 2008: 561). In order to measure influence, preference attainment and semi-structured interviews were employed. The method of preference attainment compares

the outcomes of political processes with the ideal points of actors. The most basic idea is that the distance between an outcome and the ideal point of an actor reflects the influence of this actor (Dür 2008: 566). Accordingly, influence is measured in two stages. First, a preference attainment approach was used to assess the extent to which the opinions of social partners on those two issues are in line with the Commission’s CRs and the CSRs. In order to identify the preferences of the social partners, two kinds of position papers were collected from interviewees. One is the comments on the National Reform Programme, which social partners send to the government each year (five documents from DA and DI, three documents from FH and 3F), and the other is the proposals for new CSRs that social partners send to their EU-level social partners, namely Business Europe and the European Trade Union Confederation (one document from DA and DI, and one from FH and 3F).⁶ The coding book for preference attainment can be found in Table 3. Second, to further detect the social partners’ perceived influence on the issue, in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors. This article is based on 20 interviews conducted in two rounds between February 2018 and September 2019. The interviewees are the key actors in the European Semester: the main social partners, Danish civil servants, country teams from the Commission, and so on. The interviews conducted are listed in the end, providing an overview of which organisations were interviewed and when.

Table 3: Coding book for preference attainment

Issue	Actors	Position papers of the actors	Preference attainment at the CR level	Preference attainment at the CSR level
Shortage of skilled labour	Employers’ organisations (DA and DI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments on the National Reform Programme (DI 2015; 2016; 2017; DA, 2019) • Proposal for CSRs sent to Business Europe (DA and DI, 2018; 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low degree of attainment: The CR doesn’t highlight or only briefly mentions the issue as a challenge. • Middle degree of attainment: The CR highlights the issue as a challenge, but frames it differently from the actor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low degree of attainment: The CSR doesn’t mention the issue or only indirectly mentions the issue. • Middle degree of attainment: The CSR directly mentions the issue but with different focuses from the actor.
Labour market inclusion of marginalised groups	Trade unions (FH and 3F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments on the National Reform Programme (FH, 2016; 2017; 2019) • Proposal for CSRs sent to European Trade Union Confederation (FH and 3F, 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of attainment: The CR highlights the issue as a challenge and is in complete agreement with the actor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of attainment: The CSR directly mentions the issue and is in complete agreement with the actor.

CASE ONE: THE SHORTAGE OF SKILLED LABOUR ISSUE

Preference Attainment of Employers' Organisations on this Issue

Both DA and DI consider the shortage of skilled labour in Denmark a serious concern, and both want the Commission to focus on this issue in CRs and eventually formulate a CSR for Denmark. Both criticise the Danish government for lacking policies that facilitate the recruitment of skilled employees (documents from DA 2019; DI, 2015; 2016; 2017). In preparation for the 2019 European Semester, DA and DI jointly urged the Commission to propose a CSR that would recommend 'national initiatives to address and prevent labour shortage through easier access, less red tape and initiatives to facilitate recruitment for qualified foreign workers and through initiatives to increase the number of skilled workers' (document from DA and DI 2019). Interestingly, trade unions disagree with DA and DI. They acknowledge labour shortage in some very specific sectors, but they do not consider this a general problem across the board (interview 16; 17). This view is similar to the government's (interview 18).

From the Commission's side, the shortage of skilled labour was first identified as a challenge in its 2017 CR, which pointed out that 'there is a shortage of labour for certain types of workers' (European Commission 2017: 2). Again in 2018 it was argued that 'shortages of skilled labour in certain sectors constitute a significant challenge' (European Commission 2018: 2). And in 2019 the Commission concluded that 'employment growth has been solid, but challenges persist... companies continue to report increasing shortages of skilled workers' (European Commission 2019: 4). As such, the Commission does recognise the problem of shortage of skilled workers in Denmark. However, it does not agree with the employers that labour shortage is a general phenomenon. The inputs from the trade unions and the Danish government seem to have convinced the Commission that the shortage of skilled labour is specific to sectors such as construction, information and communication technology, and services. Thus, for DA and DI there is a middle level of preference attainment in the CR.⁷

