

## RESEARCH

# Transnational solidarity in times of the pandemic crisis in the European sectoral social dialogues of commerce and social services

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## Abstract

During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, social partners were involved into crisis management at different levels. Besides the company and the national level, social partners increased their activities at the European sectoral level. Considering this transnational collective action as an act of solidarity in European employment relations, this paper analyses bridging and bonding as processes allowing for transnational collective acts of solidarity. Based on empirical evidence of case studies of the sectors commerce and social services, the paper shows that the European social partnership serves as a framework allowing for trustful collaboration within which coalition building appears to be *a natural*.

**Keywords:** social partnership, transnational, crisis reaction, solidarity, sectoral social dialogue

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected everyday life at the individual level but also transnational working relations. At the same time, it has put the idea of solidarity at the center of attention at all levels as the claim for solidarity was easily been made and has been mentioned by different actors frequently during the outbreak of

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the pandemic. On that background, it is of interest how this normative loaded ideal of solidarity is filled with life at the European level and how working relations develop as a playing field of acts of transnational solidarity.

These acts of solidarity exist at different levels within the European multilevel system in the form of social dialogue. Most importantly, social dialogue takes place every day at the level of companies across European countries (Mückenberger and Nebe 2019a; Pulignano 2010). Moreover, it appears through the interaction of social partners at the national level in the context of wage bargaining or public policymaking. These interactions often take place in national contexts framed by national legislation of the respective industrial relations system (Müller-Jentsch 2007). However, national boundaries of industrial relations are not as clear and delimiting as they seemed to be in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The industrial relations system has established a transnational dimension (Keune and Marginson 2013). Within this transnational dimension it has yet to be understood, how collective acts of solidarity appear. A fruitful social partnership that fosters acts of solidarity at the transnational level conditions stabilizing mechanisms, established forms of interaction and the opportunity to form a common identity across national boundaries. Within a transnational social partnership, such as the European sectoral social dialogue, acts of solidarity rely on processes of bridging and bonding (Morgan and Pulignano 2020). Moreover, in this heterogeneous context, it is of high relevance to have a functioning working basis which builds on a trustful collaboration. Bridging entails processes of trust-building and establishes a common understanding, while bonding intensifies trustful collaboration and fosters coalition building even in heterogeneous settings.

When looking back to the outbreak of the pandemic, crisis reaction in general as well as in the context of industrial relations took place at the national level first and foremost (Brandl 2021; Meardi and Tassinari 2022). Nevertheless, during the pandemic, we have also perceived an increase of activities at the level of European sectoral social dialogues (Degryse 2021) while at the same time information and consultation of European Works Councils at the company level seem to have decreased at least temporarily and in individual companies (Hoffmann et al. 2020). In the case of the European sectoral social dialogue, we have a transnational crisis reaction that seems to be worth analyzing in more detail. The increase is especially of interest due to the fact that the number of social dialogue texts published in the pre-pandemic years has decreased since 2012 which indicates a loss of relevance within the European social partnership. Hoffmann et al. (2020) argue that during the critical early stage of the pandemic crisis, the sectoral social dialogue has intensified. They conclude that the crisis reaction “did not take place in a vacuum but through an interactive multi-level system” of social dialogue in which each actor has more or less played their role

to maintain social dialogue (Hoffmann et al. 2020:145). Hence, the European sectoral social dialogue (ESSD) has to be seen as one level of crisis reaction which is yet to be understood in more detail.

In general, the role and the impact of ESSD have not been undisputed amongst scholars (Keller and Weber 2011; Leonard 2008). Rather they have been perceived as mere “instrument of joint lobbying” and not as a means for the regulation of European employment relations (Keller and Weber 2011:229/230). However, empirical research has proved their capacity to influence European employment relations (Perin and Leonard 2016) as well as their added value to the European social partnership (De Boer, Benedictus and van der Meer 2005).

Based on the findings that the European sectoral social dialogue served as an arena of transnational crisis reaction in European employment relations during the pandemic, we aim to explain this sectoral transnational social partnership. Therefore, we analyze *how* the pandemic has affected activities at the level of sectoral social dialogue and which processes of bridging and bonding facilitated a transnational social partnership. This paper seeks to answer this research question by zooming into two cases of European sectoral social dialogue where activities at the sectoral level were reactivated during the pandemic (sector of commerce) and where activities proceeded for the first time in a more formal setting in a sense of a European sectoral social dialogue (sector of social services<sup>3</sup>). Based on these cases, we argue that due to political salience, the actors of social partnership joined their voices on the level of the European sectoral social dialogue in order to target the European institutions in a more coherent way. The two cases show that although with varying degree of institutionalization, bridging and bonding is possible and allow for transnational collective acts of solidarity in times of crisis. Likewise, they prove that the European sectoral social dialogue fostered increased activities at the transnational level during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis facilitating exchange of experiences and functioning approaches to tackle the pandemic challenges within the respective sector. It served as an arena of/for awareness raising for the specific needs of sectors heavily affected by the containment measurements but not defined as vulnerable occupation groups or sectors.

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3 The sector social services comprises child care, care and support for older people, care and support for people with disabilities, and social services for people with mental health problems, substance abuse and homelessness (Eurofound 2022).

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: In section 2, we outline the state of literature and describe the functions and opportunity structures of the ESSD. Furthermore, we show the overall quantitative development of ESSD since 1998 and contextualize it with the socio-economic developments. In section 3, we describe our theoretical understanding of solidarity within the transnational social dialogue with the aim to understand which processes foster acts of solidarity. Hereby, we define our analytical framework for the case studies. Based on literature on solidarity in employment relations, we develop bridging and bonding as relevant processes to explain the activities of ESSD actors during the outbreak of the pandemic. In section 4, we describe our data and method which we used to analyze the ESSD. In section 5, we sketch the two case studies and elaborate on how social partnership has taken place at the European sectoral level during the pandemic and how this has differentiated between the two cases. In section 6, we draw conclusions.

## **2. The European social dialogue as arena of collective action**

Before examining the sectoral social dialogue during the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to explain its framework conditions as well as challenges and opportunities shaping the European social dialogue. At the supranational level, European trade union federations, employer associations and the EU Commission form a bi- and tripartite dialogue. Within this social partnership they interact with each other and likewise are connected with EU policy-making and have hereby access to EU institutions as one instrument in the regulation process (Furaker/Larsson 2020, Gies 2018:42f., Rhodes 2015). Thus, the form is given via Art. 154 and 155 TFEU, predetermining the resources and topics of interaction. In this institutionalized context, we have the social dialogue where transnational employer associations and European trade union federations interact at cross-sectoral as well as sectoral level. This sets the context, which can facilitate collective agreements and can foster a European perspective of collective action (Lévesque and Murray 2010:241).