As for the CSRs from 2015 and 2019, only one touched upon the labour market issue. In 2019, the first CSR to Denmark was: 'focus investment-related economic policy on education and skills, research and innovation to broaden the innovation base to include more companies, and on sustainable transport to tackle road congestion' (Council of the European Union 2019). The accompanying recital argued that 'ensuring the supply of labour in times of demographic and technological changes and addressing labour shortage, in particular of skilled workers and ICT specialists, is key to fostering sustainable and inclusive growth in Denmark' (Council of the European Union 2019). However, while the CSR highlighted the issue of education and skills, which may help to increase the number of skilled workers, it did not mention the issue of labour shortage directly. Therefore, measured against their proposals, DA and DI achieved a low degree of preference attainment in the CSR.

Employer Organisations' Perceived Influence on Crs and Csrs

The first stage of analysis of preference attainment seems to indicate some influence of the employers' organisations on the Commission, as the CR reflects their preferences to a middle degree, although the same cannot be said of the CSR. However, follow-up interviews with key actors do not find support for such influence.

First, at the CR level, there is no solid evidence that DA or DI pushed the Commission to focus on the issue of shortage of skilled labour. DA does think the CR serves their interests to some extent, but they do not think their considerable efforts have led to positive changes in the CR (interview 15). An interviewee from the Commission agreed: 'because it was a very positive thing that the economy has gone so well. The unemployment rate has dropped, so the issue has been brought up by more and more reports' (interview 14). Therefore, the reason for the Commission's focus is not the lobbying efforts of DA (also on behalf of DI). Instead, it is an issue that was naturally picked up by the Commission as it appeared more in reports.

Second, at the CSR level, there is no evidence of influence. Employers consider the 2019 CSR to be too indirect to be useful (interview 15), although investment in education and skills may increase the number of skilled workers in the long term. Therefore, this CSR was not considered relevant to issues employers would like to see action on, and they judge their efforts to push for a meaningful CSR to have failed (interview 15). From the Commission's side, it is clear that the reason for issuing the CSR on education and skills had nothing to do with the efforts from the employers. Instead, it is mainly the Commission's own initiative, with a focus on investment needs in the EU. Through this CSR, the Commission wanted to foster national ownership of the Multiannual Financial Framework, especially the European Social Fund, and thus almost all member states received a similar CSR on investment in education and skills in 2019 (interview 14; 19; 20).

Case Assessment

In this case, although preference attainment suggests some influence from DA and DI, later investigation does not provide any support. Why do DA and DI fail to influence the Commission, despite their efforts to lobby? There are several reasons. First, the Commission also listens to the trade unions and the government's opinions on this issue, and there is significant disagreement. Both FH and 3F are against the idea of having a CSR on this issue, as they find claims of labour shortage to be exaggerated (interview 16; 17). The same view is held by the government (interview 18). There is, in short, no consensus on this issue. Moreover, the Commission is well aware that this is a 'hot potato' (interview, 12; 14), as the issue of shortage of skilled labour is linked to a bigger debate in Denmark about the threshold for recruiting third-country migrant workers. On the one hand, the right-wing parties and employers want to make it much easier to recruit workers from outside the EU. On the other hand, the left-wing parties and trade unions want to maintain and even raise the threshold in order to protect the wages and working conditions of the domestic labour force (interview 14; 18; 19). Third, the Commission is bound to ensure that its CSRs do not bias against member states. Indicators at the EU level show that the skilled labour problem is no more severe in Denmark than in other countries, so issuing a CSR on the issue only to Denmark could be interpreted as inappropriate bias. In addition, the government is already taking initiatives to deal with this issue (interview 14; 19). Therefore, no consensus, sensitivity, and horizontal consistency (i.e. the relatively good performance of Denmark among all the EU countries) all play a role in the Commission's decision not to issue a CSR on this issue for Denmark. In the end, these are the reasons why DA and DI have not realised their preferences through the European Semester.