### **2.1 Functions and opportunity structures of the European sectoral social dialogue**

The ESSD was established by the European Commission already in 1998 and serves as an arena of interaction for social partners representing the workers as well as the employers' perspective equally within an organized structure and a specific sector. In addition to the cross-sectoral dialogue, joint committees for industry-wide dialogues have emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. These did not yet have a concrete legal basis. The Commission Decision 98/500/EC setting up sectoral dialogue committees to promote dialogue between the social partners at European

level established secretariats for each sector. This decision is based on rules on the establishment, representativeness and functioning of the sectoral committees (Articles 1 to 4). Since its introduction, this form of dialogue has been regularly adapted by the European Commission to new political circumstances, such as the EU enlargement rounds. To date, 43<sup>4</sup> different sectors have emerged, which conduct a sectoral social dialogue with varying degree of intensity. Activities of the sectoral committee basically contain regular meetings, formal and informal exchange (e.g. the involvement during hearings, project-based collaboration, and informal talks) and the publication of joint texts with varying degree of outreach and legally binding nature. These publications mainly comprise joint positions, declarations, tools, recommendations, agreements and rules of procedure. Under Art. 154/155 TFEU, sectoral social dialogue has power to adopt sectoral agreements as proposals for directives and as autonomous agreements. The proposals for directives in particular create a very strong link to state enforcement mechanisms. Autonomous agreements, on the other hand, require a voluntary commitment by the partners. The results of the sectoral social dialogue are either targeted towards external actors, such as the EU Commission or governments of the member states or they comprise internal agreements for the social partnership at the European sectoral level (Degryse, 2015). As part of their activities, the sectoral social partners are also part of various negotiations and groups, such as the High Level Groups, and thus continue to shape the industrial policies of the EU and its member states. Further, it is also possible to start an inter-sectoral dialogue to negotiate regulations between individual sectors.

According to Kirton-Darling/Clauwaert (2003:248) the European social dialogue was seen as potential means to react to global challenges on a cross-national and European level in order to act more coherently. However, De Boer et al. (2005) argue that the success of ESSD highly depends on the willingness and voluntary cooperation of social partners. Often, the potential benefit of a sectoral social dialogue is the basis of decision-making of the involved actors (De Boer et al. 2005:55). Furthermore, the authors perceive the ESSD as “an alternative channel for lobbying” which is not a replacement of other channels of interaction but rather a broadening of the existing channels of interaction (De Boer et al. 2005:62). Hoffmann et al. (2020:158) already indicated a “joint lobbying” with the aim to increase the visibility of the needs of the respective sector. How this joint lobbying evolved within the two specific sectors will be analyzed in more detail in this paper. In this regard it is also necessary to under-

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4 The focus in this paper is put on sectoral social dialogue representing individual sectors, therefore multisectoral and cross-industry social dialogue are not considered.

stand that such a heterogeneous body of social partnership needs actors and interaction to be able to cooperate.

When focusing on the actors within ESSD, Bechter et al. (2021) find that “frequent interaction between SSDC<sup>5</sup> actors can facilitate cooperation” and this is where the strength of collective action amongst social partners can be found. Although being autonomous actors in a network of the European social partnership, a certain degree of frequency and intensity of interactions can foster a common understanding and a common working base (Granovetter 1973). This network of interaction serves as a basis of collaboration which is especially relevant in times of crisis. However, the ESSD typically does not only comprise European trade unions and employer associations. The body also has a link to the institutions of the European Union. The EU Commission accompanies the ESSD as a process manager that offers infrastructure for the collaboration between transnational trade unions and employer organizations (Rüb and Platzer 2018). This means, the EU framework serves as stabilization mechanism as well as a companion and institutional link for a transnational, European social partnership.

With regard to the benefit of the ESSD, the involved actors tend to have different approaches and preferences. While the European trade unions aim to foster a European negotiating level, they still have to coordinate varying positions from the national level. The employer associations on the other side try to avoid legally binding agreements unless they expect EU regulations on the topic, as Bercusson conceptualized as bargaining in the shadow of the law (Bercusson 1992:185; Gies 2018:61; Smismans 2008). Overall, there are three functions that the ESSD could potentially fulfill at the transnational level: 1) a regulation function fostering the legal regulation of agreements, 2) a learning function through institutionalized and regular exchange between the social partners, and, 3) a lobbying function where the sectoral social partners transfer their joint positions to the EU commission and the EU member states (Rüb and Platzer 2018; Weber 2013).

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5 SSDC is the abbreviation of sectoral social dialogue committee which is the forum where European social dialogue actors get together regularly to discuss and tackle issues of European employment relations. The sectoral social dialogue committee consists of representatives of national and European social partners and the EU commission and represents the operational level of the European sectoral social dialogue.

## 2.2 The European sectoral social dialogue in times of crisis

*“Never has an issue triggered so much joint discussion and collective bargaining in Europe.” (Degryse 2021:97)*

This is one conclusion that Degryse draws in his analysis of the European sectoral social partners during the Covid-19 crisis in Europe. He explains this finding, among others, with the fact that the crisis affected all economic spheres in their entire range of value chain and across all sectors. This is especially relevant in comparison to the financial crisis in 2008. He therefore argues that the pandemic crisis has proved the “vital nature of social dialogue” (Degryse 2021:98) and has fostered a revitalization of the European social dialogue. In an earlier study Degryse (2015) concluded that there was an “overall trend towards gradual strengthening” of the ESSD especially with a focus on the covering of more sectors. Nevertheless, Degryse finds that there was a low impact by the financial crisis in 2008 on the ESSD. Overall, he concludes that between 1999 and 2009 most agreements within the sectoral social dialogue were reciprocal undertakings, but since 2010 social dialogue rather focused on joint lobbying instead of negotiating more substantial agreements (Degryse 2015:44-45). Consequently, the sectoral social dialogue is evolving but with varying breadth and impact. Likewise, we can conclude that the crisis context can have an impact on the ESSD but it is not clear which impact.