CASE TWO: LABOUR MARKET INCLUSION OF MARGINALISED GROUPS

Preference Attainment of Trade Unions on this Issue

Both FH and 3F are concerned about this issue. One interviewee summed up the general impression: 'it's a matter of fact that we are not good at including marginalised groups in the labour market' (interview 16). They frequently argue that there are still many vulnerable groups, such as those who are not able to work to get social benefits (document from FH 2016), old workers (document from FH 2018), and the unemployed and refugees (document from FH 2019). In 2019, they proposed the following as a CSR:

Denmark should take measures to integrate people on the margins of the labour market into employment. This includes vulnerable groups such as immigrants, young (marginalised) people and people with disabilities. With the current low unemployment rates, the time is ideal to address this issue by strengthening skills development and continuous education and training for these groups (FH document 2019).

Employers agree that this is an important issue, but they do not think the right way to deal with this is to invest more in education or training. Rather, they propose increases in the economic incentives to work (such as reducing social benefits) (interview 18).

In the CRs, the trade unions have achieved a high level of preference attainment. Each CR since 2015 has identified labour market inclusion of marginalised groups as a challenge, and the needs of groups such as low-skilled, old workers, young people, and migrants from outside the EU have been emphasised (European Commission 2018a: 3; 2017: 2; 2016: 2; 2015: 1). In 2019 it was observed that 'another challenge is to increase the employability of vulnerable groups, such as those with a migrant background, young people and people with disabilities who are less able to work' (European Commission 2019: 5).

At the level of CSRs, however, trade union preferences were weakly reflected. No relevant CSR was issued from 2015 to 2018 although this issue was mentioned in some recitals. By contrast, the 2019 CSR on investment in education and skills that was at the heart of the analysis of the first case above can also be regarded as a way to address the issue of labour market inclusion, because both FH and 3F consider education as one of the best ways to integrate marginalised groups. Further, the Commission's accompanying recital mentioned that 'it would be beneficial to focus on a better integration of marginalised and disadvantaged groups on the labour market' (Council of the European Union 2019). However, while this CSR highlighted the issue of education and skills, it did not directly point to the marginalised groups in the labour market. Therefore, trade unions only obtained a low degree of preference at the CSR level.

Trade Unions' Perceived Influence on the CR and the CSR

The first stage of analysis suggests a high level of preference attainment at the CR level and a low degree at the CSR level. Follow-up interviews show that trade unions do not have any influence at either level.

In terms of the CR, both the trade unions and the Commission deny the existence of any trade union influence on the Commission's analysis. FH acknowledges that it has failed to influence the substance of CRs so far (interview 17). Similarly, 3F struggles to identify evidence where they might have influenced the Commission's analysis (interview 16). From the Commission's side, DG EMPL chose to focus on the issue of labour market inclusion for reasons unrelated to the push from FH (interview 19). More specifically, the trade unions played more of a role of confirmation, rather than setting the agenda. As the interviewee states:

Of course, domestic actors, they influence. But they more of confirm, I must say. Because we do a lot of research here. We look at all kinds of reports, all kinds of sources... People like DA or FH, of course they can also provide some statistics that we can use, but I think influence is a big word. We take a lot of decisions ourselves (interview 19).

At the CSR level, FH does not consider the CSR on education and skills to be the Commission's response to their needs (interview 17). Indeed, FH understands the 2019 CSR much in line with the Commission's explanation, namely that this CSR was an initiative from the Commission side to all the member states to foster national ownership of the European Social Fund. In a word, there is no evidence of influence from the trade unions on the CSR.