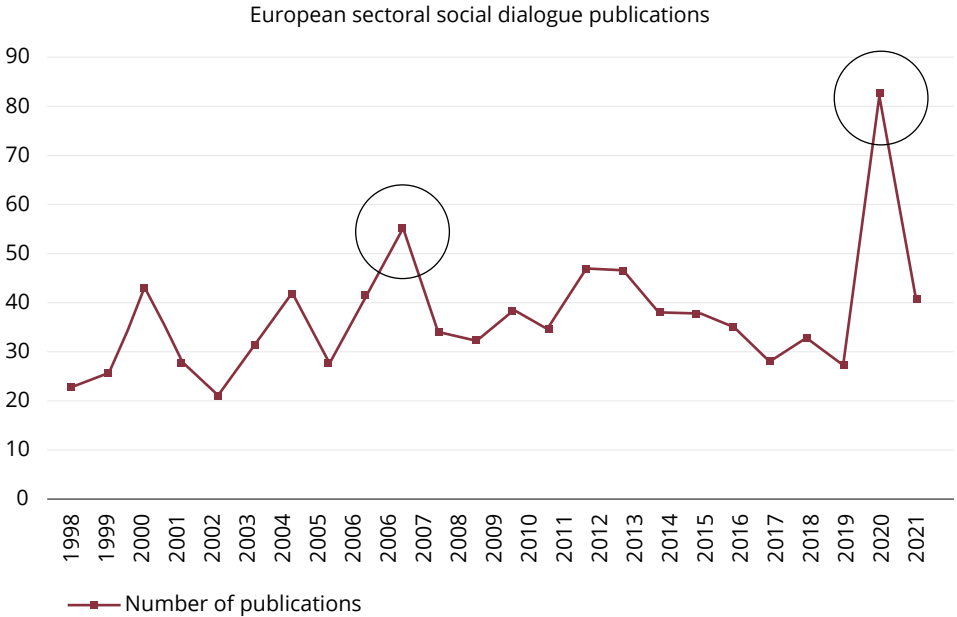
To contextualize the activities within the ESSD during the outbreak of the pandemic in 2022, we will illustrate the development of the ESSD since its establishment in 1998. Already before the reorganization of the sectoral social dialogues in 1998, the first documents were produced and published. However, it is only with the directive decision that the framework for binding agreements was created. These include six substantive agreements and 48 procedural agreements, most of which establish sectoral social dialogue committees (Gies 2018:147).

In the following, we will present the development of the ESSD between 1998 and 2021<sup>6</sup> quantitatively by means of the number of publications that the involved actors have agreed on in all 43 sectors (Graph1). When we look at the continuous negotiations per annum, we can perceive a small peak during the financial crisis with 55 publications in the year 2007 and a significant increase to 82 publications in the year 2020. Compared to 2005, the number of publications in 2007 has more than doubled. Likewise, we see more than a threefold increase from 2019 to 2020. The financial as

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6 At the time of the data collection no publication in 2022 was available.

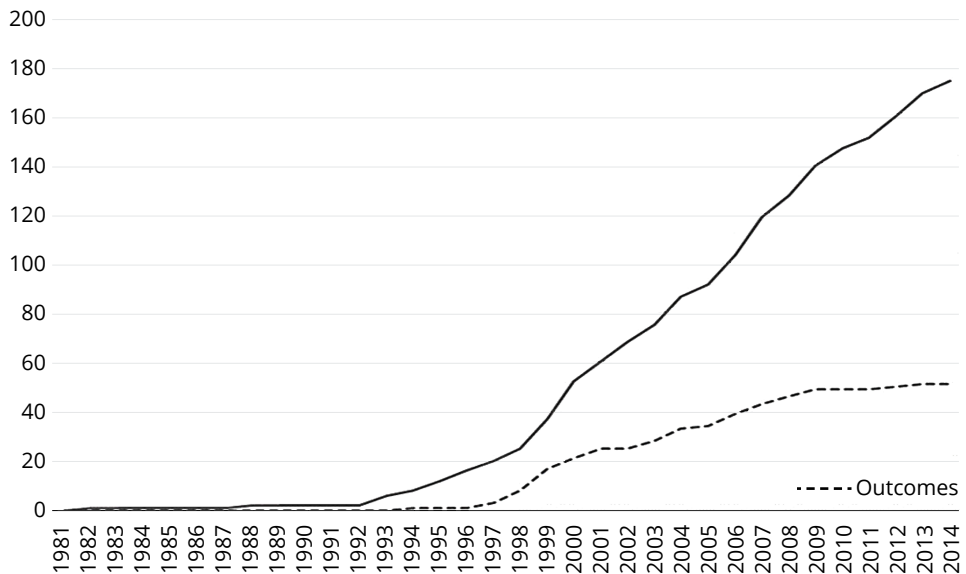
well as the pandemic crisis both have intensified the interactions between actors on the European level of sectoral social dialogue and hereby have resulted in more published social dialogue publications.



**Graph 1: Quantitative development of European sectoral social dialogue publications 1998 – 2021**

Graph 2 shows the development of all negotiated documents within the ESSD compared to documents that have a legal binding nature (outcomes). Here, it becomes clear that binding outcomes continued to level off with the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, while non-binding documents, such as recommendations and statements, continued to increase significantly.





**Graph 2: Sectoral social dialogue documents with legally binding and voluntary nature**

In the context of the financial crisis from 2008 onwards, a shift has taken place from internal regulation towards more external lobbying. This shift is not synonymous with a general loss of the ability to regulate topics within a sector. Rather, it was during that time used as a method to approach the Commission and formulate proposals rather than regulations (Gies 2018:151).

The financial as well as the pandemic crisis both have intensified the interactions between actors on the European level of sectoral social dialogue and hereby have resulted in more published social dialogue documents – although with a non-binding nature. The graphs approve that the ESSD quantitatively gains relevance in times of socio-economic crises and indicates collective activities in general. But how do these activities look like in more detail? And to what degree does it steer an understanding for a common cooperation within the transnational social dialogue? This has yet to be scrutinized in more detail in the following parts of the article. Beforehand, we outline the underlying theoretical concept of solidarity in transnational collective action.

### **3. Solidarity in transnational social partnership in times of crisis: what does it need?**

With regard to transnational social partnership in times of the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to understand processes, structures and circumstances that shape and foster social dialogue as acts of solidarity. With the need to react, social partners can aim for varying types of solidarity. This means in short, that as a first type of solidarity the aim is power allocation for a group. As a more far-reaching second type social improvements in a wider context are aimed for. And ultimately, striving for common good is the third type of solidarity. (Nussbaum Bitran, Dingeldey and Laudenbach 2022). We argue that transnational social partnership is set in a specific arena across European borders or across national company sites and brings along certain aspects of these types of solidarity.