Case Assessment

In short, although preference attainment indicates some influence from the trade unions on the Commission, later interviews do not provide support for this. Still, what are the reasons behind this failure? First, perhaps very different from the issue of shortage of skilled labour, FH and 3F did not actively push for a CSR on the issue of marginalised labourers as the employers' organisations did. As one interviewee describes: 'if we ask them, if you were to pick a CSR, what

would you pick? And they would say, of course, marginalised group ... but they are not doing it with a pushy strategy like DA' (interview 19). Indeed, trade unions believe it is better to engage directly with the government through social dialogue in terms of labour market reforms (interview 16; 17). However, they recognise that it is important to influence the CR and the CSRs (interview 17). If the current government does not make progress on this issue, then they intend to push the Commission more for a CSR on this issue (interview 16).

From the Commission's perspective, there are several reasons why a CSR to Denmark on this issue would not be appropriate. First, problems associated with marginalised labourers are more serious in other member states. As shown in the Social Scoreboard (European Commission 2018b), Denmark performs well among the EU countries, thus it is not relevant from a horizontal perspective. Second, it is difficult to introduce a new CSR within the current Commission's evidence-based approach. As interviewees explained it, one needs to present a lot of evidence before the Commission is convinced to introduce a new CSR (interview 14; 19; 20). At least two criteria must be met before a new CSR is issued: the substantive concern must be a major issue, and the government must be unaware of the issue or have approached it in a way the Commission considers to be counterproductive. However, in the case of Denmark, the government is aware of this issue and is taking a lot of initiatives, so it is hard for the Commission to introduce a CSR. Third, the issue itself is hard to pin down in terms of concrete, implementable policy suggestions. These marginalised people consist of different groups from different backgrounds, and a single policy recommendation is unlikely to serve all of them (interview 14; 19). Lastly, this issue is also related to the debate about the shortage of skilled labour, as FH and 3F believe that one should help marginalised groups who need training and education, before one can open the borders to labourers from third countries (interview 16; 17). Therefore, this again is linked to the bigger political debate about the threshold of recruiting third-country labourers. Thus, horizontal consistency, severity, feasibility, and sensitivity all contribute to no CSR initiatives being related to Denmark's marginalised groups.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

After the financial and the sovereign debt crises, the European Semester was founded to coordinate the social and economic policies of EU member states. A major debate revolves around the role of social policy in the new governance architecture. While some scholars believe there is continual subordination of social policy to the economic imperative, others argue that there is a partial but progressive socialisation of the European Semester in terms of policy outputs and the governance procedure. As fruitful as these debates have been, they have paid little attention to national level social actors. Since national social actors, such as social partners, are increasingly participating in the European Semester, there is a need to understand whether participation of national social partners has any potential to lead to policy changes at the EU level. To answer this question, this study analysed Denmark as a most likely case at the country level to see social partners' influence. Two case studies were conducted: one on the issue of shortage of skilled labour and the other on the labour market inclusion of marginalised groups.

The findings indicate that despite the active participation from the social partners, they have had no noticeable influence on the CRs and the CSRs. While a preference attainment approach indicates that both employers' organisations and the trade unions have had some influence on the Commission, follow-up interviews demonstrate that social partners' influence remains extremely limited. And the Commission is in firm control of writing analysis in CRs and proposing CSRs, whereas the social partners seem unable to influence the Commission. Importantly, the Commission was acutely aware that both issues were 'hot potatoes' with little consensus at the time. It thus acted rationally and strategically by keeping the debate alive at the technical level through its CRs, while staying away from further politicisation by proposing relevant CSRs. This shows active 'politicisation management' (Schimmelfennig 2020) from the Commission to depoliticise issues with high risks that might backfire. In the case of Denmark, the Commission

acts as the 'guardian of the markets' (Van der Veer and Haverland 2018) and issues CSRs for which it has stronger mandate, such as those on productivity growth and competition.

The findings suggest that procedural socialisation at the national level, namely more active participation of social actors, does not necessarily lead to output socialisation at the EU level. This reveals a nuanced picture of the debate on the socialisation of the European Semester. Indeed, instead of an interaction between the two dimensions of socialisation, procedural socialisation and output socialisation may go on parallel. On the one hand, national social partners participate more actively in the European Semester. On the other hand, the Commission is still in firm control of the policy outputs, pushing for a social Europe largely based on its own assessment. Therefore, irrespective of the procedural socialisation at the national level, the EU policy outputs may be less social (as shown in this article), or more social (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014) at the same time.

To some extent, this article speaks to both sides of the debate over the role of social policy during the European Semester. For critics, it does find that national social partners are actively involved procedurally. For proponents, it presents challenges for developing more EU-level social policy outputs. Therefore, this article does not side with either camp. Instead, it argues for more nuanced insights into different dimensions of socialisation that involve actors from different levels of the EU multilevel governance. For example, by investigating the 'policy direction' implied in the CSRs, Haas, D'Erman, Schulz and Verdun (2020: 338-339) create a nuanced picture of the European Semester, reflecting neither a 'neoliberal EU' nor a 'Social Europe'. While the EU's recommendations tend to recommend reducing public spending, they also encourage more social protection for vulnerable groups. As such, there is no progressive 'socialisation' of the European Semester. Instead, CSRs promoting social protection have been a significant part of the European Semester since 2012, and their share of all recommendations has remained nearly constant.

More broadly, findings from this article could be linked to the ownership concept in the European Semester, which has received much attention and is promoted by many EU institutions. Ownership can be conceptualised as institutional ownership, political ownership, and cognitive ownership.

Institutional ownership refers to the capacity of a certain actor to control the process and shape its outputs. Political ownership means that national actors accept and agree with the policy objectives promoted in the framework of the Semester and thus are more proactive in fostering implementation. Cognitive ownership is a thinner type whereby actors are aware of the Semester, know how it works, and have integrated it into their daily routine. (Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018: 590)

In the two Danish cases, social partners do seem to have a high level of political ownership (i.e. they agree with many objectives in the European Semester), and cognitive ownership (i.e. they have a high awareness of the European Semester). However, there is indeed a very low level of institutional ownership (i.e. they fail to influence CRs or CSRs). Therefore, there seems to be a long way to go to be able to meaningfully enhance institutional ownership of social partners during the European Semester.

Lastly, this study has only focused on social partners, but at the national level there are other important social actors during the European Semester. For example, ministries in charge of employment or social affairs as well as social non-government organisations are also actively involved in the European Semester. Therefore, future studies can investigate the potential of their participation to influence the EU social policy during the European Semester.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Annual Growth Survey is accompanied by the Alert Mechanism Report, which monitors macroeconomic indicators across the member states.
- ² Sabato (2018) actually treats the CSRs as outcomes instead of outputs. This study considers outputs as policy contents, and outcomes as behavioural changes in the target population, such as the income level. Thus, CSRs are considered as outputs instead of outcomes.
- ³ This study follows Sabato's (2018) research design and focuses on CR and CSRs, excluding AGS.
- ⁴ Before the Juncker Commission, social partners' participation was extremely limited (Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017).
- ⁵ However, those two cases may not be considered as 'most-likely cases' as shown later.
- ⁶ Another ideal position paper is the comments that social partners on the CR. However, only 3F provided this material for the author. Still, comments on the National Reform Programmes were often described by interviewees as presenting and repeating their positions, so they should be valid proxy for their preferences.
- ⁷ This is in line with the assessment that DA and DI sent to Business Europe on the European Semester in 2019, in which they admitted that 'the European Commission recognizes the beginning of labour shortages in particular areas'. But they also argued that '[t]he Commission needs to set more focus on the problems on the Danish labour market with weak growth and that, in spite of the weak growth an increasing challenge of growing labour shortages' (document from DA and DI 2019).

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