This deems necessary as solidarity becomes even more relevant in times of crisis where questions of restructuring or redistribution have to be tackled. However, in such a fragmented industrial relations system as the European employment relations, transnational solidarity also conditions stabilization, functioning interactions and a certain common identity. It has yet to be elaborated how these preconditions are interwoven and can foster transnational acts of solidarity and to what degree.

When we read literature about solidarity, we can roughly distinguish two notions of solidarity, either in a sense of "altruism" or in a sense of "cooperation". The former is based on "conscience" whereas the latter relies on "reciprocity" (Volland 1999), often, the two are entangled. Accordingly, we argue that solidarity also entails both the motives and the capacity a specific group of people has to cooperate with each other as this defines the degree to possibly generate collective action. Further, solidarity may be more or less steady depending, among other things, on formal as well as informal rules created by the group in order to maintain cohesion. These rules regulate the cooperation in the group itself, the distribution of rights and resources and/or the contribution each member is expected to provide. According to this understanding: "solidarity is a particular social norm that applies to a specific collective, is reciprocally recognised by its members, translates into certain practices of cooperation and mutual renunciation, and is backed by sanction mechanisms" (Engler 2016:35 own translation). However, it is the altruistic motive of solidarity that enables solidary action beyond (collective) self-interest and thus allows to "cross" the borders of a defined group and to create a new understanding of a common identity as well as new forms of social action.

Hence, solidarity, traditionally presupposes a certain level of homogeneity of the group to create an identity, specific borders, stabilisation mechanisms and interac-

tion processes within the group. As in the transnational sphere new stabilization mechanisms beyond the nation state go along with new borders of groups, these two prerequisites are defined interconnectedly. The aspects of identity, stabilisation and interaction are briefly discussed in the following.

### **I. Identity building to overcome heterogeneity**

Traditionally, institutional solidarity is linked to the national (welfare) state (Prosser 2020:135). In this regard, it is also a matter of identity which entails questions of belonging and self-interest to promote acts of solidarity. In the context of social partnership, trade unions have established a way of common identity through their opposition to capital and with the aim to create an alternative social order. Hereby they were able to bridge differences within the workforce across sectors or occupations (Hyman 2004:37). Within the transnational context, such as the ESSD, a common identity has to be created across borders and varying nationalities as a precondition to solidarity. This has to be evolved throughout processes of strategic interactions and mutual understanding (Gajewska 2009:32). Although in the institutionalized context of the ESSD social partners are representing one specific sector, an aspect that also can foster a common identity, it has to be questioned to what extent and on which topics this is possible across classes (labour vs. capital).

### **II. Seeking for stabilisation within blurring borders**

Institutional and organizational structures can help to define an intersubjective social context in which workers are protected under the umbrella of the national demarcation and hereby function as stabilizing framework. In the context of social partnership this is constituted e.g. by different systems of industrial relations (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2014; Ferner and Hyman 1993) often in conjunction with different types of capitalism and welfarism (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001).

In the transnational sphere the EU is a special case as its foundation was fostered not only by the idea of free trade within a common market, but also by the idea of solidarity and peaceful cooperation (Knodt and Tews 2014; Mückenberger and Nebe 2019b:35-54). Moreover, the EU defines concrete borders by membership and has wider competences of rule setting than any other supranational entity. Thus, it contains more substitutes to national stabilization mechanisms than other transnational spaces providing opportunity structures for transnational or international solidarity and cooperation (Lévesque and Murray 2010:241). Therefore, it opens up a space to workers', respectively unions' solidarity as a group within the borders, or the different institutions of the European Union.

While forming organisations and networks on the transnational level can foster stability, actors can get stuck in internal struggles likewise (Bandy and Smith 2005:231-32). This also affects the allocation and use of resources that highly influence their capacity to act. This comprises not only financial resources that are necessary for travelling, translation and campaigning, but also the discursive capacity of trade unions and/or the commitment and willingness of national trade unions to foster transnational action (Lévesque and Murray 2010:240) as hierarchies among their decision making processes have to be compensated (Gies 2018:41). The institutional structures of the ESSD serve as a framework of coordination which hereby stabilize transnational social partnership. However, representatives being part of the sectoral social committee also belong to national trade unions or employer associations and are shaped by their national industrial relations system. This diversity can still lead to a social partnership that is situated within a very heterogeneous context and impede functioning cooperation (Mitchell 2014).

### **III. Functioning forms of interaction**

Another condition for solidarity is the existence of interaction processes within the group. We can assume that once these interactions are dense, e.g., when members of a group have increasingly more interaction experiences with each other, a strong consciousness of interdependence can be developed boosting solidarity within the group. Trade union organisations promote their goals by campaigning and mobilising, coalition building as well as negotiation and exchange with other political actors or employers – albeit to a different extent according to the traditions of the respective countries (Crouch and Streeck 2006).

For European trade union federations within the ESSD, the question is, whether forms of interaction can be created that are able to bridge gaps of established national forms of organization and action shaped by different ideological ideas and national institutional contexts and experiences. Thus, a central prerequisite for transnationalization is to engage in frequent interactions, develop a common discourse, create networks and organizational structures and institutions as well as to mobilise for collective action.

### **Bridging and bonding as processes of transnational acts of solidarity**

By analyzing the two ESSDs during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis in 2020, we aim to understand how transnational social partners are cooperating in order to lobby jointly and how it affects their internal commitment to ideally go beyond the rational considerations and act more in solidarity. We argue that it is necessary to find a common understanding and ideally to define a common identity to create a fruitful

working base at the level of European sectoral social dialogue (Nussbaum Bitran, Dingeldey and Laudenbach 2022:11). This is even more necessary within a social dialogue where antagonistic perspectives (labour vs. employers) get together and have to find a common working base. As already mentioned above, especially in contexts where legal regulations are weak, it is even more relevant to increase interaction and foster a common understanding in order to be able to act in solidarity. Following Morgan and Pulignano (2020), we perceive processes of bridging and bonding as highly relevant at the transnational level in order to enable acts of solidarity. *Bridging* requires the development and maintenance of common discourses, fostering topic-related exchange, (establishing) networks of collaboration (formal and informal exchange) and (developing) organizational structures that allow for an exchange among the members of the group to build trust. *Bonding*, as a more far-reaching step, emphasizes the similarity within the specific, in our case transnational, group and the strength it draws from this similarity. This similarity is perceivable through a common identity among the members of the group and expresses itself as trust. In the case of the ESSD, we could expect a common identity in representing a specific sector. Especially, as social improvements cannot be achieved without both partners as it needs two to tango. However, whether it is possible to continually define a common identity across class-borders (labour vs. capital) between European trade unions and employer associations has to be examined critically.

As starting point within the respective network of collaboration we expect that a certain degree of trust has been established and facilitates a more profound regular interaction. Concretely, these heterogeneous groups have a given structure for (regular) exchange of experiences and in addition, are able and willing to form coalitions if needed. Their work relies on the power of rituals, such as regular (in)formal meetings, commonly defined work programs as common ground or rules of procedures. They use a certain language of morality, relating to a common understanding of which commonalities the group members share and what distinguishes them as a “we” in relation to those who differ from “us” (Morgan and Pulignano 2020:21). Even when bonds are weak in a sector, bridging can be expected to provide strength of collaboration also beyond relatively isolated moral communities. As a result of this continuous exchange kinds of cooperation, (seemingly) solidary acts and solidarity exist as they are socially constructed and institutionally embedded (Morgan and Pulignano 2020).

#### **4. Data and Methods**

Our analysis is based on 9 expert interviews that have been conducted with experts from European federations of trade unions, employer associations and the EU

Commission (see list in the annex) in early 2022. All interviews were conducted online and transcribed afterwards. For the analysis of the social services sector, expert interviews have been conducted with three European trade unions and three European employer associations which have been active and published joint statements in 2020 within the sector social services<sup>7</sup>. According to the Eurofound representativeness study, EPSU and UNI Europa have the highest levels of representativeness across the EU member states social services trade unions (Eurofound 2022). Hence, they both can claim to represent the European social services sector strongly. EFFAT, by contrast, focuses on domestic workers and is officially recognized as social partner e.g. in the sector of hotel, restaurant and catering. They have not been considered in the Eurofound representativeness study and thus play a minor role in the sector of social services. However, they have been involved in several interactions and in joint statements at the early stage of the pandemic. On the employers' side, the Federation of European Social Employers represents employers in the field of social services (including all care and support services) at the European level and can be seen as the most representative employer organization in the sector of social services (Eurofound 2022). Moreover, the European federation for family employment & home care (EFFE) was involved in the interactions and joint statements. This organization is one of the main actors involved in the personal and household services (PHS) sector at EU level. And, finally, the European Federation for Services to Individuals (EFSI) is representing federations and companies across Europe that are involved in the development of personal services.

**Table 1: Actors in the sector social services**

<b>Involved actors in the ESSD social services</b>	
<b>EPSU</b>	European Public Service Union
<b>UNI Europa</b>	European Trade Union Federation for Service Workers
<b>EFFAT</b>	European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions.
<b>EFFE</b>	European Federation for Family Employment & Home Care
<b>EFSI</b>	European Federation for Services to Individuals
<b>Federation of European Social Employers</b>	Federation of European Social Employers

7 The selection of interview partners/social partner organizations was based on the definition of the sector by Degryse (2021).

For the sector commerce, interviews were conducted with one representative of UNI Europa, EuroCommerce and the EU Commission respectively, which is responsible for the sectoral social dialogue commerce.

**Table 2: Actors in the sector commerce**

Involved actors in the ESSD social services	
<b>EuroCommerce</b>	EuroCommerce is representing retail, wholesale, and other trading companies.
<b>UNI Europa</b>	European Trade Union Federation for Service Workers.
<b>EU Commission</b>	DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Unit C3: Social Dialogue

The interview partners have to be seen as experts within the respective ESSD as they have been part of the sectoral dialogue committee during the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, which served as the place of interaction of the representatives within the ESSD. Consequently, they can deliver relevant insight knowledge (technical, process and context knowledge) that cannot be found in written documents but might be important to understand the interaction process (van Audenhove and Donders 2019). Moreover, we include data from policy reports and policy documents. The data was analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis using deductively developed categories (Kuckartz 2016; Mayring 2015). Following the theoretical definitions, we analyzed our data along the above-illustrated definition of bonding and bridging with the aim to understand how the involved actors interacted. Concretely, with regard to bridging we aim to understand which/whether networks of collaboration within the respective sectoral social dialogue were prevalent, which organizational structures shaped the interactions, whether there has been a topic-related exchange and a common discourse that paved the way for a trustful collaboration and bonding. When focusing on bonding, we aim to understand processes that fostered a trustful collaboration. This entails a focus on the use of power of rituals, symbols and rhetorical appeals which help to create a shared identity across national borders. Likewise, we focus on a language of morality that is being used by the involved actors. Besides this, we analyze how exchange of experiences and coalition building structured the collaboration and fostered identity building within the respective sector.

## 5. The ESSD as an arena of transnational crisis (re)action

In this section, we will describe two cases of transnational crisis action during the pandemic which were especially outstanding due to their specific situation within the pandemic crisis. Both, the sector of commerce and the sector of social services were particularly affected by their direct contact with potentially infected clients but also by their strong restrictions due to health and safety regulations such as lock downs or strict access requirements. The two sectors are not part of the health sector which was defined as vulnerable sector; however, workers were exposed to the virus likewise. Moreover, the two sectors vary with regard to their degree of institutionalization and history. While the sectoral social dialogue commerce has a long history of transnational collective action and is officially recognized as ESSD since 1998, the sectoral dialogue committee for social services was only recently officially recognized in July 2023 - after our investigation. The comparison of these two historically and currently different sectors gives us an idea of the expectations of the actors involved towards the ESSD. Furthermore, it gives us more detailed information about the role of the ESSD in crisis situations, since we already know that there has been a quantitative increase with regards to publications.

### 5.1 En route to the sectoral committee: the case of the social services

The social services comprise around 9 million employees of whom 82% are female. Overall, the sector is characterized by insufficient funding, which has even increased in the last two years through additional costs caused by the pandemic. Moreover it has a relevant lack of qualified personnel and a high fluctuation with personnel leaving for other sectors where working conditions and/or pay were deemed more attractive (Eurofound 2022; Federation of European Employers/EPSU 2022). During the early stages of the pandemic, this sector also suffered from a decrease of employees presumably due to the working conditions where personnel was rather exposed to the virus (Vanhercke and Spasova 2022) but also as a consequence of lack of recognition as essential workers (EPSU European Public Service Union and Federation of Social Employers 2021). Altogether, the sector is of high relevance for the European society albeit lacking recognition and valuing. One pathway to address this discrepancy is the attempt of European sectoral social dialogue actors to „[s]trengthening industrial relations and capacity building, recognising collective bargaining and social dialogue [...]“ which they perceive as key elements to improve working conditions but also the attractiveness of the sector (EPSU European Public Service Union and Federation of Social Employers 2021:3). Therefore, several European federations of trade unions and employer associations put effort in transnational social partnership in order to establish official and recognized structures of social dialogue.



### 5.1.1 *Bridging: projects and networks in the social services*

The European sectoral social dialogue in social services is based on structures that have developed since several years. Although this social dialogue was just officially recognized by the European Commission in July 2023, it comprises a broad network of actors involved in transnational social partnership. Due to their activities and their mutual recognition as social partners, they can be seen as equivalent to a longer standing, officially recognized sectoral social dialogue (SSD\_A\_1; SSD\_A\_3). The above-mentioned actors representing workers as well as employers in the social services at the European level have a common history of interaction and thereby a common interest to act collaboratively. For instance, within project contexts, they have been collaborating since more than a decade (e.g. FORESEE project, PESSIS I/II/III, Ad-PHS<sup>8</sup>). Within these projects, all actors have established common goals and structures for social dialogue. E.g. in PESSIS III, the involved actors have developed and published a “Common Declaration on the Contribution of Social Services to Europe” already in 2017. This declaration includes the aim to facilitate exchange, promote the development of social dialogue structures and to collaborate on topics such as digitalization or decent work (PESSIS 3. Promoting employers’ social services in social dialogue 2017). In June 2020, in the middle of the struggle for political relevance and recognition across Europe, a network of 12 organizations (amongst them the Social Employers and EPSU) published a Joint Position Paper with the claim for more recognition of social workers as being directly at the frontline of the pandemic and “essential to Europe’s social market economy” (EASPD et al. 2020). However, the variety of actors entails a fragmentation of the sector and weakens the effectiveness of the involved collective actors (SSD\_A\_6). Coalition building at the European level thus seems to be challenging not only due to the lacking legal power and external stabilizing framework of a potential sectoral dialogue committee, but also due to the diversity of the sector.

When scrutinizing the activities during the beginning of the pandemic in more detail, we can see two developments in parallel. Overall, activities with different thematic priority and different actors are recognizable: 1) The dialogue between EPSU and the Social Employers covers residential care work and social work. Both actors are informally recognized as actors in the ESSD through a recently published representativeness study by Eurofound (2022). Within the sector of healthcare, EPSU is formally recognized as actor of the ESSD. The dialogue between EPSU and the Social Employers is based on a process of collaboration for more than ten years. During

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8 For more information on the projects, see: <https://socialemmployers.eu/en/projects/foresee/>, <https://socialemmployers.eu/en/projects/previous-projects/>, <http://www.efsi-europe.eu/projects/ad-phs/>.

several projects, the two federations have established common working structures, a common understanding and a common goal for their collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue. The aim was e.g. to establish a European network of social services employers which was accompanied and supported by EPSU. This culminated in the application for official recognition by the EU Commission as sectoral social dialogue (which implies the establishment of a sectoral social dialogue committee) in the year 2021 (SSD\_A\_2; SSD\_A\_4).

2) Moreover, there exists a dialogue between EFFE, EFSI, EFFAT, and UNI Europa which covers personal and household services. These actors have also been in collaboration before the pandemic. Within a project on personal and household services (Ad-PHS) they have built a platform covering relevant stakeholders in the field and hereby have established their co-operation within the context of social services. These actors do not (yet) strive towards official recognition by the EU Commission, they are rather focused on capacity building (at the time of the interviews) (SSD\_A\_1; SSD\_A\_5). Besides, they especially bring in their expertise in the European care strategy, which was being discussed at the time of the data collection (SSD\_A\_6).

These existing networks and collaborations served as bridging mechanism for a rapid collective action at the transnational level. Common experiences following project-related cooperation fostered trust among the actors and paved the way for deeper collaboration. In this context, the involved actors could build coalitions and develop their own mechanisms to foster bonding.

### *5.1.2 Bonding: Regular exchange fostering coalition building*

Both networks within the sectoral social dialogue reacted to the situation at the early outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to frame their sector as relevant and severely affected by the pandemic. They used the window of opportunity to bring their topics to the political attention and to establish their collaboration with several timely public statements. One quote from an expert sums it up: “[Y]ou know positions are much stronger, if they come from both employers and workers” (SSD\_A\_2). Even without official recognition by the European Commission, the actors of the social dialogue in the social services sector built coalitions (SSD\_A\_5) and developed their own working structures, e.g. by a work program in which the respective actors have clearly allocated topics and responsibilities. Accordingly, EFSI has the leading responsibility in terms of undeclared work, while EFFE focuses on the European Care Strategy and UNI Europa and EFFE collaborate with regards to professionalization (SSD\_A\_1). Regular meetings related to specific topics, e.g. the improvement of the PHS sector (SSD\_A\_6) served as power of rituals and hereby fostered the common understanding and the internal structure of the social dialogue (SSD\_A\_1).

Throughout informal and semi-formal regular exchange within the two networks of dialogue, the actors used the forum to up-date each other in terms of on-going developments, policy reactions and consequences for workers and employers across the EU (SSD\_A\_4). In this case, the sectoral social dialogue offered a forum of exchange. Further “coordinated actions” with other actors to reach out to a network of actors (EU, collective actors, NGOs) were initiated, such as an open letter, a social media campaign and joint statements addressing the EU and member states (SSD\_A\_4). Together with other actors in the field of social services (e.g. EASPD), the European Federation of Social Employers initiated the campaign #SocialServicesAreEssentialServices which had the aim to increase the awareness and better the working conditions of workers in the social service sector (SSD\_A\_4). On a discursive level (language of morality), the actors used the pandemic to put the focus on the needs of social services to be recognized as “essential services” in the same way as the health-care sector (SSD\_A\_3). Both Social Employers and EPSU organized an online summit with the aim to address the EU with needs and claims to improve the situation of social services workers during the pandemic. Especially the #IAMEssentialWorker which was added to the announcement of the summit indicates a sense of a “we” towards the EU/national authorities as those who need to recognize social services as essential. This example shows that discursively and in such an organized context as the social dialogue, the creation of a common identity as essential worker and a sense of solidarity also by the employers association – at least for the moment – seems to be possible. However, this has to be seen in the context of the pandemic crisis as an exceptional situation in which the social dialogue actors tried to do as much as possible for their members that are traditionally not very good represented and organized in collective agreements.

In this sectoral social dialogue, regular interaction paved the way for coalition building and hereby fostered bonding among the involved actors. This allowed for a sharing of experiences and good practice in times of insecurity regarding the appropriate reaction to the pandemic. Moreover, bonding appeared on a discursive level by means of a common campaign and awareness raising within the joint statements.

## **5.2 Occasional interactions relying on a long tradition: The sector commerce**

The sector commerce is characterized by labor-intensive work which relies on low skilled and often part-time work. Likewise, gig-economy and self-employed work are relevant in the sector. Overall, it can be described as a very heterogeneous sector with employees that often are not covered very well by social protection measures and were directly affected by the security measures (lockdown) during the pandemic

(Degryse 2021:56)<sup>9</sup>. Overall, according to EuroCommerce, around 26 million individuals are employed in the sector<sup>10</sup>. The sector has undergone several changes such as internationalization, deregulation and technical innovation, in the last decade (2018). This especially is evident in the “rise of e-commerce”, which comprises online marketplaces and rather “traditional retailers” and is dominated by Amazon, Zalando and others (Eurofound 2018:9). Altogether, these developments influence the already heterogeneous sector and have an impact on a common crisis reaction within the sector.

### *5.2.1 Bridging: Transnational organizational structures with a long history*

The ESSD commerce has a long history. Already in 1983 EuroCommerce and EuroFIET (predecessor of UNI Europa) have established a sectoral social dialogue which was officially established in 1998 after the Commission decided to create a legal framework for the establishment of sectoral social dialogue committees (Eurofound 2018:4). Since then, UNI Europa and EuroCommerce represent the social partners and collaborate actively within the committee. Since its establishment, the social dialogue produced joint statements, guidelines, position papers and recommendations on varying topics related to the sector (overall 36 since 1988, see social dialogues texts database).

The sectoral social committee provides organizational structures that are pre-defined by the EU Commission but are implemented by the social partners. In this regard, the EU Commission with its respective policy officer in the Unit on Social Dialogue serves as coordinator, bringing the social partners together and, if necessary, providing the sectoral committee with information e.g. regarding activities of the EU Commission (SSD\_B\_2). Within this committee, national and transnational actors get together in order to collaborate and exchange with regards to specific issues and topics as a “standing way of communication” (SSD\_B\_2). Moreover, social dialogue is being described as a forum where social partners “can learn from each other and try to understand each other” and hereby form a common understanding and a common discourse. Not only do they have a common discourse on relevant issues but they also collaborate in common projects (SSD\_B\_3). The social dialogue therefore is a forum where social partners get to learn and understand each other’s perspective on specific topics. However, it does not necessarily lead to joint agree-

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9 The sector comprises classifications of economic activities in the European Community (NACE) codes 45 (wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles), 46 (Wholesale trade) and 47 (Retail trade).

10 <https://www.eurocommerce.eu/about-retail-wholesale/> (as of 13. April 2023).

ments. At this stage, bridging provides a first working base, creates mutual understanding and sets a framework in which a trustful collaboration is developed.

### *5.2.2 Bonding: A common working basis fostering transnational crisis reaction*

In general, the ESSD commerce takes place in a trilateral context with EuroCommerce, UNI Europa and the Commission. However, during the early months after the outbreak of the pandemic, there was also bilateral interaction with the aim to up-date each other regularly and to be able to react coherently and quickly (SSD\_B\_1). In order to intensify collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue, the power of rituals was significantly relevant. Relying on a long tradition of collaboration, the rules of procedure provided a functioning framework to react quickly. Regular meetings, at the beginning of the pandemic “on a weekly basis at least” (SSD\_B\_3) helped to update each other, exchange information, experiences and good practices. Historically established formal and informal structures simplified the interaction and hereby facilitated the exchange of experiences and good examples to tackle the pandemic challenges from the different perspectives and actors across EU member states that are amongst the committee members (SSD\_B\_1). The work of the sectoral social dialogue committee is based on a common work basis which was established through common rules of procedure, but also by two-year work programs that are regularly updated and agreed on by all committee members (SSD\_B\_2). The sectoral social dialogue committee had agreed on a work programme for the years 2020/2021 in which they had put an emphasis on digitalization and the future of work as well as health and safety. Overall, they agreed to strive towards an “interactive and innovative Social Dialogue” in which they exchange examples of good practice and involve expertise to generate new perspectives on the relevant topics (EuroCommerce/UNI Europa n.d.). Although these planned topics became less relevant due to the pandemic crisis (SSD\_B\_3), it defined the functioning of the sectoral social dialogue committee and hereby established a working basis for the collaboration within the sectoral social dialogue committee. One expert summarized it as follows: “So I think it was just a natural to reach out to each other” (SSD\_B\_1). This quote shows that coalition building in this case was nothing special. Instead, their activities were based on the common interest to tackle the pandemic situation.

With regards to language of morality, press releases were shared by the social partners to announce their common statements and to increase the outreach of these statements (SSD\_B\_1). Discursively, the social partners referred to the common challenges that all actors in the social dialogue faced due to the pandemic crisis. For instance, they stated that:

*“Europe must act effectively and in solidarity in facing this emergency by protecting all its affected citizens, workers and businesses. The European social partners in the retail and wholesale sector remain committed to protecting employees and their jobs, suppliers and customers, and maintaining this essential economic activity during this crisis.” (EuroCommerce/UNI Europa 2020)*

In this statement, they define the pandemic situation as an emergency which hits everyone equally and therefore needs a special reaction in a sense of solidarity. They hereby define a certain similarity between everyone who might be affected by the pandemic within the sector commerce. However, this similarity does not lead to a common identity consequently. It is rather shaped by the crisis-driven circumstances as well as the institutional context of the social dialogue. Overall, within two common statements in 2020 the social partners framed the pandemic as a dual risk for employees in the sector. Employees in the commerce sector were exposed to the virus while at the same time being threatened by unemployment due to lock downs and potential shop closures. The sectoral committee used the statements to raise awareness for the exposure of employees in the sector and their recognition as particularly affected. Likewise, they demanded protection measures to be implemented as well as financial support for shop owners and (re)training opportunities for employees.

### **5.3 What can we learn from the two cases?**

When comparing the two case studies, we can draw several conclusions with regards to processes of bridging and bonding with implications for solidarity in transnational social partnership during the crisis. During the outbreak of the pandemic, the social partners involved in the two sectors clearly had a common interest. They aimed at tackling the pandemic crisis, raising awareness with regard to the vulnerability of the workers in both sectors and improving their working conditions. In both sectors, the social partners were able to easily establish an exchange and find a common understanding of what needs to be addressed. Especially the case of the social services shows that the ESSD can provide a framework in which social partners interact more or less officially. By means of mutual recognition amongst the social partners (a first step of bridging) and hereby establishing the framework for a common working basis, the social partners manifested the foundation for trustful collaboration (bonding). Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that these processes of bonding can only be seen as selective identity building which takes place in a crisis driven context where the circumstances fostered identity building through sectoral affiliation. A substantial common identity between European trade union federations and employers associations is not perceivable – these examples show rather a selective occurrence of transnational solidarity mostly on a discursive level.

Table 3 shows how the two sectoral social dialogues differed at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic with regards to bridging, bonding and the concrete crisis reaction (output). The rather heterogeneous sector social services lacked an external stabilization mechanism due to the missing official recognition as sectoral social service. However, the involved actors were able to interact and find a common ground. Bridging in this case entailed the mutual recognition and project-related collaboration, which established a first basis for mutual trust – at least within the respective network of actors. By means of regular meetings, exchange of experiences and coalition building they were able to speak with one voice.

**Table 3: Bonding and bridging in the European sectoral social dialogue**

Sector	Social Services	Commerce
<b>Bridging</b>	Project-based collaboration, Topic-related interaction, Parallel structures by different network-related actors	Constant network of actors, Defined organizational structures with rules of procedure
<b>Bonding</b>	Semi-formal & informal exchange, Coalition building with rhetorical appeals	Formal & Informal exchange, Common work program, Regular meetings, Coalition building with rhetorical appeals
<b>Crisis reaction/ output</b>	EPSU & Social Employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statement on COVID-19 outbreak: the impact on social services and needed support measures (25-03-2020)</li> <li>• COVID-19 and social services: What role for the EU? (25-06-2020)</li> <li>• EFFAT/UNI Europa/EFFE/EFSI:</li> <li>• Statement on the Covid-19 pandemic in Personal and Household Services (01-04-2020)</li> <li>• Statement on Personal and Household Services – Workers require priority access to Covid-19 vaccine (14-12-2020)</li> </ul>	EuroCommerce & UNI Europa: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint statement EuroCommerce/UNI Europa on the impact of Covid-19 in the retail and wholesale sector (08-04-2020)</li> <li>• The social dimension of A European Pact for Commerce: Recovery priorities for the retail and wholesale ecosystem (16-10-2020)</li> </ul>

The sectoral social dialogue commerce, by contrast, could rely on the already existing organizational structures and reactivated their channels of interaction easily. In this case, the actors could build upon a constant network of actors which was accompanied by the EU Commission. Their working basis was already defined by organizational structures (bridging). Based on these existing structures and an already developed

work program, the involved actors could interact easily and frequently. Coalition building amongst the social partners was “just a natural” (SSD\_B\_1) (bonding).

## 6. Conclusions

Summarizing the above described cases of transnational social partnership, we can draw several conclusions with regard to transnational crisis reaction and solidarity. Firstly, transnational solidarity needs (internal & external) stabilizing mechanisms and a strong common understanding to act collectively. The two cases are examples of interest representation which was possible due to a (semi)institutionalized context of consultation and negotiation. External stabilization was and is given by the framework of the ESSD and further existing structures of European social partnership. Internally, the ESSD is stabilized by instruments such as rules of procedure, work programs and commonly defined goals (project/content-related). Secondly, in these two cases, frequent and intense interaction facilitated a prompt and coherent co-operation during the pandemic crisis. Thus, bridging and bonding were fundamental for transnational crisis reaction. Topic-related interaction as well as coalition building resulted in common rhetorical appeals which were published in joint statements. In the case of social services with semi-formal structures, bridging was more prevalent than bonding. The sectoral committee in the commerce sector could rely on a long history of interaction, existing internal structures and a more defined common understanding of transnational social partnership. Bonding in this case was possible easier. What remains open is the question whether these are really examples of transnational solidarity. Within the context of the EU social dialogue (Social Europe) they could also be seen as examples of enacted solidarity which were mostly possible due to the crisis driven political salience on all levels of social dialogue.

The case of social services is especially of interest in terms of the motivation to act in solidarity across national borders. Without having an official institutional framework and linkage as ESSD, this social dialogue (re)acted on a transnational level to the pandemic, defined common positions and published joint statements to address the EU Commission and the national governments. This serves as an example of high motivation and commitment to European social partnership during the outbreak of the pandemic, without being fostered externally by the EU Commission. In the case of the bilateral co-operation between EPSU and the Social Employers, this even fostered the intensification of their institutionalization and resulted in an official application for the recognition as ESSD social partner in the sector of social services.

However, these activities fostering bridging and bonding among transnational social partners have to be seen within the context of the crisis. Although we can prove



activities of bridging and bonding in both sectoral social dialogues, it still has to be questioned whether these can be seen as acts of solidarity or whether they are driven by common interest only. Having in mind the assumption that solidarity typically does not go beyond class borders, we have to challenge the finding that trade union federations and employer associations interactions can be understood as acts of transnational solidarity. This can be merely proved selectively and as a reaction to the crisis-driven circumstances shaping the scope of action of the social partners at that time.

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## Appendix

### List of conducted interviews

Institution	Position	Abbreviation	Date of the interview
<b>EFSI</b>	Representative of EFSI	SSD_A_1	26.04.2022
<b>EPSU</b>	Policy assistant for social services and youth	SSD_A_2	15.03.2022
<b>EFFAT</b>	Political secretary in charge of the domestic work sector	SSD_A_3	21.03.2022
<b>Federation of European Social Employers</b>	Project and policy officer	SSD_A_4	23.03.2022
<b>EFFE</b>	Representative of EFFE	SSD_A_5	30.03.2022
<b>UNI Europa</b>	Director – Property services and UNICARE	SSD_A_6	31.03.2022
<b>UNI Europa</b>	Director of commerce	SSD_B_1	07.06.2022
<b>EU Commission</b>	Representative of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion/Unit C3 Social Dialogue	SSD_B_2	24.06.2022
<b>EuroCommerce</b>	Representative of EuroCommerce	SSD_B_3	30.06.2022